

The After

By Sally Six

Dedication

This dedication is to all those of my family and friends who have helped and encouraged me in my book writing endeavors.

The After

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Characters

Main Farmstead:

Wild Horse Ranch:

Kris and Debbie Fairbanks,

Son, Cal and his wife Martha

Daughter, Rose

Tex and Jill Brandt, children Thomas, Mark, Morris and Dorcus

Frank and Erin Boyd, child John

Jerold and Millie Boyd, children Harold, Hector, Horus, Hannah, and Heidi

Their oldest son Hank and wife Annie

Ollie Johnson, child Carter

Ranch hands: Furlong and Annette Green, son Martin, daughters Delilah and Violet

Colt and Lillian Forsyth

Neighboring Homesteads:

Rice Ranch:

Joe and Ella Rice, children Alan, and Angel

Daughter, Alice husband Leonard White, child Leonard Jr.

Barry and May Rice

Son, Toby and wife Eliza, child Bret

Son, Todd and wife Hazel (sister to Eliza), children Betsy and Beatrice

Kate Rice, children Jason and Samuel

Foreman: Bob Becker and wife Mary, older couple

Extra hands: Leslie and Gwen Bluet

Charlie and Carrie Jones, daughter June

Mike and Frieda Theisson, sons Kevin and Mace, daughter Betsy

Wolf's Rest:

Seth (Walks in the Dark) and Flower Wolf (Growing Woman)

Son, Gilbert (Dreaming Man) and wife Odessa (Light Eyes), teenaged children George (Burning Fire) and

Ruth (Bright Cloud)

Seth's brother, Homer (Sees Ghosts) and Grace Wolf (Pleasant Woman)

Son, Oscar (Lightening Strike) and wife Sue (Sweet Grass)

Cousin's

Lester (Rushing Wind) and Jane Wolf (Laughing Woman)

Son, Lester Jr. (Snarling Dog) and wife Star (Wanderer), younger child Faith

Daughter, Hope (Running Woman) and husband Isaac Brightwater (being half white and not raised with picking an Indian name, he is trying to figure out what he wants it to be. His wife Hope thinks he should be called, Stubborn Man Walking.

Extra hands: Peter Running Bear, wife Becca (Olson), daughter Daisy

Luke Hansen wife Trina, son Abraham (Slinking Coyote) who had taken to the Indian ways like a duck to water.

The Golden Horde:

The Khan, Peter Lloyd wife Lacy, sons Gray, Mike, and daughter Mini, concubines Dolly, Cindy, and Sandra and many household slaves

Gray's household, Stu, concubines, Prissy, Sarah and Sally (sisters) along with household slaves

Illegitimate son of the Khan, Taggard, slaves inherited from his mother, Cap, Freddy, and April

Second Commander Martin Willard, his wife Ruby, houseman Kyle, along with concubines and many slaves

Nephew, Jack raised by Martin and Ruby

Captains:

Bad Billy Bob Hansen

Henry Killer Van Oat

Newt Danny Portville

Slick Oscar Beasley

Lieutenants:

Herman Miller

Abe Johnson

Jefferson Brown

Reuben Gonzales

Gil Archer

Evil Even Lighthorse

Plus a cast of characters

Prologue

The birds flew through the sky and in and out of the tree branches; chipmunks, squirrels and other animals chatted and squeaked in and around the forest. You could see a blacktop road winding through the valley and up into the hills, but when you looked close weeds were encroaching from the sides and through the cracks in the roadway. Here and there deer and bear walked along and down the road. You could spot bobcat, fox and a mountain lion from time to time making their way through the trees. You could smell the pine and wild flowers in the breeze and the sounds of the forest were the same as heard two hundred years ago.

No plane flew the skies; no sounds of cars and trucks came from the roads and byways.

Down in the valley at this moment in time surrounded by mountains, teamed men, women and children on horseback and mules. Horses, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and Llamas walked along and ate on the valley grasses with a few odd other animals that were being herded, milked and butchered across the valley.

These were invaders to this valley. In the hills and mountains above the valley, men watched hesitantly.

They turned quickly to ride to warn the people that lived in the mountains in the area. This did not bode well for their families.

Chapter 1

Caught

Rose woke up after a fitful nights sleep, it was barely light in the yurt; the smells had been assailing her since she had been here. Being thrown into this yurt with all these women and girls made things so much worse in this summer heat here in the valley, and the night hadn't helped it cool off any in this closed environment. She didn't know how many others there were in here yet; she had been thrown in here and her eyes could only make out a few of the closer women. With the whimpering, crying, and whining during the night it had been a very bad night, she was tired and very sore from sleeping or rather trying to sleep in the middle of all this. They had been packed in here pretty tight with hardly even enough room to lie down curled up, let alone being able to stretch out. The women and girls had been collected for days as the tribe moved along to this new summer camping area. She had heard a few talking about their capture this morning.

How in the world she had been stupid enough to get caught, she thought to herself. She knew they were around, her older brother Cal had told her they had been seen in the valley 15 miles from their home. Rose had just wanted to take a peek, not get too close, as she was sneaking down from the hills. As quiet and stealthily as possible she had made her way the half-mile from where she had left her horse so she could overlook the valley. She found herself watching the valley from behind a large pine tree at the yurts, teepees and tents being set up, there were horses, sheep and goats being herded to one end away from the tents and yurts.

This was so exciting, all she had seen for six years now was the family and friends around them, and that had grown old. She wanted to see new faces, and wondered what was so bad about them anyway. Everyone seemed to be so afraid when her brother came riding quickly back to the homestead, one could tell by the look on his face that something was wrong, after he had told father and the other leaders that the Huns were in the valley a few short miles away, word had spread fast on the large farm and riders were sent out to alert the other few families around them.

Through the last four years the families had finally felt safe enough to spread out from the original homestead they had all ended up at for mutual safety, they had been friends and families that had gathered when the flu, death, and then anarchy seemed to reign in the world. They learned to live without electricity and modern conveniences, it was hard, they hadn't realized how spoiled they had been and really were until they had to go a prolonged period without it.

Rose had decided to go see for herself, she knew it would be dinner time before anyone realized she was missing, they knew that sometimes she would ride off into the mountains for a few hours to think. She always went armed, that was without saying. She felt her hip, she hadn't even thought about it until now; yes of coarse her pistol was gone, the only thing left was her holster. Whoever had come upon her as she watched the valley had been even quieter then she could possibly imagine. She hadn't known a thing was wrong until she was grabbed, a bag thrown over her head, her hands tied behind her and then she was tossed on her belly over a riders lap on a horse.

She had one option open yet, she pretended to rub her right knee and then down the calf of her leg her hands went down to her boots. YES, her small boot knife was still there.

“Ok, now what am I going to do with one small knife?”

Rose didn't get any more time to think about it as the door of the yurt was flung open and the bright daylight shown in through the door, and in stepped a short grimy bearded man. Behind him through the door she could hear and see people gathering behind him.

“Hurry up all you women, get up and get out,” he yelled gruffly, “everyone out and out now, I said.”

The whimpering and whining worsened as everyone stood up. Rose seemed to be stuck in the middle of the pack, she thought at least she wouldn't be noticed as quickly. Wrong, because then as the light filtered through the yurt she could see there were not very many young women of her age group, they were either older or younger, and that did not bode very well for the few that were 15 to their early 20's. Rose didn't have a very good feeling about any of this; she knew she was in deep trouble.

“Quiet down you lot, if you don't quiet down you'll be whipped here and now.”

Everything seemed to quiet down to a snuffle as fear gripped their minds; at least they were quieter for the time being. As the women went through the doorway, Rose was relieved a little when her time came to leave the stifling smelly yurt.

She looked around at the wild looking people as they gathered around the new group of women and girls to peer at the new slaves and wives, as they would become.

Rose noticed that half the men were still on horseback not bothering to dismount, as in ages past they were again the people of the horse. A group of men on horseback to the right seemed to Rose better dressed and more colorful, one man in particular and therefore he had to be the leader. The man behind the colorful fellow dismounted from his horse and walked over to a tall pole with colorful streamers on the top that had been erected in the middle of the camp.

He stopped and turned to face the men and horses he had just left, he gave a bow at the waist to the man in the lead, who in turn nodded his head. He turned back to face the crowd that surrounded him. His pants were a light brown leather that were tucked into his calf high boots, he had a long leather fringed vest and a light weight wool shirt underneath that had been died yellow, he wore a band of braided leather with long feathers attached down the back of his head that blended in with his brown and gray streaked hair.

“As most of you know we are in need of new women, we take no more nor no less of what we need, we had many die through the winter and need new blood to infuse us and keep us strong.”

Rose cringed at this announcement. Oh gads, what have I gotten myself into?

The man turned to face the new women and girls again.

“We are the Golden Horde, your new leader and master is Khan Peter Lloyd, I for your further reference am Second to the Khan, my rank and name is Second Commander Martin Willard. You will address all men in this camp no matter their age as master until you are given your place among us, the same for all women above you but they will be addressed as madam.”

Rose glanced off to the surrounding hills, maybe someone right now had their binoculars on her and trying to plan her rescue. She hoped and prayed with all her heart that what she was thinking was true it just had to be. Rose had no inclination to be neither slave nor wife to one of these raiders.

Her attention was jarred back to the speaker, as he yelled, “one and all begin your bidding as we bring up each female.”

There were two large rough looking guards standing on each side of the women and girls, the one on the right stepped over and took a woman of maybe 30 from the edge of the group, she was from her expression, mad. He took her over to the Second and had the guard turn her by her arms first one way and then the other. She had brown hair which she wore in braids to the middle of her back, she was around 5 foot 5 inches tall and say 140 pounds, she wore a long blue homespun skirt that went to her ankles, a lighter blue blouse and brown sweater, on her feet she wore moccasins as did most everyone these days. Rose noticed as the woman’s feet moved that they were well decorated, for everyday moccasins.

The bidding became quite animated and finally a man sitting behind the Khan, Captain Henry got down off his horse and came over to claim his prize. He was dressed in his finery of whitened fringed leather shirt and pants with leggings; he had quillwork across the top of the shoulders and down the arms. His hair was dark brown with just a touch of gray beginning to show at the edges, he wore it loose just past his shoulders. He stepped up to the woman and demanded her name. At first, all she did is stand with her hands on her hips and glared at him.

“Your name woman, NOW.”

She still didn’t answer him and continued to glare with hate and loathing. He quickly raised his right arm

and slapped her with his open hand across the face and she fell to the ground. The crowd laughed and hooted. He looked down at her and it was his turn to glare at her.

“I like your spunk women, but only so far, now your name?”

“Penny, my name is Penny Baker.”

She began to climb to her feet, and he took his right foot and pushed her back to the ground.

“Lets get this straight for now and the future; you no longer have a last name until you are given one.”

He turned to the new women and girls.

“Do you all hear that,” he said loudly, “you do not have last names here, so when asked your name you will give your first name only, do you all have that, or do you need a lesson as well?”

The other captives stood there all shaking their heads in the negative, except for Rose, she just stood still watching the savages have a good time at their expense. He turned to face the women on the ground again.

“Get up and come with me.”

She slowly climbed back to her feet but you could tell she was mad as a wet hen, the laughing was dying down around them; he turned and headed over to where his horse was. A woman of around 50 years old was standing at the rear of his horse. Her hair had already gone to gray and she had it cut off at the shoulder, she wore a brown buckskin skirt to just below her knees with high boot moccasins, and a blue calico blouse. She didn't look happy to see Penny coming towards them behind the man at all.

Rose didn't get to see what else happened with Penny, as the bidding began on another woman. This continued for another hour and then it was her turn. There were still a few girls behind her and she tried to slip behind them to delay the inevitable. But it didn't work.

“Stop, your next, you the young lady in the green shirt, men get her and bring her up here.” It was no good she had been spotted trying to go back. Dang it all.

Second Commander Martin yelled at the men again.

“The blonde girl with the green shirt and buckskin pants, there's only one, what are you both, color blind?”

The two filthy men now had Rose by an arm each and began to haul her up to the pole for bidding.

“Let go of me both of you, I can walk there by myself.”

Rose dug in her heels and both men were surprised that she stopped them, at least momentarily before they began to drag her.

Second Commander Martin thought another stubborn headed one, good; we need more entertainment, this has gotten boring, the first woman had been the only one to balk at being bought. He had been doing this part of the Khan's capture and buy team even before he became the Second, but now it was getting to be same ol same ol and most of the captured women were cowed and frightened and didn't put up a fight, but every once in awhile things got a little more exciting. Martin thought this was to be his last as Master of Bidding, he was going to turn it over to his nephew Jack, and so next year he could just be a spectator.

Rose put her feet forward and they stopped again.

“I said, I can walk over there by myself, NOW LET GO.”

Both the men looked over at the second, and he gave them a nod. They let go and the young woman continued onto the pole and then turned and stood next to the Second. The crowd was whooping, hollering, and whistling by this time. There was fire in her eyes everyone could see that. This one would be another rough one to tame, thought Martin.

Someone else had taken notice also, he sat on his horse slightly behind his father the Khan, and he liked that fire in her eyes, he had an admiration for the first women that had bulked at being captured and bought, but she was on the old side for him. He looked this young blonde woman up and down, she had some weight on her and you could tell it was mostly muscle. After all who wanted a skinny unhealthy woman? She wore a green homemade blouse and unlike the other women in skirts, she was wearing buckskin pants. She must be used to riding, well that had ended and only a few women took to wearing pants here in the Horde since they weren't allowed to ride men's horses. The girl stood with her head held high, but he noticed she also scanned the hills to the right of the camp. She turned just so, so she thought no one noticed her inquiring eyes, but he, Gray son of the Khan had noticed. Why he had taken notice of this captive he had no idea, most of them were the same to him, the majority destined for slavery or to become concubines and a few for marriage if they were deemed worthy, smart, and strong enough after testing. Ah good, the bidding had begun, he needed to stop daydreaming or he would lose her.

Martin looked around the crowd and listened to the bids as the bidding became heated and was surprised to hear a bid come from the Khan's son, he had never bid before on anyone. Martin saw the Khan turn and look at his son, as this was out of character for Gray. His attention was drawn quickly back to the bidding, good the crowd had noticed Gray Lloyd was bidding and the competition for the young woman died down.

All except for Taggard, he had to have this one if the Khan's ninny son wanted her. He had a hate in his heart that would never diminish until he was dead and buried, he should be sitting behind the Khan too, after all he, Taggard, was the oldest. Even if he was illegitimate he was still a son of the Khan. There were many children like that now. Why should things be different just because it happened before the dying time? He would show them.

The Khan looked over in Taggard's direction, and he saw the hate in Taggard's eyes, as Taggard eyes bored daggers into Gray. I should have gotten rid of that whelp long ago, was his thought; he has been nothing but trouble from the beginning. He had tried to give the boy the benefit of the doubt and hoped he would become a self-made man, and then he would give Taggard his place in the Horde as a captain. June, Taggard's mother, had spoiled the boy and now he was a spoiled 24 year old. She had only passed on two years ago, but she had continued to fill the young man with hate up to her dying day. The Khan had thought the young man could overcome all this, so much for thinking. Those had been great years when June was his old lady, his motorcycle gang had had a good time but then he came upon Lacy, then he had dropped June like a hot rock. June stayed on the outskirts of the gang even after the boy Taggard was born; she took up with Les a while later but always kept hatred of Lacy.

The years rolled by and the women with children stayed at a base only leaving to go with their men once in awhile. Lacy saw and felt the hate so she always had others watching June and that she never came close to Lacy's kids. Then the sickness hit, Peter and the Raiders weren't far from home, thank goodness so they grabbed a few trucks and vans, rolled their Hogs inside and went after their families and got them out of town. A few hours out they took over a large farmstead and stayed to survive the bad years. The owner and his family had been their first set of slaves, heck they still had the farmer's kids, now grown. A few of their number died of whatever the illness was, but not many. All this was going through their minds while the bidding came to a close.

Gray had won out and he gave a deathly stare in Taggard's direction for taking the bidding so high instead of giving up when he knew who he was bidding against, heck Taggard wasn't even bidding at first until Gray had started. That told volumes to Gray. Taggard was never going to give up and would push all this hate to a climax someday, and if Gray had anything to do with it, it was going to be on his terms and not Taggard's.

Martin's voice invaded again, going, going, crap he hadn't been paying attention again. Martin was looking in Gray's direction and Gray nodded his head.

"A new high bid is entered, anyone wish to go higher?"

Martin's showmen ship was asserting it's self. He turned circles around Rose arms and hands going out and around.

"Ah, come on men this is a strong looking beauty, good enough to warm anyone's bed, anyone else care to bid?"

Taggard was turning a strange shade of purple; he couldn't raise his bid any higher that's all he had. That dirt eaters going to get her after all. He looked around to see if anyone else was going to bid against the Khan's son. No, it didn't look like anyone was going too. Taggard turned quickly bumping into those beside him and stomped off.

Those around him just laughed good-naturedly and thought he was a bad loser and turned back to the entertainment.

Martin's voice continued to ring out into the crowd growing louder.

"The bidding is ending some of you will regret losing this fiery beauty. All right men, going, going, going, gone, sold to Gray Lloyd, son of the Khan."

You could hear the murmuring of voices as Gray called his head houseman, Stu, over to him, he whispered something to him and Stu turned and began walking over to where Martin and Rose stood. Stu had a pretty good smirk on his face as he came face to face with Rose, he went to grab her right arm and she stepped back. Rose looked straight into his eyes.

"Where ever I am to go I can walk there on my own, try to touch me again and you will live to regret it and that's no idol threat."

Stu was surprised at the venom in this young woman's words without realizing what he was doing; he automatically took a step back. Then he hardened his face and voice.

“That's fine but you will learn to watch your mouth, disobey me and it's you who will learn to regret it. Now come with me and do not give me any more excuse to have you beaten within an inch of your life.”

Stu started on his way back over to his master, Rose held her head high and followed him, her heart thumping loudly in her ears.

The crowd had quieted and was now waiting for the bidding to start on the young girl being led up beside Martin; she couldn't have been more than thirteen and of mixed race, with tears streaking down her forlorn face. The bidding on the last nine women and girls went quickly, too quickly as far as Rose was concerned. Rose stood off a few feet from Stu, her brain going a mile a minute desperately trying to think of how she was going to escape from this mess.

Chapter 2

The rest of the morning was a whirlwind of confusion and noise, when the bidding broke up Rose was led off to the housing for Gray's slaves. She lost site of Penny as she went the opposite direction. Penny seemed someone after her own heart in the way of not being cowed by all this. It didn't take long to get where they were going, as the Khan and his families housing were closer to the center of the camp. A few minutes later they were standing in front of a medium sized yurt.

There was a guard at the door as Stu walked up and nodded at the guard, and the guard nodded back, the flap of the yurt was open to let in some light and air. Stu motioned for her to come and they both stepped inside. She would have to be given a space in the slave yurt, and it was pretty full as it was, but Stu didn't think it would be for long. He knew she was destined for Gray's yurt.

Rose's eyes adjusted quickly and she noticed the fire pit in the middle and then the blankets and personal objects in spaces all over the yurt. Stu looked around and finally spied a space for Rose. She was shown to the back of the yurt and told she could have the two and one half by five feet area for herself, not quite big enough for her to stretch out in but that's all that was left for her. It was hot and stuffy in here at the back, as there was no cross ventilation; they kept it battened down to help keep the slaves from escaping at night, so no lifting the bottom to let air flow through. It was just another precaution, but there was little chance of that with the double guards and the dogs at the perimeter of the camp and then another line of guards after that.

One thing she knew though was that her dad, brother and neighbors could still get in this camp undetected that was one of their talents. They had been passing this along to the others on the homesteads, the families needed to be trained in all areas. Dad had been special black ops in a division that wasn't even supposed to exist; he retired after 30 years of service. He had more ways to get in here then you could shake a stick at. It was always a great thing to have someone like him in the family, especially now. Rose was thinking back to the years before this when the families had gathered together for protection. Her dad had gotten them through the bad years in the beginning of all this trouble with his knowledge and that of Seth wolf's, they had held off and did away with more then a few scavengers that tried to take what the families had, but they have been six feet under in the pine grove for quite a few years now.

Thinking of the Wolf clan, she wouldn't like to see anyone after the Wolf's got done with them, or maybe she would, she didn't like being considered a slave.

Oh man, did she ever have to pee, she had been so upset earlier it never entered her mind, now it did with a vengeance.

Stu was still talking to her; she would just have to interrupt, no helping it.

"Excuse me Stu, just where is the women's toilet tent or whatever, unless you want a wet spot here in this yurt, you had best show me where it is."

Rose was also thinking and then what do I do with no dry pants to change into.

Stu looked at her in surprise; he wasn't used to being interrupted by a supposed cowed new slave let along any other slave. Then it dawned on him what she had said.

“Um yeah, well just this time, next time I will have to discipline you, do you understand?”
“Yes I hear, but where are the toilet facilities?”

She sounded so urgent about it that he led her right out the door, took a turn to the left and went straight to the Kahn's slave's facilities and it was a tent latrine, big enough for six women at once to be in there. But at this moment she didn't give a darn how many were in it. She went inside and to the closest free spot drawing the stares of the three women that were in there, most new slaves were shy and tried to wait until most everyone had left, but not this one. There didn't seem to be a shy or embarrassed bone in her body that they could tell.

Rose was uncomfortable with it all but no way in the world was she going to show it to these people. She was going to bull her way through this, the best she could. She gave a nod to the three others in the latrine as she pulled up her pants and buttoned them up. She opened the tent flap to find Stu and a women waiting for her.

“Malinda will take you back to your quarters; she will also tell you where other things are including where you will eat. You will be issued one blanket, anything else you need you will have ask Malinda and if you deserve it she will see to it, anything else you will have to earn by good behavior and hard work.”

With that Stu turned to the right and walked away.

Rose looked at Malinda and figured Malinda was about five foot three, very thin with long black hair; she thought Malinda must be around 35 years old or so. She looked like the sun was making leather out of her.

“As Stu said, I am Malinda and you will follow me and do as I say, I will now take you for a meal.”

She turned and started to walk away and Rose followed her.

Man that was short and sweet, no love lost on me I guess, thought Rose.

They didn't have to go far, if you were part of the Khans household, even a slave, nothing was far away from his and the families yurts. The Khan was smack dab in the middle of an ever-enlarging circle of tents, yurts and teepee's.

Malinda stayed with Rose as she ate her meal, both sitting on the floor of a yurt that was the cook tent in bad weather and the eating tent when it was hot and sunny. Rose couldn't complain about the food. But maybe the Khan and his household ate better then the others she had no idea. This was a nice thick venison stew with even a few vegetables in it served with flat bread. She wondered whose larder they had raided for the vegetables. Because there was no way they had gardened themselves, it was almost harvest season now and they had just pulled in here a few days ago. So they had to be another one of their acquisitions.

Rose had been given a bowl, spoon, and a cup to use.

“I see that you are finished with the bowl, cup and silverware, do not lose them that is the only set you will be given, if you lose them you will have to do without. If you are caught taking someone else’s after that you will lose a finger, no excuses. Now come with me.”

Rose wasn’t the type to steal but I guess if you lost your plates and things, a person might get desperate. I guess I will keep an eye out for missing fingers.

Soon they were ducking into a very large yurt.

“This is the master’s home, when you are called before him you will enter the yurt with your head down, do not raise your head and look him in the eyes. That will be punishable by whipping. Only if he tells you to raise your head will you do so, then look at his chest and nowhere else. You will not speak unless asked a question and then in a low voice and if he doesn’t recognize your presence right away you will stand where you are quietly. Now do you have this straight?”

“Yes, it’s not hard to remember things that simple.”

Malinda turned quickly and slapped Rose across her right cheek.

“That is enough of your smart mouth, I am over you; you are a dog. Not even good enough to lick my shoes. You will not talk to me in that manner, I am Miss or Madam, do you understand me?”

Rose not known for holding her temper was turning beet red with anger. Before she knew what she was doing her right fist came up and met the left side of Malinda’s face. Bam, she cold cocked Malinda a good one. Rose stood growling over Malinda.

“Don’t ever touch me again, do you understand me?”

Malinda was looking up from the yurt floor, wondering what hit her and how she ended up on the floor. Then through the rushing noise in her ears came the sound of the growling voice over her.

“I repeat, don’t ever touch me again, UNDERSTAND?”

Malinda just looked up at the wild women standing over her in shock and pain. Her cheek felt like it was on fire and her eye was beginning to swell.

“Well, well you are a wildcat,” came a deep voice from behind her.

Rose turned quickly and there standing in the doorway was Gray, the Khans son, and the man who had bought her. Rose stepped to the side of Malinda and stood there staring straight at Gray, another rule broken. Her eyes narrowed with hate plainly on her face.

Gray turned and motioned at someone, a guard stepped over from the side of the yurt.

“I need your help a moment Guy, come inside with me.

”Rose heard, “Yes master”

Her stomach was beginning to churn, she knew what the consequences could be for her actions, but she still stood there staring him straight in the eye with hate and anger on her face.

Gray straightened his face so it showed no emotion; he found this all very amusing in his boring day, but he wasn't going to let this upstart wild cat see it.

Gray stepped into the yurt the guard directly behind him. By this time other members of his household were beginning to gather outside the door. Meanwhile, Malinda was still lying on the floor. Gray spotted one of his concubines, Prissy.

"Prissy," he called; she turned towards him but did not look him in the face.

"Yes master."

"Go help Malinda up off the floor and take care of her."

Prissy bowed, "Yes master, right away master."

She scampered over to where Malinda was now sobbing and helped her up from the floor and held onto her as they ducked past Gray, the guard, and the others at the yurt door.

Rose stood her ground scared about what was going to happen next, but she would be danged if she was going to show it.

Gray was in a quandary on what he should do at the moment, he had never seen anyone act like this after being captured. But he knew he would have to make a lesson of her, no one could get away with something like this. Open rebellion would not be tolerated in the least degree in his or any other household.

Dang it, he thought and I really like this one.

Gray turned slightly and glanced over at the guard who was now slightly behind and to his left and then glanced back at Rose. Rose began to steel herself for the next set of indignities.

"Girl you have really stepped in it haven't you, I was going to make you one of my concubines but now that will have to be delayed, first with your punishment and then a time to see if your going to conform to our ways." Gray then turned back to the guard. Guy go get Lex, I have a feeling this will take both of you to complete."

Rose was still standing there staring at Gray and trying her best to not start shaking. Stay mad; stay mad, she kept repeating to herself. This she felt would stop her from giving in to crying. Think girl think, I have to think!

Gray smiled a nasty grin like he knew just what was going to happen to her. Guy was headed out of the yurt and soon there would be two guards to help control her.

Now the Yurt had three rooms, it was three yurts made into one large one. The main room here for meetings and meals and then the concubines' bedroom on the right and Gray's bedroom on the left. Rose turned and quickly made for the back of the yurt, she made a dash left and ended up in a bedroom.

Gads this has to be his room. Meanwhile Gray just stood where he was waiting for the two guards to return, he didn't think there was anywhere for her to go, she was trapped in his bedroom.

Rose quickly bent and grabbed her boot knife and went over to the side of the yurt and stuck it in the wall. A soft tearing sound came from the wall; her knife was good and sharp. Guy and another guard, Lex, were entering the yurt and Gray nodded his head toward his bedroom.

"She went to the left and into my room, get her and follow me to the stocks."

Lex didn't show it but he was surprised, he would have thought the first place the new slave would have gone would have been to the whipping post, Guy had filled him in on the goings on, on the way over. The guards walked into the room and looked around, they looked around some more, and there wasn't really anywhere to hide in here. The bed was rugs, furs, and blankets on the floor, that's when they spied the long slit in the yurt wall to the right of the bedding. Lex looked at Guy and Guy looked at Lex and they both headed to the slit. That's when Gray stepped into his room and saw the guards headed for the back wall of his room where a very long slit opened to the outside, in the side of his wall.

Gray started to turn red with anger; no way would he bring himself to walk through that hole in his wall, too demeaning for his rank in the Khans household. The guards heard him enter and turned for instructions.

"You two get out there and run that wildcat down or it's the both of you who will face the stocks with more besides."

They quickly turned and headed through the ripped wall. Then Gray turned and went for his front door at a fast walk, seething. People were astonished as the two burly guards came out of the back wall of Gray's yurt. Guy and Lex kept their eye out for the girl maybe hiding around one of the close yurts or teepees. They also began to stop people and ask if they had seen the girl that Khan Gray had bought today, as she had escaped and was now a runaway. By this time Gray had told his household staff and others that had gathered at his yurt when the trouble began, that the girl had managed to escape and word was put out to be on the look out for her.

Chapter 3

Rose had made it to the last three rows of the outer circle of the camp; she hadn't run as this would have brought attention to her immediately. She just slipped out the hole like she had just come around the yurt and was headed on an errand. She hadn't stopped to look around that would draw suspicion down on her; she just slowed a little as she tried to get the lay of the camp and a way to slip the rest of the way out of the camp. It wasn't hard to walk past the slaves as they were to single minded and quickly going about their work.

It's the members of the Huns she needed to avoid and any questions as to what she was doing and where she was going. Plus she didn't know how long before word was out she had escaped from Gray. This just seemed to go from bad to worse and she was sure worse and worse punishment. She almost stopped at that moment; a Hun was walking her way, a large greasy looking fellow. She looked slightly to her left and saw a tent and that the door was wide open, and made up her mind and dashed into the large tent. What she didn't know is the Hun that was walking towards her was headed for the very tent she had ducked into.

A sneering smile played its way across Taggard's lips. He knew exactly who she was and that she must have managed to escape some how. How delightful, not only was Gray's first buy now in his hands, but he could now torment Gray with how he can't even manage to keep his hands on a mere slave girl. Taggard knew the tent was deserted at this time of day; his own slaves were out doing their chores. He stepped into the doorway of his tent and let his eyes adjust to the dimness. There she was to the back right trying to stay out of the light. Taggard took another step inside. He didn't want to be overheard by anyone passing his tent. He would let her go when he was done with her, her virtue would be his and if Gray wanted his leavings, so be it, but he doubted Gray would let her near him after Taggard had finished with her.

If Taggard had been smart he would have tried to get close to her by saying what she wanted to hear, that she would be safe and he would hide her and help her escape. But no that wasn't Taggard; all that there was in his mind was hurt and revenge for his life in the tribe.

"Well, well, what do we have here; escaped from that snot Gray did ya? Well now it's my turn to show you what a real man is."

He stepped a few more steps toward her, his leer growing deeper.

All Rose could think is, "I keep going from the frying pan and into the fire. She leaned against the tent wall, her boot knife palmed. She turned very so slightly to her right, her hand at the side of the tent wall. She sunk her knife into the tent wall and started sliding it downward from shoulder height with her eye never leaving this smelly man's frame. The backside of the tent was pretty dark, and she didn't know how long his eyes would take to adjust to the darker light of the tent, so she was trying to work quickly.

She decided she needed to use her wits more than she did earlier. She started to whimper and slid herself down to her knees, her knife sliding down the wall of the tent, cutting its way through the thick fabric. The blowhard was getting ever closer. Rose quickly ducked out through the rent she had made in the wall, and felt her left foot being grabbed. She stuck her hand back in the hole as she fell to the ground on her side,

twisting around and ran her knife across the grease ball's hand. He yelped and quickly withdrew his hand from her foot. She was just getting to her feet when her heart sank for she was grabbed by the shoulders.

"Gotcha now, let's get you back to Khan Gray young lady, so he can figure out what to do with you." It was Stu.

Inside the tent Taggard could hear someone talking to the Hellcat. She had fooled him, she whimpered like she was scared and then slipped right out of a hole in the side of his tent. He jumped after her as fast as he could and managed to get one of her feet, but to no avail, she slit him across the hand with something sharp and was gone. Must have been the same thing she had slit the tent wall with. He'd get her back for this, one way or another, when no one was looking, she'd get hers.

Stu had Rose by her upper right arm; he had seen the glint of the small knife as he helped her the rest of the way up from the ground. He reached over and took it from her as she tried to hide it.

"I'll take that young lady, there will be no more escapes going through the tent walls. Some one is expecting you, now let's go."

Stu grabbed her upper arm tightly and pushed her along. Rose was indignant and embarrassed that she had been caught so easily. Rose debated if she should try and get away from Stu, she thought she could with what her dad had taught her, but would that just continue to make matters worse then they were now. From the looks of all the people milling around now, there was no way she would be able to get away without being noticed. She also figured she best keep her mouth shut for now, but try to show less of just how scared she was. She knew she was in store for some kind of punishment, most likely plural punishments at that.

Stu spotted a dirty boy of about eight years old staring at him and his prisoner.

"Boy come here, run to Khan Gray's yurt and tell him the slave girl has been caught."

The boy looked at Stu for a couple of seconds, and then said, "What's in it for me?"

"If you don't go now and do as I say, a beating will be in store for you, you have that? Go and I will see that you're rewarded accordingly." With that the boy left to do as he was told.

As Stu marched the escapee back to master Gray's, he figured he ought to let Gray know quietly that the girl may have injured his half brother Taggard. Taggard was known for his temper and even Stu knew that Taggard would try to get his revenge on the girl for any injury she had done him, no matter if he deserved it or not.

"I just don't know why the Khan has put up with that little piece of scum all these years; he should have seen long ago that he was a hopeless case."

Stu was doing a bit of mumbling as they headed back to Khan Gray's yurt. Rose wondered what all the mumbling was about coming from Stu but did manage to make out a few words here and there. Somehow she thought she must be part of it and the trouble she had caused in the camp. She also wondered why that man she cut hadn't come running out from his tent to take care of her, for what she had done to him. She

was trying all she could to occupy her mind. She also saw many people were beginning to turn and follow them as they saw her being hauled back.

“Wonderful, just wonderful, I get to have a big audience,” she mumbled at herself.

Stu looked over at her as he heard sounds come from her; he wouldn't want to be in her shoes, that's for sure.

As they neared their destination Rose could see a good number of people gathered there. “Oh great.” She had said that out loud.

Stu looked over at her again, “If I were you girl, I would stay just as quiet as possible at this point, nothing you try to say will help your situation one bit.”

They finally reached Grays yurt and went on inside going through quite a crowd. Gray was sitting on a padded folding chair, which was sitting on a three-foot box, and all of this was covered in furs. Stu marched her in and then stood there in seven feet away in front of Khan Gray, not saying a word, his head down. Rose tried to not look up but it just wasn't part of her makeup to be subservient, she looked over to the left and then the right at the people around them and did do her best not to look over in front of her at Gray.

Gray just sat in his chair staring at her, he knew he was making Stu wait at the same time, but that didn't matter, after all Stu was just a slave, a trusted slave, but a slave never the less. What Gray found comical about the whole thing right now was the girl. She really didn't have her head down but she was doing the best she could to not look directly at him. This wasn't going to go well for her but it had been a nice break in another boring day.

“Stu bring the girl here directly in front of me.”

Stu looked up and still having a hold of her hauled her over with him to stand in front of Gray.

“You may release her Stu and go stand to the side. I doubt she will try to run now.”

“Thank you master,” Stu said, and stepped over to the left side of the yurt to watch the proceedings.

Again Gray was silent; pondering the girl's punishment, this type of rebellion could not be tolerated. He didn't want her dead but he had to show his father he could met out the right punishment for the crime committed. After all, he would be the head Khan someday. Ok, enough daydreaming of the future, he needed to take care of this problem.

“Look up at me slave, it's time you learned what we will tolerate and what we won't. You haven't been in this camp a full day yet and you have managed to upset the running of the whole camp by your escapades. This will not be tolerated, we can't allow it to be or we would lose all control and we as a people would not survive long. You are lucky you pulled this in my household and that I know you are new to us. I don't know how much that will help you in the long run but I will consider it, that's more then I can say a lot of the men of the tribe would do for you.”

Gray looked around at the audience this had created, he really didn't like being in the limelight and this had

pushed him there. To top it off his father the Khan had just stepped into the yurt. Everyone outside were already bowed and the people in the yurt now did the same. Gray got up and descended to the ground and also bowed at the waist to his father.

The Khan looked at his son, “Gray I am only here as a spectator, I heard about your little wildcat and would like to see how you meet out her punishment. You go ahead and get back on your seat; this is your home after all and your decision. I will stand and watch like the rest.”

The Khan then walked over the right of Gray’s chair and turned to face the front, looking at Rose appraisingly. The Khan’s bodyguards took up their stations around the room and one of them to the back of the Khan.

“Well so much for trying to seem harsh yet trying to be as lenient on her as possible,” thought Gray, after he nodded to his father and climbed back up on his seat.

Everyone’s eyes were now going from Gray to the new slave.

Gray knew he needed to get on with this judgment and give orders to carry out his ruling. Ok, let’s get this over with.

“Slave give me your attention, you assaulted a member of my household, you were belligerent to me, and then tried to escape me your rightful owner. You upset our camp and caused people to go looking for you and not be able to attend their normal duties. For this you will be meted out a punishment. First you hereby will be named Dirt; you will go by this until I deem it time for you to have a first name other then this. Second you will be spending the next four days staked out, you will be given a drink of water in the morning and one at night, and you will not be let up for any reason. Then when you are released you will be the hog wrangler, you will be escorted back and forth from the hogs until I see an improvement in your attitude. Guard take Dirt out and stake her down between the camp and the creek immediately. Lex walked over and grabbed Rose with his meaty hand by her right forearm and began hauling her along. They walked by all those in the opening of the yurt and a little boy bouncing up and down on his toes trying to get the attention of Stu, as Stu walked out behind Rose and the large guard.

As they walked by the little boy grabbed Stu’s jacket and tugged on it.

“My reward master, where’s my pay for doing your errand?”

Stu looked down at the grubby boy, then reached into his pocket and took out a note pad and pencil; he wrote a note and gave it to the boy.

“Here boy give this to the quartermaster.” Stu held his hand out to the boy with the note in it. With that the boy grabbed the note, turned on his heel, and took off at a run for the quartermaster’s tent.

Rose was upset but was showing no emotion, she wasn’t going to give any of them the pleasure. She wondered if this was a blessing in disguise, would this possibly make it easier for her people to get her away from here.

As they walked through the camp some of the people glanced their way, the slaves among them tried to glance over discreetly so their masters wouldn't notice and accuse them of neglecting their work. It took over 20 minutes to get to the creek shore where the stakes had been set up, by this time Lex had her by her right wrist and her hand was going numb. Rose noticed one place was already taken up by an elderly gentleman, his clothes were different from the clothes she had seen among the tribe, almost like an odd fringed outfit she had seen in the old magazines they had at home. He must be another newly captured slave, but why would they keep an older man, he must be at least 60, she wondered, what use could he be to them? He must have been here a couple of days already; he was beginning to smell of excrement.

At that moment she was roughly thrown to the ground, Lex grabbed her left ankle and began tying it to wooden stake with what looked like three quarter inch nylon cord. She started to struggle and Lex reached over and back handed her across the face and knocked her onto her back. He then grabbed her right foot and tied her ankle to the stake, in a few minutes she was tied spread eagled to the ground, and Lex was stomping off for camp. She turned her head and saw the older man had been watching the whole process. He was about 12 feet from her and to her left; there was room to put another person in-between the two of them. She turned her head so he couldn't see the tears that were beginning to run down the sides of her face and into her hair. Her thoughts were ones of self-loathing for not being in better control of herself and getting herself into the predicament.

"Why couldn't I just have bided my time better, held my temper, and went along with things a little longer, then seen if I could escape, sometimes I am my own worse enemy."

She was talking quietly to herself and continued to mumble for a while longer. A hoarse voice brought her out of her self-pitying tirade of herself.

"Hey there girl. Girl, you alright?" The voice croaked.

Rose turned her head to the old man. "Yes, I'm alright, just being mad at myself."

"Good to hear it girl, my names Frederick D. Boone, now why in the world did they stake out a pretty little thing like you?"

"My name is Rose Fairbanks and well it's like this," Rose then went on to tell him of her capture and then the reason she ended up out there staked to the ground.

"Woo wee girl sounds like you ticked them off something awful, but yes I do agree with you, you might have been better off holding your temper and seeing what time brought your way."

They both heard a scuffle in the grass and turned to see a dark haired young women coming their way with a canteen. The girl had her black mid length hair tied back with a leather cord and she was dressed in a ragged brown flannel shirt with a blue dirty gingham ankle length skirt, and on her feet were much worn moccasins. She went to Frederick first and let him have a few swallows of water and then over to Rose where she did the same. It seemed to Rose that she had let Frederick have more then she was supposed to, maybe she felt sorry for him because she knew he had been out here who knows how many days.

"Thank you young lady," Frederick said to the girl his voice was a little better, so Rose thought she also

ought to do the same and thanked the girl for the water. The girl whispered your welcome and scurried off, with glances around her as if to make sure no one had heard her.

Rose looked back over to Frederick, “is it ok if I call you Fred?”

Frederick grinned back at her, “Sure Rose, Fred will be fine you go right on ahead and call me Fred, my wife always did. Well once in awhile she called me a few other things to, but I deserved those most times.”

Rose couldn't help but smile back at Fred, he was so likable. Here she was staked out on the ground and smiling about something, who would have thought it.

“Fred can I ask you how you ended up staked out here to and you don't seem to be dressed like someone who has been with this bunch long?”

“No, I don't mind you asking Rose but it's an awful long story of how I was captured and I am sorry to say I don't think I am up to telling you right now. As far as being staked out here that's part of the story, part of the not cooperating part of my story. I hope I live to tell you girl, I would love to pass my knowledge onto another generation before I join my sweet wife in the hereafter.”

“Sorry Fred and I'm sorry about your wife also.”

“You couldn't have known girl, but I thank you for the thought.”

The sun was setting by this time, Rose could hardly believe she had woken up in her own bed just yesterday; this was like a long nightmare. Her only hope right at this moment was that her family knew where she was by now and had spotted her. Father and his blood brother's of the Wolf Clan could get her out of this, she just knew it.

Chapter 4

Rose didn't have to hope and wish, it was a fact her family knew where she was, in fact her family and friends were much closer then even she realized. Yes indeed she had been spotted. The families had gotten a pretty early start on their hunt for her. It didn't even take until her horse made it back to the farmstead the first evening to know she was missing.

Same day Rose was captured on the Wolf Ranch:

Gilbert Wolf had been getting ready to milk the goats on the late afternoon Rose was taken, when he stopped dead in his tracks, his son George was with him and knew when his dad got that far away look in his eyes to not even try to talk to him. Gilbert wasn't called Dreaming Man for nothing; he seemed to have a very close connection to the Spirit world and those around him. Gilbert came out of his trance after about two minutes and turned to his son.

“George go grab one of your cousins, I have to get over to the Wild Horse Ranch immediately. Make sure when you find some help that you tell your grandfather or uncles someone's in trouble from the Fairbanks home and I have headed over there already. Tell them to send more of our people over to the Fairbanks they will be needed and bring their packs, I don't know when we will be back home again.”

“Sure dad don't worry I'll do it.”

“Ok George take care son while I'm gone and tell your mom what's up as soon as you can, may the creator bless and keep you.”

With that they both turned, Gilbert headed for the corral for a horse and George for the barn where some of the others were milking the cows. George was really concerned, nothing had happened in a couple of years besides the day-to-day accidents that could mean your life. Grandfather and Grandmother Wolf had saved many lives of those on their ranch along with the folks on the other ranches with old time folk medicines. They had insisted on all the family members learning such things wither they had a knack for it or not. It would need passed on the next generations to come. Grandfather and Kris Fairbanks had collected many medical books along with natural medicine books, on herbs. George didn't remember any other way of life. When the older set talked about the way the world had been just a few years ago some of the things they talked about seemed inconceivable. He had been too young when the sickness came to remember. The one thing he did remember sort of was television and turning on light switches and having the room light up. By this time he was at the barn and his dad was riding away from the ranch.

George had been running and was out of breath as he ran into the large doorway of the barn. He stood there gasping for breath as his eyes adjusted to the darker barn.

Cousin Lester Jr. looked over to the gasping boy from his milking stool as he milked Anna their only purebred Jersey.

“Well what’s up with you George? I thought you and Gilbert were milking the goats, come on boy out with it.”

Uncle Homer looked over to where George stood now able to talk.

“Ah Lester, give the boy a break would you.” Homer knew something was up or George wouldn’t be here. Homer was giving hay and grain to the cows but stopped and started to walk over to George.

“It’s dad he had a vision and left for the Wild Horse Ranch, he said someone from there is missing and in trouble and to have some of you come with your packs cause he doesn’t know when you will be home again. I’m supposed to get help to milk the goats.”

George being 15 was doing his best to be the brave man he knew he needed to be now. He thought, is this what it’s like for everyone, scared inside but able to step up and over come it at the same time knowing they are needed. It is a good day to die. He shivered a little with that thought but kept his face as blank as he could while his uncle Homer was getting a couple of helpers for him. Uncle Homer was also telling the family in the barn to spread the word that the evening chores needed to be done quickly, there was trouble afoot and they all needed to meet in the main house as soon as possible. Everyone got about their business and did their chores in record time. They knew trouble brought to one family up here was the same for them all. They had survived this long by pulling together and they knew it also meant their future survival. Soon they were assembled in the main house of Seth Wolf Chief of their family, except for those that had guard duty.

Homer took the floor, “as you have heard Gilbert has left for the Fairbanks, for those of you that have heard this but not the why I will fill you in.”

He then explained what George had relayed to him from his father Gilbert after his vision. The family began to get loud as they discussed what this could mean to them all.

Homer knew he needed to quickly get on with this and pick those that must leave to help out their blood brothers and sisters at the Wild Horse Ranch. At that moment his brother Seth stood up from his chair at the head of the room and told the family, we must hold our peace and be quiet for now, this needed to be done quickly not discussed. We are children of the Wolf we will continue to do what must be done. Our forefathers demand it and nothing less; as we have done in the past we will continue to do. It may have been a couple of years since we have had to fight anyone but we knew there would not always be peace in this new world, now lets get on with this.”

Everyone quieted down immediately and looked to Homer to continue as Seth sat down.

“Alright family, first we need a show of hands for volunteers to head over to the Fairbanks and onto whatever awaits us. But as you know some have to stay home to keep the rest of our family safe and attend to the ranch, and before I forget,” he turned to Ruth, Gilbert’s daughter. Ruth saddle up a horse and hightail it for the Rice ranch, tell them what’s going on and that all us volunteers will meet at the Wild Horse Ranch A.S.A.P.”

“I’ll get right on it Uncle Homer,” she fled the room and the house to run to her own home to dress and ride to the Rice’s. In no time they heard her galloping off. She would return but only after the others had left for the Fairbanks and would help take up the slack at home for lookout and chores. She would have loved to gone along instead, but she knew better then to argue about it, this could be life or death for some of them. Forty-Five minutes later she was riding into the Rice Manor. She had heard the signal of recognition and gave it back in return so she had no trouble getting to the main house. She was met by Joe and his wife Ella, a few of the other family members had begun to gather around her as she explained with the information she was given what the trouble was and why she had been sent. All knew of the wild people who had invaded the valley a few miles away and knew this had to be part of the problem. As their homestead was the furthest back the trouble just hadn’t reached them yet.

They sent Ruth back on her way to home with the Creator’s Blessings and began to gather their family for their own council.

By this time on the Wolf Ranch those that would go to the Fairbanks and those that would stay were already chosen, with the ones leaving, well on their way by the time Ruth arrived back home.

Those that went over to the Fairbanks were; Seth (Walks in the Dark), Oscar (Lightening), His wife Sue (Grass in Hair), Lester (Rushing Wind), Lester Jr. (Snarling Dog), his wife Star (Night Wanderer), Isaac Brightwater, and Abraham Running Bear Hansen (Slinking Coyote). The others hated to have to stay but they knew they had to keep the homestead guarded and safe from intruders that might find there way here

from the camp below. Prayers had been said to the great Creator and they had gone on their way. Now they were dressed in traditional clothes of the combined Blackfoot and Sioux nations mingled with long fringed leather chaps and Ghost shirts. Rifles, pistols, a few hand grenades, along with bows and arrows, knives and miscellaneous throwing stars were among the weapons of choice. Seth had Gilbert's clothes and weapons. Meanwhile Gilbert was riding into the Fairbanks ranch, having giving the sign of admittance for family and friends, along with an extra call of trouble. At the sound of the trouble call most of the ranch gathered and awaited the incoming rider. They didn't have long to wait as Gilbert Wolf rode up at a good clip, slid off his horse and went straight for Kris who he saw was coming down the steps of his front porch.

“Gilbert the emergency call has got us all twitchy what's wrong?”

“Which of the women are gone from your ranch right now, is Rose about?”

Kris said he really didn't know for sure but they would check.

It didn't take long to find out yes Rose wasn't around.

Gilbert was ticked at himself they were losing precious time, when he knew it was Rose from the very beginning.

“Kris came back to Gilbert, “ok Gilbert where is she and what do you know?”

“I had a vision Kris, I knew it was her, but I am still not used to this talent, it's the Huns in the valley they have Rose. She is in great danger from one of them, an evil heart worse then those around him beats down in that valley, we have to get her back and soon. For I just didn't see her captured but what may come if we don't get her back from them. My family should be here soon and I am sure the Rice family has been told by now.”

Kris went up onto his porch and rang the bell, two rings then a pause and then three rings. Now the ranch family knew a meeting was being called right away. Deb Kris's wife had been standing close and knew what was going on, she was very afraid for her daughter Rose, but she knew if anyone could get her back it was her husband and his blood brothers. She just hoped Rose didn't rile up those savages too much.

The family gathered and was filed in on Rose's situation Kris looked over his family and extended family he knew in a day or two some may not be with them anymore. This had become such a hard world but then it

also had become a simpler one. Ok, he told himself lets not get morbid or sloppy; too many depend on me, including my daughter.

They were holding the meeting outside and Kris explained that Rose was missing and that Gilbert Wolf had a vision of her capture and had high tailed it over here immediately to let them know. He then called for volunteers and explained how dangerous this was going to be and that they needed the best of them if they were going to get Rose back and as few as possible of the ranch folk killed. Of course they had all the volunteers they could possibly use for this mission, more then enough.

Kris then said, “listen folks and I know you all want to get Rose back but we need people to stay home to, to watch over the young ones and the ranch. As far as we know right now none of the tribe down below has scouted the ranches up here. But they have to know there are people around, elsewhere did Rose come from? So we know it won’t be long before we start to see them up here and more of our families start to disappear and people are killed resisting. Now as far as we can tell they are nomads and scavengers and they are summering down in our valley, so we are sure they will move on when they have used up and destroyed everything around here including us. So sooner or later we would have had to face them anyway, so instead of a week from now its today. Ok folks lets get with it.

Those going from the Fairbanks Ranch were Kris, Cal, and Martha Fairbanks, Thomas Brandt, Harold and Hector Boyd. Thomas was 24 years old; Harold 22 years old and Hector Boyd were 22 and 20years old. All had been well trained by Kris himself with Seth cross training them. Kris and Seth had crossed trained each other when they were friends years ago to make sure they had each other’s skills. Clothes were changed; their special weapons and equipment stashed on their bodies, and packs readied. They would get as close as possible by horse and then walk the rest of the way to watch the proceeding in the valley to see if they could spot Rose. Then determine from there how they were going to rescue her.

As the hour went by first the Wolf’s came riding in and then a short while later the Rice’s. Seth stepped down from his horse and he and Kris exchanged a brotherhood handshake, hands on wrists and then Seth gave Kris a bear hug. Seth looked Kris straight in the eyes, “Sorry to see you under these circumstances Kris, we’ll get her back. We came as fast as we could behind Gilbert after his son told of his vision.”

Kris gave Seth a grin even in times like this it was something to see Seth all decked out in his hunting attire, (man hunting attire that is). They weren’t painted up yet but soon they would be. Nothing that would stand out, like Kris and the others it would be dark greens, black and browns, streaked across their flesh that wasn’t covered by leather and cloth.

“Thank you for coming so soon Seth and I hate it too be under these circumstance also, I would sooner it be under happier times. As soon as the volunteers from the Rice’s get here we’ll decide how ere going to proceed. Lets make sure you horses are taken care of while your still here, I’ll call a couple of the kids over to lead them to the water trough and give them some feed.”

Hannah Boyd 14 years old and Dorcus Brandt 13 years old were standing on the porch, they had been spinning wool in the sunlight and had stopped when the bad news came in and still hadn’t gone back to spinning. Kris saw them out of the corner of his eye, so they were elected to see to the horses, they didn’t mind one bit they loved to be able to get out of spinning for now, it wasn’t hard just tedious work for active girls, anyway it would be to dark soon to spin.

“Just a second Gil I have your knives, guns, bow, arrows, and pack,” Seth told Gilbert.

The ammunition for the rifles and pistols was getting scarce; it was finally getting to old and couldn’t be trusted to fire, they always took their chances that it would fire or not.

Seth grabbed an extra pack from his horse and a rifle before it was led off and Gilberts pack was thrown to him and Kris’s invited him in to change, he went from jeans and t shirt to his leathers in no time at all. Gilbert like the rest of the men on their ranch kept his hair on the short side, that way it was easier to take care and clean. Kris was always amazed at the transformation he saw in his blood brothers when they had their leathers on, except for their hair it was like taking a step back in time well over two hundred years. They had a few little additions here and there for modern equipment but it wasn’t enough of a change to notice and most of it was well hidden. Only real difference was these Indian wore pistols. As Gilbert stepped over to his horse that was now tied to the hitching post on the side of the house with the other now watered horses and saw the Rice folk riding up.

“Good, he thought, we should be out of here shortly.”

Gil could see Joe Rice riding at the head with his son Alan to his left, next came Leonard White his son in law, his other son Barry with wife May, and ranch hand Leslie Bluet. Not as many as he would have liked to have seen come from the Rice ranch, but there must be a reason and any way too many people on this mission would make for its own problems. You wouldn’t have had any idea these thoughts were going on in Gil’s head he had put himself in his show no emotion mode and all that’s was on his face was a blank expression.

Everyone was gathering again at the front of the house so Gil moseyed on over. Those gathered also

included all those done with their chores done for the day so there were many children getting underfoot as well. The crowd didn't seem to be getting very loud even with the added folk. Well a squeal here and there from a little one which was expected out of children. They were excited the last time the families got together had been in the spring for a wedding. Even if was just a few of them here, it was different to the kids along with Rose getting herself captured and the Huns so close to them.

Kris stepped up onto the porch; I guess it's time we got this party going. I am the first in command then Seth and Joe. Gil, Cal, and Leonard will be the captains. If something happens to me then you look to Seth he knows what I know and vice versa, Joe is almost as good with this Kris grinned and looked over at Joe and Joe grinned back and said.

"I heard that you wiper snapper."

That got a chuckle out of most everyone, see Joe was one month older then Kris and Kris was always teasing Joe about being the old man. Of course that made Seth Wolf the youngling of the three of them with being nine months younger then Kris.

"Ok, continued Kris, We will spread out a bit and go take a look see and see if any of us can spot Rose in the morning. There's no way in the world it will be possible to night, but we do have some night vision glasses in case this takes us in to their camp at night which will be the smartest way to do this. Joe and Seth both spoke up and said they had their night vision glasses with them also.

Seth said a loud, "no worries mate."

So most of the people around him that knew him well were having a bit of a laugh. He always had liked Crocodile Dundee. Seth had started saying this on their ranch years ago and even the grandkids said it now, and he had copied the knife down the back thing to. He just loved the, "That's not a knife." Seth kept a 14-inch bowie knife in the holder in this shirt also and it had come in handy more then once in the past years.

Kris went on, "alright lets meet up at Blue's rock and we will divide up from there, now lets be on our way."

All went to their horses saddled up and started out down toward Blue's rock, everyone kept a keen eye on their surroundings, not grouped together but taking different trails. They had been taught well, all Kris or

Seth had to do is point use a few hand signals and the others knew what to do. An hour later the whole group was at Blue's rock listening to the plans Kris, Seth, and Joe were outlining.

As Kris stood by the boulder he thought back for a few seconds. The rock was a huge boulder that had rolled down from the mountaintop and ended up smack dab on top of 80-year-old Robert Blue's shack 15 years ago. He thank goodness was in the outhouse at the time, he spent the last few years of his life at the Wild horse Ranch and died a happy old man among his adopted family. Robert had been a very talented man and very intelligent, passing on his knowledge to those around him. Oh well I need to keep my mind on the job at hand thought Kris. I can think of these things when there's nothing to do but sit in my chair and stare at the fire at home after Rose is home. He ran his hands through his black salt and pepper hair and went on with his thoughts to the people around him.

They had decided to separate into three different units and get into place tonight so they could be where they wanted to be by daylight. Rushing Wind Lester Wolf senior would go with the Rice's and give them seven in their group. Kris's unit had seven and the Wolf's eight people. Each group would designate a runner to go between the units with news, and so it had started. Kris thought maybe this was for the best that this had happened, they would be finding out some of the things they needed to know. The Huns being here was going to come to no good and they were destined to clash. He tried to keep his mind from the thoughts of those of his family and friends that would no longer be with them in the months and years ahead because of invasion by this group that would rather take what others have then work for it themselves.

Kris and his people made their way down through the trees. The howl of coyotes was filtering through the forest; it would be stone dark in a few moments. They had left their horse a mile back; they didn't want to take the chance of a whinny being heard by a passing Hun. So they slipped down through the trees, yet staying high enough to get a good look at the campfires laid across the east end of the valley floor. By day they should be able to see things in the camp well with their binoculars. Shortly all their men would be at their vantage points to watch the camp for Rose and another wait would begin, for now they would take turns sleeping so all would be fresh for the day ahead.

Chapter 5

Just before dawn Kris came wake with a start, at first uncomfortable and wondering why he was out here sleeping in the woods, his fussy brain cleared and his memory with it. Rose his sweet young daughter down there in the hands of who knows what kind of men. If they didn't get her in the next few days the chances were they wouldn't get her back at all. He knew his daughter and her temper, she may be sweet but she was also a handful and a hellion when it suited her. She just may act first and think second if they made her mad enough. He whispered into the night sky, "please Lord help her hold her temper."

The younger people took turns on the night watch not bothering to tell Kris of this, he expected to be up around 3 AM to stand his watch; he was surprised to open his eyes to the predawn sky. Well, he thought can't cry over spilled milk and what's done is done, but he made sure he let them know not to do that again. They had to be a team and not think he or any other team member was too old to do their part on this rescue.

It was a beautiful morning, the glow of the soft orange and pink sky was breathtaking as ever off to the east as the sun started to come over the mountains, it was so much easier to see sitting here on the side of the mountain. He was usually in the barn at this time of the morning back at the ranch, and he would have preferred this morning to have been no different. He liked boring; they had, had too many days of death and uncertainty these past few years. Things in the last four years and slowed down and there were fewer and fewer raiders hitting the ranch's, enough so they had spread out. This last year no one had hit them not even a cattle thief, the only problems they had were animals, accidents and some normal illnesses that took a life. Because now no illnesses are really normal and average, any thing could now take your life.

Kris raised his binoculars and he noticed how the Hun camp was coming to life. Women, men and children in ragged clothing were headed to the cows, yaks, goats, and sheep and began the morning milking. Guards were headed out to take over for the night shifts, hunting parties were already riding out into the hills, and they are the ones that the teams would have to be watch out for. Fires had already been lit and food was being cooked throughout the camp. A full two hours went by before the watchers noticed the camp gong to a central location in the center of the camp. Only the ragged slaves and guards went about their duties. It looked like a nicely dressed man was giving a speech by a pole which had streamers tied to it.

"Well, well it looks like something is about to begin."

This came from Cal Fairbanks, Rose's brother.

"I'd say you're right Cal," said Kris, "looks like their getting ready for a meeting or something."
"Look dad even the hunters are riding back in, guess it's something they don't want to miss at least that helps us."

Kris turned to his son and the others, "Let me get this straight I don't want anyone to get lax; there still could be some of them out here and more then likely are. I don't see the leaders not making sure they have men out and about to keep them safe from invaders and looking for potential targets, you all hear me?"

Everyone nodded and then he and the others went back to looking at the camp down below. They all had their binoculars pinned on the camp and the surrounding area.

Hank Brandt whistled quietly and then said, "Hey Kris, look over to your far left by the river, there's a man staked out on the ground over there."

Kris turned a bit and trained his binoculars over toward the river where Hank said, sure enough splayed out on the ground was a man, well now, now they knew one of the punishments for troublemakers in the camp. At least it wasn't a quick death, in case Rose made trouble.

A few more minutes went by and down in the valley some men walked over to a central yurt with one of them going inside the yurt. The yurt view was from the left side front but they could see. All the people they saw gathering were pretty small but nether the less were easy to make out. Kris was glad he had purchased good equipment all those years ago. Then from out of the yurt door the man came out and behind him women and girls were exiting the yurt.

Then Martha gave a gasp, "there she is, there's Rose, I saw her, and she doesn't look hurt either."

Kris smiled and looked for his daughter in the crowd of captives. Sure enough there she was, a little mused up but alive and kicking, praise be. They all watched as woman after woman and girl were led to the pole in the center of the camp and they swore must have been being auctioned off from what they could tell. Then they watched as a woman was knocked to the ground and then led off. They watched as Rose was led up to the pole, well as they tried to lead her up to the pole, it looked like she had dug her heels in and stopped the two big brutes in their tracks a least for a few seconds. Then they began to drag her.

Kris's quiet voice could be heard, "That's our Rose alright, no matter what stubborn to a fault." They continued to watch and shortly, even Rose walked off behind a man headed for the men on horse back. Kris looked them over he knew they must be the leaders of this savage band. From what he could see they were the best dressed of the people in the camp and besides that most were very big men. Kris wondered what in the world these men had been in the world before things went to Hades in a hand basket, and what turns men into raiders and killers. In this world now they could settle down and build their own little kingdoms, yes it would take hard work and sacrifice and you would have to fight for it. Maybe that was it they didn't want to work hard but take from those that had poured their sweat and blood into their land and crops, and maybe they just loved the rush of the raid to, I am sure it makes for an adrenalin high. No more fast cars, motorcycles, except where people knew how to make bio diesel and maintain their cars. But even that was running out, no more parts from overseas, just what people could scab together from old cars and the what not. Maybe there were places in the states where that was still common but it sure wasn't any where around them. But they would be again someday but he thought that would be sometime in his old age. Sometimes he hoped it wouldn't come back, he liked life simpler. Yes the modern medicines were great but he other things, spoiled instant gratification selfish adults and children, and back scratching politicians the world could do without. Right now as he could see in front of him there were still too many people taking what others had worked for.

"I must be showing my age, grumbling about things."

He must have said that a little too loud because he heard.

"What did you say Dad?"

Cal was kneeling right next to him behind a rock.

"Nothing son really just nothing, I was just grouching to myself."

As they watched the auction it went on for another couple of hours until the last girl was led off. Then the crowd began to disperse and go about their normal day, if these people really had one of those. They kept on eye on where Rose had been led to; they hadn't been able to see her she must have been standing beside a tent. But they kept watch on the area so they wouldn't lose track of her.

Ah good there she was, Kris thought.

“You all see her don’t you, said Kris?”

He got a yep from everyone except the man they had watching the area around them a few feet back, so they wouldn’t be caught flat footed by the Huns. They watched again as Rose was led to a yurt a section back from the center yurts and tents. Rose wasn’t in that yurt but a few minutes when she was back out and headed elsewhere. She was allowed to go into a small building by herself and they watched as the man that had led her there walked off and left a woman to wait outside the building.

Cal spoke out loud.

“That’s a mistake, leaving Rose with just a woman to watch over her, I wonder how long it will take Rose to lose her?”

So they were all surprised when Rose came back out and followed the woman to another tent. This didn’t seem like their Rose at all. Soon Rose came out holding a bag of some sort and continued to follow along. It was the same second row of yurts and Rose was led into a quite large yurt that looked like three yurts put together. A young man rode up and dismounted from his horse and walked into the yurt, a large guard walking in behind him, they watched as a slave led the horse away.

“Crap dad why didn’t Rose try to get away while just the woman was watching her?”

“I don’t know Cal, I hope we’ll be able to ask her some day, for now all we can do is watch and hope we can get her back soon.”

“Oh, oh,” Hector brought their attention back to the valley camp.

“What is it Hector,” Kris asked as they looked down at the yurt.

The boy smiled, “it looks like Rose must have stirred up a hornets nest, look at all the people going for a look see.”

Sure enough quite a few people were headed for the large yurt, and then a large man who must be the guard came out hurriedly. They watched as the guard went a few yurts over to another man and must have asked

him to accompany him back. They rushed back to the young master's yurt, pushed people aside and went inside, because by this time there was even more people surrounding the doorway.

Kris heard sniffing and looked aside from his binoculars to see tears running down his daughter in laws face. Cal was putting his right arm around Martha's shoulders and looked up at his dad and shook his head, and then said.

"What's wrong Martha? Maybe you should have stayed home honey," Cal told his wife.

"No Cal, I wanted to come, no way would you have left me behind on this trip, I have trained right along with the rest of the family. I am just so darn mad that were so close yet can't do a thing and can't tell what's going on down there and we all can tell something is and it must involve Rose."

"Alright honey I understand and there isn't much we can do at this point but watch, and yes I find it very frustrating to, lets just pray for the best and that we can get her out of this, ok?"

"Yes I know that Cal but I just can't seem to help it, I'll buck up, don't worry about me."

"That's a girl; now let's get back to watching."

The others were trying not to listen to the conversation between Cal and his wife but it couldn't be helped and all had grins on their faces. Kris had kept an eye on the yurt while having a ear on the conversation as well. He sure had a strong family, even those that had joined them.

He noticed that there was a hurried amount of activity around the yurt, more so then even a few moments ago.

"Now what," Kris said out loud?

Cal was grinning, "Looks like our Rose has a few more thorns then they counted on dad."

"Well son she must have escaped, because it's like a bee hive down there now.

“People are looking all over for someone and that has to be Rose, I’ll just bet on it. Anyone caught sight of her yet?”

He heard a no from everyone in his unit, but he just didn’t see how Rose could get away in the middle of the day and with so many of the enemy around her. His stomach was beginning to tie itself in knots. Relax Kris just relax, I just have to loosen up and take this as it comes or I will make myself a nervous wreck.

None of them spotted her; Harold thought he had once but then nothing. They took turns snacking on jerky, cold hoecakes, homemade granola bars, and hard tack, water was their drink. They would have cold camps as long as they were out here else they would be to easily spotted if they tried to have fires for hot food. They hoped they wouldn’t be out here to many days anyway.

“They got her Kris, they have her alright, that same guy she was following earlier now has her by the arm,” Harold Boyd said with disgust. “It looks like their headed right back to that yurt she escaped from. I would still like to know how she disappeared out of that yurt with no one knowing.”

The same conversations were going on in the other units stationed around in the mountains above the valley. Trying to figure out how Rose had escaped without the Huns capturing her right away and the unit not seeing how she got out. Even the Wolf unit on the other side of the valley hadn’t seen her when she slipped out of the back of the yurt. The Rice unit was more to the head of the valley and at the moment they thought they had seen her duck into a yurt they had to get down as a crew of Huns rode by. When they were able to watch the camp again they couldn’t spot neither hide nor hair of her and they had gotten such a fleeting glance they weren’t even sure it had been Rose. All the units did spot Rose and her captor as they walked back to the yurt and the ensuing crowd that continued to gather around the yurt, after she was caught.

Kris watched as a burly colorful dressed Hun with what looked like bodyguards that walked slightly behind him made their way to the large yurt.

“He has to be the head honcho, you just can’t dress like that and not be,” you could tell by Kris’s voice her was anxious.

“Now what has she done to attract the leader? This just keeps getting better and better.”

Cal wasn’t much better but he was trying to cover his feelings and he told his dad.

“All I can think of dad is that young man she ran away from has something to do with the leader maybe his son or nephew or something. They both look like they are among the well to do in this camp, and as far as I can see the ones in charge seem to be the best dressed.”

They watchers all waited anxiously on their mountain perches as the time ticked by, down in the valley people still gathered around the yurt with a few better dressed ones making their way inside the yurt. Then finally with a big burly man holding onto Rose she was marched out of the yurt and down through the rest of the camp and on towards the creek. A few followed along after but not many, like they knew what was to follow wasn't very interesting and they could go on about their daily routine now. The families watched as Rose was staked out onto the ground not far from the poor fellow that was already staked out.

By this time Kris her father was grinning for all he was worth, luck was with them after all. “Wonderful,” he was saying, “just wonderful, we couldn't of asked for a better punishment for her we should be able to get her out of there easier than we had thought.”

The others found his smile contagious and were all grinning as they watched Rose being tied down, and then a ragged young woman who came later give her and the older man something to drink. Runners were sent to the other units for everyone to get back to Kris's unit and rally for a plan to go get Rose.

It was just past dark when everyone found them together again and beginning the plans for the rescue of Rose. It didn't take long to come up with a plan; those that had the most expertise with stealth would make their way to Rose and steal her away. The others wouldn't be that far behind and others behind them, like a line of safety backing them up as the rescuers make their way back to the mountains and safety. The people that would make their way to Rose would be Cal Fairbanks, Seth Walks in the Dark Wolf, Gilbert Dreaming Man Wolf, Lester Snarling Dog Wolf Jr., and Toby Rice. From their backpacks dark face grease paint, furs, and dark clothing were extracted and the five who would go all the way to Rose if possible readied to go. Some of the others donned these same items as they would be the next backup and needed to be well hidden in the night. A smell assailed their senses as Seth opened a jar and began to smear himself here and there about his person and then handing the jar on to the next man.

“Ah man Dad that's some ripe stuff you made,” Gilbert was grimacing at the odor even as he also smeared himself with the odor of skunk.

“Yeah,” said Toby “O Da La Skunk, what a perfume. But it's strange how a man even a guard will go

around an area he smells a skunk in and that includes a smart dog, I sure hope they don't let their dog chase skunks.”

They were all smiling and shaking their heads a hardy yes to that statement. The people who would be the next line of defense was decided and the five front men headed out and down into the valley. Not eight minutes later the next of them started down and then eight minutes after that the next team. The last of them would be just barely up the mountain and in the trees.

For those further back from the action nerves were on edge as the wait began, but for the forward rescuers they had gone beyond nerves and into another state of mind. One of ruthlessness and steal, it couldn't be any other way. Their senses were honed and sharpened; they had trained for this these past years and on several occasions in the last few years used it well. They would rather not have to continue this training to keep sharp and train the next generations, but do not do so might mean death for some or all of them or slavery. They knew all of this would go into the traditions for the future children and warriors. That's where Seth's mind was as he made his way low and close when the dark shadow of a guard. He wasn't called Walks in the Dark for nothing; he had suburb night vision. Besides if he needed them he also had his night vision glasses. But he wanted to keep his own sense for the night as natural as his skill and gift would bring him. The five men headed for Rose were 200 feet apart and making there way forward.

Toby Rice heard a guard around 60 feet from him; the man had been sitting on a stump and now was saying peeeuuuuuu. Toby grinned as the wind blew the odor from him and towards the slothful guard. He slipped past and off into the night closer to the creek and Rose. No one knew but he had his eye on Rose for the last year now, he figured at the next fall harvest celebration he would tell her of how he thought, but now this. Maybe he shouldn't have put it off after all; life now was just to short and uncertain to put things off.

Gilbert stopped his forward motion the night seemed to be swirling with colors and so he closed his eyes. He had been bent low and had been skirting a large bush when he stopped. He went to his knees, no sense being caught up in a vision standing and making himself a sitting duck, well a standing one anyway in his case. This wasn't the time to be lost in a vision but he had no control over it. He saw through his minds eye his father Seth helping Rose up from the ground, turning and cutting the man lose from his bounds and beginning their trek back to the west side of the valley. Then out of the dark a shape, a horse and rider one who he had just barely seen earlier, blue beads on a leather thong hanging from his hair. Then a flash to another scene and the same man from the Hun camp, standing in front of the Fairbanks ranch house smiling looking down at Rose beside him and a boy by her side. Then the vision cleared. All he could think was complications, always complications. Well, he had better get going so no one killed that young man.

Lester Jr. was several feet forward from the rest of the rescuers and headed around a large boulder when he ran smack dab into a Hun Guard, he didn't waste a moment on indecision, his knife was out and into the guards belly ripping upward point going into the mans heart. It was quiet and quick; the man died with a

startled look his face. Lester pushed the man to the boulder and laid him at the foot of the rock as close as he could. He walked over a few feet to a few bushes and pulled one up. He brushed his footprints and the blood over and some dirt up onto the body laying the bush over him. No one would see him right away in the dark. Then Lester went quickly on his way, mere minutes had passed. Just a few more yards and he could smell water he knew he was getting close.

Cal lay in the grass, a guard and his dog not far from him. The dog was yipping in Cal's direction and pulling at his leash.

"Bog stop it; behave yourself you're not going after that skunk, stop, heel I said."

The dog finally listened to his master's command but kept looking back in Cal's direction as they walked off on their rounds. Cal slowly rose and continued on his way thinking, I don't know how that dog or the guard could smell me at all, that guard was rank, this skunk smells better. Cal had donned his night vision glasses a few minutes before the guard and his dog came close. But he had heard them even before he had put the night vision glasses on. He went to one knee at the creek shore and seeing nothing crossed on over.

All of the rescuers had reached Rose, Lester immediately went camp ward and kneeled watching for anyone coming their way. Rose was smiling up at Seth, she knew to be quiet. Toby took the opposite direction taking to his right knee and watched their surroundings. Cal noticed Gilbert go up to his father Seth and whisper into his right ear. Seth nodded then looked up at Gilbert and then looked over and nodded at Cal and pointed toward the man staked out not far from Rose, then slashed his hand downward. Cal knew it meant cut the guy loose. Seth only had one rope left to cut on Rose on her right ankle as Cal walked over to the man. The man he saw spread eagled on the ground was older and dressed in what would you call Daniel Boone style. The man was looking up his eyes wide and followed as he Cal bent down knife extended and began cutting his right wrist loose, then ankle, then leaned over and cut his left side free. Cal noticed the older man take a deep breath like he hadn't been sure on wither he was going to be cut loose or killed. The guy sat up and rubbed is wrists, Cal helping him to his feet and pulling him along as they headed for the creek and away from camp. Cal stopped he needed t ask the man some questions.

"Sir does anyone come out here after dark to check on you?"

The older man did his best to look at this man in the, well what he guessed was night vision glasses.

"No not generally but I don't know if they would now with the girl out here to, it's only been me for the past three nights."

“Ok thanks that’s what I needed to know, maybe tonight won’t be any different to.”

After they all crossed the creek Cal stopped and gave his sister a quick hug and Seth quietly informed the others that Gilbert saw them being followed in a vision. But here was the catch, they were to let him and draw him as far as they could toward the others in their units. The man was to be captured alive.

Seth looked at each one, “do you understand what I said, he is to be kept alive at all costs.” He made sure they all nodded their heads to the affirmative.

“Good I don’t want what any mistakes with this, now let’s get out of here, divide up.”

Rose couldn’t figure out why in the world they would want to keep the Hun alive that was to follow them, why take the chance? Another was why in the world they all smelled so bad, what did they all do roll in skunk scent? Seth pulled at her left arm, and signaled to her that they had to go and that she was going with him. With Seth on one side of her and Lester Jr. on the other, her brother Cal ahead and to the left and getting farther away with the older man in tow. Gilbert was headed off to the right and started to drop back, in a few moments Lester Jr. joined him mid point from the creek and where the others continued on their way towards the mountains.

Gilbert and Lester Jr. conferred for a few moments and parted, settling down after only a few feet and waited for their guest to make his appearance. It didn’t take long to hear the footfalls of a horse coming from the direction they thought he might come. A mist had started to swirl through the night air and Gilbert could just slightly see the horse and rider as he rode closer. The rider was closest to him but he didn’t move yet and neither did Lester. The mist made the night seem like ghosts walked among them and Gilbert thought as he closed his eyes for a few seconds they did indeed walk among men this night. He opened his eyes and saw a shadow go by, Lester turned slightly and looked at him as he passed and they both went on their way behind the rider.

Chapter 6

The camp was quiet as far as the camp went, a few babies crying in the night, a dog barking here and there, someone yelling at a slave, the normal sounds of the camp. Gray couldn't sleep; he continued to toss and turn, even taking one of his concubines to his bed didn't help any either. He rolled over to his left and sat up; the girl beside him moaned in her sleep but didn't awake. He thought maybe he would go for a walk and think about what the day had brought. That girl Rose being staked out beside the camp was on his mind, she rolled though his brain continually and he just couldn't stop thinking about her. He pulled his pants, shirt, and boots on. Before tying his belt on his waist, he inserted his long knife into its sheath and put it on his belt and tied it. Then he bent down to his small night table and picked up his boot knife and slid it home.

Gray chuckled to himself, he should have known better then not have her searched, especially when Stu turned that little knife over to him after she was caught and told him she had it in her boot the whole time. They just weren't used to a woman having such things. Well that won't happen anymore, all new women will be searched for boot knives and other concealed weapons, not just the men. He wound his way through the camp and before he knew it he was standing beside the creek. He looked through the night up toward where Rose should be staked out along with the stubborn old man, it was hard to tell anyone was there on the ground with the mists swirling through the night air. He decided he would check on her, after all she was just a girl even if she was a wildcat and he wanted to make sure she was alright. Stu told him what he thought she had done to Taggard and he just wanted to make sure he wasn't getting his revenge in the dark. A smile played across his face, she sure is something, and she would make a good mate. He didn't think she needed all the wildness taken out of her, he thought his father's policies on women needed to change. This was a new time and he could see beaten and cowed women weren't strong women. There just wasn't any life in them, even his concubines were cowed and he treated his better then most men in their camp. They walked around fearing for their lives, any wrong move, look, or action could mean a beating from any man in the camp. Gray tried talking to his father about his idea's many times, but his father liked things the way they were, he told him to forget such ridiculous idea's. Women were made to be slaves. So Gray never mentioned it again, he knew it would come to naught and would only make trouble. He didn't want news of his ideas leaking out and his father accusing him of making trouble or even mutiny.

He was close now, he should have come upon the stake out ground, his right foot bumped something and he looked down, it looked like a stake, he bent down. Yes, it was a stake alright, with the ropes lying around it. Gray picked up a piece of rope and looked at the end, it was cut. He stood and looked at the ground around him.

“CRAP” was the only thing that came out of his mouth. He would have to go after her, he didn’t want anyone else to know that she had somehow cut herself loose or someone else had. The old man didn’t matter; yes his father was trying to soften the old guy up so he would give up his secrets, he still wouldn’t be killed but they might ham string him if and when he was caught. There wouldn’t be any more running by him. Gray thought they must be together, misery loves company and Gray was sure they would head for the girl’s home somewhere up there in the mountains. He was sure they had been cut loose by someone, maybe Taggard had. Maybe Taggard thought to get back at Gray that way and take Grays new prize away from him.

Gray headed over to one of the fields where his horses were grazing, a guard stepped out from behind a tree. Gray thought I should have given the signal for the guard to let him know I was a friendly; before I even got this close. But apparently he wasn’t too sharp, I must have caught him napping. That’s not good either, were getting sloppy.

Not far from the tree was a tent that had been put up just for horse blankets, bridles, saddles and some tack, kind of a anyone’s if you were in a hurry but mostly for the guards. They weren’t the best and showed a lot of wear but they were oiled and cared for. That was one of the problems, replacing things, no one in camp or that they had captured knew how to make good saddles and many other things. That’s where the old man that escaped was going to come in, he knew how to do many of the old world crafts, they had seen that in his home and out buildings. They had taken everything the old man had made and the Khan wanted him to teach the tribe how to do some of those things and the old man had refused. At least the Khan saw the writing on the wall about that. What would happen when they ran out of places to steal from? Because the Huns never left anyone alive or not enslaved to rebuild.

Gray walked out of the tent with the gear and thought of his own gear. It was well used but clean and well mended. His saddle was a black Spanish saddle he had picked up from a raid two years ago 300 miles south of here. The ranch had thought themselves pretty safe in the hills, but not from the Huns. The camp had been ranging farther and farther the last few years and the pickings were getting slimmer all the time. He picked up a half way decent saddle and bridle and went out to find one of his horses.

It didn’t take long to pick out one of his even in the dark. This one was a nice palomino he had named Stepper. She was a beautiful mare and had given two good colts to his herd the last couple of years. She

whinnied as he slipped the bridle over her head, and he patted her nose and sweet-talked her.

“That’s my girl, sweet girl aren’t you, were going for a little ride you and me.”

He then threw the blanket and saddle up onto her back and fastened the belly strap good and snug. His left foot went up into the stirrup and he climbed up into the saddle.

“Ok Stepper off we go,” he clicked his tongue twice and gave her the giddiup with his legs and off she walked into the night. He thought to himself as he rode through the night, it shouldn’t take long to find them. The old man just couldn’t be in very good shape after the days of being staked down and not fed. He should be pretty weak.

The guard watched the Khans son ride off into the night thinking it was kinda odd for Gray do go for a ride at this time of the night, well far be it from me to question the heir, it’s none of my business. He shrugged his shoulders and went back to his tree and leaned against it and closed his eyes. His thoughts were, after all I am an inside guard what do I have to worry about, no outsiders have ever gotten this close to camp.

Gray and his horse splashed across the creek not far from where Rose and the old man had been staked down, the mist was thicker here and the night air damp. He gave a shutter; the nights were always so much cooler here. At least he thought it was the night air that was bothering him. Gray knew which mountain she had been captured on so he headed in that direction. He wouldn’t be able to signal any guards out here, they would be keeping quiet, he would just have to take his chances, at least coming from the direction of the camp they would look first before they shot or set the dogs on him.

He decided to set Stepper at a trot, he needed to make up some time. It had to have been after dark when they escaped but that was five hours ago now, even if he didn’t think they were making very good time they still had a pretty good start.

A large shape came into sight, a boulder, funny he would have thought he would have been challenged by this time by one of the camp guards. A few minutes later the hair rose on the back of his neck but he continued on his way. He shook off the feeling, just his imagination he thought. He wasn’t used to being by himself, there was always bodyguards, hunting friends, or others of the clan around him for one reason or another. So the feeling of foreboding wasn’t something he was used to.

He was well past the boulder when he found himself knocked bodily off Stepper, he hit the ground hard and what or who ever was on top of him helped to knock the wind out of him.

“Oof,” then gasping, trying to suck air back into his lungs was all that came out of him, then blackness. In the night, all that could be heard was the scuffle of the horse’s hooves and whispering.

Come on Lester hurry help me get him across the horse, we want to be as far from here as soon as possible while he is still out. Both Gilbert and Lester hoisted the man up on his belly across the horse and tied him to it; they didn’t want the young man to be jostled off. Gilbert took the horses reins and he and Lester started their own ground-eating trot across the valley with man and horse in tow. They neither saw nor heard another guard or guard dog, coincidence, maybe, that’s if you believe in coincidence.

An hour later Gilbert and Lester Jr. were making their way up the mountainside and into the trees. They stopped when they heard the call of an owl, but it was just enough off they knew it wasn’t an owl. Young Lester raised his hands to his mouth and gave almost the exact call back with a touch different sound added at the end. They continued their walk up the mountain knowing they would soon be met by friends and loved ones.

The next owl call was very close indeed, and so right after Lester gave the signal back, Seth walked out from behind a large pine tree a few feet up the mountain from them. It was good timing too because the young Hun on the horse began to moan. Lester stepped over and gagged him with a handkerchief, something they should have done earlier but had neglected to do because they were in such a hurry. A mistake like that could have meant their lives if he had come to sooner and made a commotion. By the time they reached the others half way up, the Hun was fully awake and squirming. Rose was astonished at the sight of the young man thrown over on the horse.

“Why in the world did you bring that with you uncle Gilbert, why didn’t you just kill it. Someone give me a knife and I’ll do it now, then we won’t have any more trouble out of it.”

The others turned and looked over at her, this didn’t sound like the Rose they knew. They had all thought she hadn’t taken her lessons seriously and that sometimes it was kill or be killed. She always seemed to be day dreaming and off walking and riding in the woods.

Gilbert looked Rose square in the eye, “our captive our responsibility, don’t you worry about him, I will make sure he causes no trouble.”

Rose’s eyes grew large and she spat out.

“NO trouble, that whole camp is going to be looking for that piece of garbage, that’s the head man’s son, he’s second to the Khan himself. They will be crawling all over these mountains looking for him. Now tell me there won’t be any trouble.”

Gilbert looked at Rose and the venom in her voice, “I’ll take care of it Rose. They won’t be looking for him I promise. Lester Jr. and Dad, will you help me get this young Hun off this horse and out of his clothes?”

They both looked at him funny but figured he knew something they didn’t which was normal anyway and helped him get the Hun down, untie him, and strip him of every stitch. In the mean time they decided most of the units were going to head back to the ranch house only leaving four others to help and watch. Extra clothing was taken out of packs to redress the young Hun and he was sent on his way with the group going back to the ranch, Cal having the other end of the rope. Gray was tied with his hands behind his back and the gag was left in place. If eyes could kill they would have all been dead by Gray’s boring into them.

Gilbert hoped it wasn’t too late to do as he planned, and that the man Lester had to kill wasn’t too far off from Gray’s coloring. Else they would have to find another guard that was.

“Lester” he said, “do you have any idea if that guard you killed back by that large boulder was anything near Grays size and coloring?”

Lester who was standing to Gilberts right looked over at Gil quickly, he should have realized if any one knew about the dead guard it would be Gilbert.

“Don’t look so surprised Lester I could smell the dead mans blood as we passed and I knew you had headed that way from the start.”

“Yeah Gil your right, there is one there and I think he was a little shorter then our Hun but he did have the same color of hair, I don’t know about the eyes though.”

Gilbert slapped himself in the forehead with his right hand.

“The eyes, I hadn’t even thought of that, some great planner I am. I will have to run and catch them before they get to Blue Rock and the horses, so I can see what his eye color is.”

Seth and Lester just stood there looking at each other with Grays clothes lying on the ground in front of them. Gilbert took off up the mountain and then hadn’t gone but 100 feet when he stopped dead in his tracks, started to chuckle and turned, headed back to his dad, Seth, and to Lester. He came back to them with a smirk on his face.

“Well Gilbert what is it, or is this joke only for you,” his dad asked?

“I feel like an idiot dad, just don’t have my thinking cap on I guess, I didn’t get far because I thought just take out the guards eyes, duh.”

Lester was smiling by now too, thinking I should have thought of that since I have some idea what Gil wants to do.” But he didn’t say a word.

Gilbert then asked his father, “Dad would you go with us but stay a few hundred feet back, just incase we run out of night and into trouble?”

Seth said he would as in, “no worries mate.”

Gilbert scooped up Grays clothes grabbed the horse’s reins and off they went back down the mountain.

The three had only gone half way when Gilbert cupped his hands around his mouth and began a wolf’s call. The eerie sound was answered a few seconds later coming from the southwest.

A guard that was a half mile away shivered at the sound and turned around and went back the way he had just rode. He patted his horse's neck to calm it as it began to dance at the wolf calls, he was staying clear of wolves, these days they were huge. No one said that these new 21st century Huns were known for their bravery, just kidnapping, thievery, and death.

Lester looked over at Gilbert as they continued their journey to the rock, "so that's your plan, dress that guard in the young Huns clothes and help the wolves rip the body to pieces."

"I figured you and dad would figure it out before we got back there, the horse we will just mark up with a few scratches, smear some blood on it and let it go. It should head back to its herd or wonder out there for someone to find, it doesn't much matter, but they will see their young Hun was jumped by wolves. When they find the body they won't be able to make out much except maybe the bits of clothes and hair."

Lester was smiling, "Oh you are a smart one me boy, I sure am glad you got your thinking cap back on."

A few minutes later Gilbert gave another wolf call, which in turn was returned but was closer this time. Gilbert and Lester just wanted to make sure they got things done and got out of there before their brothers the wolves showed up. They reached the rock and the body still laid there undisturbed as yet, but it wouldn't stay that way for long. Gil and Lester undressed and then dressed the corpse in Grays clothes. Gilbert took out his knife and plunged it into the corpses face destroying the eyes without leaving evidence of a knife doing the job.

"Ok Lester this is going to be the hard part, take the left arm first and I will hold the body and you pull and twist."

All Lester did is make a face at Gilbert and do as he was instructed. He had never quite done anything like this, kill men yes, tear them apart no. Head, legs and arms dismembered, the corpse was ready, well after Gilbert noticed the heads hair was too long and gave it a trim of about 6 inches, tucking the hair into one of his pockets to dispose of later. They needed to get rid of the evidence of that knife wound to in the abdomen. So they stuck their fingers in as best they could, Gilbert taking one side and Lester the other and they pulled tearing the abdomen apart. The only problem is they needed more blood, being dead it didn't bleed like they needed it to for a freshly wolf torn body. The wolves would take care of even more but they needed more blood anyway.

Lester said he had an idea and went over and fetched the horse and brought it over close to the body, which the horse really didn't like with the smell of death and bowels in its nostrils.

Lester used the back of his knife with Gilbert holding tight to the horse's head and Lester proceeded to put a long deep scratch down the horse's left front leg. Lester used one hand to hold the horse's leg and the other to splash blood all over the corpse where it was needed most. Then they scratched the horse up some more, also ripping the saddle here and there like claw scratches and sent it on its way. They knew the smell of fresh blood would draw the wolves, so Gil gave another call and found with the return call the wolves weren't far from them at all. Lester did his best to wipe off as much of the horse's blood as he could from himself on the corpse's clothes. Gilbert said, "There also going to be looking for this guard, we best tear up these bloody clothes starting with the knife hole and throw them here and there as we leave the site here. A wind was blowing and getting stronger so they wouldn't have to worry about taking branches to wipe out their footprints, they would be gone shortly from any dirt areas. Lester wiped the clothes in the horse's blood on the corpse and off of him also.

Lester and Gilbert looked at each other nodded and started on their way back at a good run, throwing bits and pieces of cloth sections as they ran, no way they wanted to be here in a few minutes. They would be lucky if the wolves didn't also decide to split off and send some after them.

Gilbert dug in his daypack at his waist and found a handkerchief and small plastic bottle of alcohol, "here Lester, see if you can clean the last of that blood off you, I bet they can smell you just as well as the corpse and the horse."

Lester did the best he could, then they stopped dug a hole, threw in the cloth, and threw a few rocks on top it and off they went again. They met up with Seth a few minutes later and not long after were back at the foot of the mountains.

"Seth was huffing and puffing from the run, "I'm just getting to dang old for this stuff."

Gil and Lester just smiled and shook their heads, they knew better; only last month Seth had out run both of them in a picnic race. By the time the three reached the top of the mountain and started on the trail to Blue Rock the sun was beginning its rise over the East mountains across the valley. They soon met up with Cal Fairbanks and several hundred feet later Leonard White. They just melded in with them as they walked

down the trail. Everyone still kept their eyes and ears open; they wouldn't want to be caught flat-footed now.

Another forty-five minutes of walking and they could see the top of Blue Rock through the pine trees. More of the members of the units joined them, as they grew closer to Blue Rock.

What was on everyone's minds was getting home, especially Rose's. She never thought she would be so happy to see home ever, it didn't seem like such a boring place now, home never sounded so sweet.

Kris was thinking who's gonna keep the Young Hun and what in the world are they going to do with him, not one Ranch had a jail of any sort. Well this is going to be fun. I still don't understand why Gilbert insisted on bring that young man along. There would be enough time for questions once they got home. All except Thomas Brandt and Harold Boyd, they had volunteered to stay behind and keep a watch on the Hun camp and alert the closest ranch if the Huns headed up here.

As they rode, Gilbert and Lester told the account of just what they had done with the young Huns clothes and to the guard. Kris sure hoped the Huns would be fooled and that they would accept the death of the Khan's son and when it came to the missing guard they would just think the wolves got him also and tore his body apart and they couldn't find much of it. Well they would know in a day or two, one way or the other.

Chapter 7

Gray couldn't believe he was someone's captive, things like this just didn't happen to people like him. He was above this; after all he was the son of the Khan, a man of privilege and high station. To have been stripped down buck naked in front of these people like he was a slave, an animal of no consequence made him even madder every time he thought about it. How dare they do such a thing to him, he would get out of this and lead his people to them and destroy these people to the last man, woman, and child. Gray looked around he had been so busy being mad he didn't see where the men were that made him strip down and wondered where they had gone with his horse and what in the world could they have been up to with his taking his clothes? His wrists were getting sore from the ropes he was tied with. They were just barely loose enough to keep his hands from going numb, and it didn't help he had been worrying them by working his wrists back and forth trying to loosen them up.

Just before they reached a gigantic boulder with what looked like boards sticking out from underneath it, they came upon their horses scattered in a grove of trees. He caught a quick glance of Rose as she threw herself up on a horse behind an older man. She looked like she was born getting on a horse, the grace was unbelievable, and as he looked around he saw the other women in the group were equally at home on their horses. These women were riding and fighting beside their men, not cowering in a house or tent somewhere at home. He didn't realize as he watched these people that he wasn't so mad any more but curious and mystified. Why couldn't I get my father to see this, having a few women warriors would make us so much stronger, it could really increase our strength? But he knew his father wouldn't accept women as equals in any way shape or form. The women of the tribe walked or rode on the carts but weren't allowed to be on a horse that was men only. The first offence for a women being caught on a horse was a brutal whipping at the post, if caught a second time it was sure death instantly, no explanations, no excuses. All Gray could think is a people that didn't learn, change, and grow became stagnant. That idea came to him as common sense. He continued to think but also keep aware of his surroundings to watch where his captors were leading him.

Rose on the other hand was beside herself with relief, her father and family never looked so good in all her life. First thing she wanted was a good meal and then a bath, or vice versa, if she hadn't been so hungry the bath would have been foremost, depended on how she felt when she got home. She knew she smelled to high heaven, she had been tied to the ground and had to pee, she had no choice but to go in her clothes at least she was dry now, she didn't really care at the moment as she snuggled into her dad's back. He smelled some to so maybe he didn't mind so much. Her arms tightened around Kris's middle and he reached down and squeezed his daughter's right arm. A smile going across his face, he felt whole again, that upset scared feeling in the center of his being was gone as far as Rose was concerned and if they had to face the Huns at least the family was together again. He turned to his left and looked slightly behind them at the gentlemen behind Joe Rice; the old guy looked like he had really been through the wringer. By the time they had gotten to them awhile ago the guy was being carried. Kris wondered how many days the man had been staked out and man did he reek but no one was saying anything to him about it, no one really cared because they

understood. Well we should soon find out, get him to the ranch, fed, cleaned up, and some sleep, along with the rest of them, then Rose and he could tell their stories. They would also set extra guards and send word to have extra rotations set up at the other ranches. All that would be easier now with the others going on to their homes soon.

Fred Boone looked around at his rescuers, hopefully he hadn't just gone from the frying pan into the fire, but somehow he didn't think so. He was dead tired but his mind said safe, after weeks of beatings and pain finally safe. He found he was relaxing and leaning against the gentleman's back he was riding behind.

Joe felt the gentleman lean against his back and a few minutes later heard a quiet snore. He was concerned about the old gentleman sliding off from behind him.

Harold wasn't riding far from him, "hey Harold undo that blanket from behind you and help me get that around me and Fred here so I can tie it and keep this man from slipping off."

"No problem Joe, give me a second."

A few minutes later Fred was good and secure behind Joe. Fred even sighed in his sleep from the warmth of the blanket. Before Fred knew it he was being awakened and a cool breeze was filtering around him. The sun was bright in the eastern sky it must be at least 8 AM he thought. He had slept through almost all of the ride and even the signaling back and forth from the guards to the riders. He saw his rescuers dismounting from their horses and the horses being led off by children and teenagers, both boys and girls. Ah wonderful normal folks he thought.

Fred saw the young woman Rose run up unto the porch of the house and into the arms of a stunning older woman whom he assumed was her mother, except for the white hair running through the older woman's black hair and a few extra pounds difference they looked much alike. Seeing the tears streaming down their faces when they came out of the hug and turned towards the man going up on the porch brought a smile to his. He was so happy for this family, they were together and safe for the time being and these days that was more than a lot of people could say. He took a few minutes while the others were busy greeting each other to look around at the ranch and buildings. It was nice well thought out set up. He was so engrossed at looking at the farm that he jumped when he found Rose and the man who must be her father standing next to him and calling him by name.

"Aw Mr. Boone, Fred, this is my dad Kris Fairbanks. Dad this is Frederick D. Boone my fellow stake-ie and keeper of high spirits even in a bad situation, she said with a smile and then she went back up on the porch with her mom. Kris reached out with his right hand to shake Fred's with Fred doing the same.

"You have a very brave daughter Mr. Fairbanks and it's a pleasure to meet you I can sure tell you that. I thought I was a goner and now I am here."

“The pleasures all ours Mr. Boone were just glad we could get Rose out of there and you along with her, and please call me Kris, were not formal around here.”

“And that’s goes for me to, you call me Fred Kris, I don’t hold with friends calling me Mr. Boone either.”
From the porch both men heard.

“Well aren’t any of you hungry?”

They looked up to see Debbie, Kris’s wife, hands on hips.”

Kris smiled up at his beautiful wife, “Fred I want you to meet my better half Debbie.”

“It’s nice to meet you Debbie and did you mention food?”

Fred then noticed Rose was no longer present on the porch and that people were filing around to the back of the house.

“Yes I did Fred; we have breakfast being served to everyone out back.”

“I do have a request first though, is there any way I could take a quick bath, I don’t want to join the others smelling like this.”

“That’s no problem Fred, Kris take him on over to the showers and we’ll scare up some clean clothes for you to slip on.”

“Come on Fred follow me, the work showers aren’t far from the main house over there by the buck house.”

Kris pointed over to the left and down a small hill. Fred saw a few men coming out of a small 12 by 10 building with a huge water tank sitting off to the side of it on an incline higher than the building; and black barrels sitting on the roof, he had seen it as he had looked around the ranch. Only at that time there hadn’t been anyone around the building and he really hadn’t thought about the tank at the time. There was a longer building not far from the shower building that must be the bunk house. They headed down the hill so Fred could get a shower and Fred wondered at the gravity fed setup and how the water was fed into the tank. He knew there would be time for a tour of the ranch later and questions. Now a shower and then food and a

decent rest, he could hardly wait.

As they reached the showers a young man was stepping out of the building, it was one of the men who had rescued him and helped haul him across the valley and up the mountain. He now saw the resemblance between this young man and Kris. Kris looked at his son and felt great pride.

“Fred you already know my son Cal from your trip across the valley.”

“Yes I sure do, he stuck out his hand towards Cal, I need to shake your hand young man and thank you for hauling this poor old man away from there.”

“You’re very welcome sir, I was just glad to get you and my sister out of that sorry situation. I’ll be on my way now, I’m awfully hungry. Dad, Fred, see you at breakfast.”

They watched as Cal headed back up to the house and Fred said he also wanted to thank whoever it was that had met them part way up the mountain after they rescued him and had helped Cal haul his sorry butt up the mountain.

“We’ll see him later for now let’s get you cleaned up.”

Then from the direction of the house they heard, “Grandpa Kris, grandpa Kris.”

It was 11 year old Dorcus Brandt, Kris was grandpa to all the children on the ranch, and her small arms were full of clothes. She reached them with a large smile on her petite face. Dorcus was a small, blue eyed, long haired blonde pixie, and looked more like she was a six years old then eleven, but her spirit more than made up for her size.

“Grandma Debbie told me to run these clothes down to you and Mr. Boone.”

She looked up at her large adopted grandpa with love in those beautiful eyes. Kris picked her up and threw her in the air arms full of clothes and all, she squealed. When he sat her feet back on the ground, she was still smiling. She handed the clothes off to Mr. Boone and looked down at her blouse and slacks and pretended to straighten them and shyly said, “grandpa I’m getting to old for that.”

“So you are Dorcus you’re just growing to fast for me to keep up with, I’ll try and remember that ok?”

“Thank you grandpa, now I have to go, I am helping with breakfast.”

She turned and ran back up the hill but she looked back and gave a big wave.

“Ok Fred lets get you in there before we get delayed any further.”

Towels, wash cloths, soap and other toiletries were on shelves beside the first shower. Kris showed him how the showers worked and they were indeed gravity fed. Turn on the lever that opened a valve and water came out of a shower head, not much pressure but it worked. The shower wasn't hot but it was warm. It sure beat bathing in the creek or taking a sponge bath. When he was finished showering, he stepped out to find a clean wet Kris getting dressed from some clothes hanging on a hook at the front of the building. Fred's borrowed clothes were also there. He dried and dressed in no time and they were headed back out the door.

Apparently they were the last of the people to clean up. He was beginning to feel pretty weak, that rest on the horse helped him but he needed food badly. He went weak in the knees on the way back up the hill to the house and Kris caught him before he hit the ground.

“Whoa there Fred I got ya.” Tex Brandt who had been going off to his chores saw what happened and rushed over to help Kris get the old gentleman to the house and sit him at a table.

“Sorry I guess I don't have anything left in these old legs. Thank you to young man for helping get me over here, I'm Fred Boone by the way.”

“Names Tex Brandt and that's a good one he grinned, ha, ha, young man indeed, as Tex was 52 years old. I have to get on to the chores; I'll see you later then Fred. Kris you have a good breakfast and I sure am glad to see Rose and you all back safe.”

Kris gave Tex a nod and said, “Thanks Tex its good to have her back, I' see you after I eat and rest for awhile.”

With that Tex was back on his way.

Martha, Cal's wife came up with two huge plates of food and plopped them down in front of Kris and Fred. Dorcus was right beside her, face beaming with two glasses of milk, one in each hand. Fred eyes bugged out, “wow there's no way I can eat all this.”

But he didn't delay digging in and shoving a bite of biscuits and gravy into his mouth.

Martha grinned at him, “Eat only what you think you can without making yourself sick, I've been told you were staked out for several days but I didn't want you to feel slighted.” She then told Dorcus to fetch a pitcher of milk for the table and bring some apple juice to. Dorcus took off for the drink table. Mean while Kris just sat there eating and enjoying the family around him.

Fred nodded at her and picked up his milk and downed half of it in seconds.

“I didn’t realize I was still so thirsty,” they had given him water and a little pemmican on the trail before he fell asleep. That is the only reason he figured that he had lasted this long.

Martha told them she would see them as she could and went off to help in getting food from the cook cabin and house kitchen to the tables. Most of the people just dished up what they wanted at the tables. Little Dorcus showed up a few minutes later with their pitcher of milk and a small pitcher of apple juice with two small glasses on a tray.

“There you go grandpa and Mr. Boone, is there anything else I can get you?”

As Fred was trying to drink Kris told her, “thank you Dorcus for waiting on us but I think were both fine for now.”

She gave him one of her precious smiles and skipped off back to the Kitchen cabin.

Rose could hardly believe how good it felt to get clean again, sheesh the things I took for granted. Dad always said he and the others were spoiled with their world before, now I know kinda what he was talking about. I took the little things for granted, family, showers, food when I was hungry, and not to mention safety. She slipped into clean under clothes, a pair of slacks and a brown blouse and put her other belt on. She decided her low moccasins would do for today after slipping on a pair of homemade knitted socks. She wiggled her toes in her clean socks and the warmth of her rabbit lined moccasins. Oh how good that felt.

Rose headed out of her room and felt like she would drool at the thought of breakfast. By the time she got out to the breakfast table over half of the family and most of the rescuers had eaten. She spied her dad and Fred at an outside picnic table. She choose many of her favorite’s dishes and made her way to her dads table. Biscuits and gravy, scrambled eggs, crisp bacon, and a couple of pancakes with butter and blackberry jam were piled high on her plate, and a tall glass of milk. She stuck her silverware in her right pants pocket.

“Mind if I join the two of you.”

Kris and Fred had been so intent on their breakfast’s they hadn’t even seen Rose come up on them. Her father patted the bench next to him.

“It’s fine with me sweetheart, how about you Fred?”

“It’s ok with me to Rose; it’s always nice to have a young pretty woman around. Sit down and eat.”

Fred saw her hair was wet so she had bathed but she looked drawn. He knew she must be about as tired as

he was even if she didn't show it as much as he did, youth after all can last a while longer in these situations. Her father Kris noticed these facts also.

"I bet you two are ready for a good nap?"

Fred was about finished, not with everything on his plate but with eating, he knew he shouldn't put all this food in his stomach at this time. No sense in making himself sick. So he put down his fork and answered Kris.

"I for one can say I really need some rest but I really hate to go to sleep this morning and then be awake when others here are going to bed tonight, I would like a tour of your ranch as soon as I am able and someone as the time to show me around. You have some great things here, like your gravity water delivery system and I would really like to see what other innovations you have come up with."

"Well Fred we will be happy to have someone show you around that can also tell you about all we've done here," then Kris shoveled the last of his breakfast into his mouth.

Rose felt like she was wilting, the bath had helped but now that was wearing off. Maybe she should have rested on the way back also, at least closed her eyes for awhile.

"I for one am going to lay down for about four hours, then play catch up with the family on what went on while I was captured and how y'all found out so fast I was gone."

Rose then finished her meal and relaxed a little more with the hallow feeling gone in her middle.

"By the way dad I guess I can't wait until later, just how did you find out so fast I was gone and had been hauled off?"

Her dad smiled at her and his eyes lit up, "Gilbert Wolf came galloping in here day before yesterday, saying you had been captured by the Huns down in the valley before we had even missed you, that's how. Well you know Gilbert's gift we don't take anything lightly of what he tells us is happening or going to happen these days now do we?"

"No dad I guess none of us do after he saved our butts so many times in the past years."

Gilbert had saved their lives many times, and he was the one that had given them the heads up about getting everyone out to the ranches before the unknown sickness hit the rest of the world. Some of the families were already out here but a few of the families adult kids had been over the mountain in the city. No one was going to disregard anything Gilbert came up with. Later he had warned them before a large band of bandits hit the ranch eight months after they had been here, when they were all still here protecting one another.

It hadn't taken the world long to go to Hades in hand basket back then. Riots in the cities, no food or fuel deliveries, and if the sickness hadn't killed enough of the worlds peoples, they were killing each other off for food, money, or whatever they could get their hands on. Small kingdoms were being set up here and there, some by people like the Fairbanks, Wolf's, and Rice's, but way too many like the people in the valley.

"Kris, I say Kris," Fred was trying too get his attention.

Kris thought, boy I really was day dreaming, got to watch that. Rose was looking his way also. He saw her smile as he looked her way. He didn't care if he had been caught day dreaming really, seeing his daughter sitting across from him and smiling was the most wonderful thing in the world.

"Say Kris," Fred was still talking to him.

"Am I led to believe you are saying you have someone in your number that see's visions?"

Fred looked back at forth, first at Kris and then at Rose waiting for an answer. He couldn't seem to believe what he was hearing.

Kris saw Rose smile in Fred's direction and nod her head, "tell him dad."

So Kris explained how he and Gilbert's dad Seth had been in the military together, their families grew close and how Joe Rice and family had joined the group and made it a trio. He told Fred how Gilbert's talent grew as he became older and how he was 100 percent accurate. The Fairbanks had a family ranch; it wasn't kept up and had become pretty run down. How not just because of Gilbert's promptings but from watching the world scene they went in together and bought more of the surrounding land and fixed up the old Fairbanks homestead, then put up extra buildings, cabins, barns, and out houses and tried to make the place as off the grid as possible. Plus the Wolf and Rice's bought land out away from the Fairbanks but not to far.

They had just begun the homes and buildings on the other farmsteads when Gilbert warned them to get everyone they could to the ranch. Even the ranch hands that had beenhired to start working the following summer were called. They had a hard time convincing all of them and some hadn't made it there in time. The illness swept the country and the world very quickly. Gilbert had seen it would, he had seen it was a manmade vamped up measles virus with at least a 60- 75 percent death rate.

Then he told Fred how later Gilbert had set the alarm for attacks more then they thought possible. Sometimes they had days other times just mere minutes before being attacked, but always just what he told them happened. He had become the Shaman not only for his family's ranch but for all of them.

Rose sat listening but found she could hardly keep her eyes open. She had sat around the fires of camp meets while the stories had been told, so she knew them well.

“Sorry to interrupt but I am going to lay down for awhile, see you both later, Dad, Fred.” They both told her to sleep well, and Fred was surprised he had become so engaged in the story of Gilbert Wolf and the ranch he found he wasn’t so tired after all.

“Go on Kris, this is astonishing, what’s funny is I always preached to my students we shouldn’t question the gifts of God and here I am doing that very thing.”

“It’s ok Fred, I was about finished anyway, so do you think we’re crazy,” he said with a chuckle.

“No I do believe you if I realize I am here because of that young man’s visions. If you hadn’t come when you did because of them I wouldn’t be here. I would still be staked down there by the Hun camp awaiting either my death or to give in and give them the information they wanted.”

A couple of the kids came over the table and got their plates and glasses and Kris and Fred headed back toward the front of the ranch house. Two riders were dismounting and a third was headed up towards the ranch while a boy led his horse off to the water trough.

The young women dismounting were smiling so Fred’s racing heart calmed. No way would they be smiling if they came to tell them the Huns were on their way. Kris saw the look on Fred’s face.

“No worries Fred just the riders that went out to inform the other two ranches everyone was back safe and sound with the mission accomplished and they would be home later.”

Then Kris started to laugh, “oh gads now he has me saying it.”

Fred looked strangely at Kris. Kris was still chuckling at himself.

“Sorry Fred it’s an inside joke, see Seth Wolf always liked Crocodile Dundee the Australian movie character and his favorite saying became, no worries mate and that’s not a knife. So he says it every chance he gets even now. But I didn’t think I would catch myself saying any part of it. Talk of the devil.”

Fred turned to the right and saw who must be Seth Wolf walking towards them. He had seen Seth also on the rescue mission but hadn’t been introduced; they didn’t want to take that kind of time. Fred had noticed the Wolfs were American Indian and he also wondered what other talents Seth’s family had and by that time Seth had walked up to them.

“Hey Kris doing ok? I also wanted to shake this gentleman’s hand and get introduced.”

“Yeah I am doing fine Seth, Seth meet Fred, Fred meet Seth Walks In The Dark Wolf, Seth meet Frederick D. Boone.”

Fred held out his right hand to Seth, “its Fred for short Mr. Wolf.”

“The same for me Fred, we don’t stand on formality, its Seth, plain ol Seth.

They shook hands and Fred could tell Seth wanted to say something else.

“What is it Seth,” Fred said, “ask away.”

“I know you’re most likely exhausted and all but I guess my curiosity has gotten the best of me. Why in the world did they have you staked out? Did you commit what they thought was a crime, try to escape or just not cooperate? But in most of those cases I would have thought you would have just plain killed you.”

It was Fred’s turn to chuckle, “well you’re right on one of those. I wouldn’t cooperate and tell and show them what I know. They didn’t kill me for it because they wanted the knowledge of what I know badly. So they were trying to wear me down, I don’t know if I could have lasted much longer.”

Kris now got back in the conversation, “just what if you don’t mind telling us Fred, wouldn’t you educate them about?”

Fred grinned and announced, “I’m a gun smith, I can manufacture everything from the black powder to the newer models, but the old ones are my specialty. Along with the gun powder, Bows, knife making, tin smithy, and a few other old time trades.”

Fred was ginning ear to ear as he saw the astonished looks on Kris and Seth’s faces.

Kris said,” Wowie no wonder you didn’t want them to get a handle on that stuff, which would have meant a lot more trouble for others like us. Now Seth and his family are good bow makers, so you two can compare notes on that. But the other things will be a God send to any community if they can get that going. We used up all our ammunition, we still have our guns and loading equipment but ran out of supplies to reload after all the battles we had to fight. We found some things for awhile on a few scavenger trips but used that up to.”

It was Seth’s turn; his mind was rolling with this information, “gun powder where would we get gun powder or the stuff to make it, and ore or scrap metal for the guns even if we went back to black powder?”

“Fred knew he had hooked them, “all in good time, but believe me not all that far from where my home was

are a few mines and other deposits that will do nicely for everything, that was one of the reasons I bought the place. But mostly scrap metal we find which I am sure you have been using will last for years.”

“Yes,” Seth countered, we have hauled in a lot of metal, and the struts from the old cars and trucks and so on have come in handy for a lot of things. We have melted down and reused many things after the fuel gave out and we couldn’t find a way to make biodiesel up here. Our mechanic and mad scientist never made it here and no one we ever came upon that joined us knew how to convert the vehicles. So that’s the tall and short of it, it didn’t take long and we were back to horse power.”

Both Kris and Seth noticed Fred was wearing down.

“Sorry gentlemen, I guess I am getting tired, I was hoping I could hold out till later but there’s no way after all. Rose was smarter than me. Now Kris where can I lay down for awhile?”

Seth told Kris he would try to talk to him before he and his folks took off for home and said goodbye to Fred. He also told him he would love Fred to show him his skill in bow making and gun smithy when he was up to it.

Seth and Fred shook hands again and Kris led Fred off to a small house, they had several from the families living here a few years back. Some had been turned into storage sheds and other things. Fred sat down on the cot and slipped off his shoes after Kris left, he didn’t even remember lying down.

Chapter 8

Down in the valley it was pandemonium. Gray's horse had been found very bloody with bites and gashes and nearly dead between the camp and one of the guard lines. The howling of many wolves had been heard in the dark of the night. Many of the guards had moved away from the howling, no one wanted to meet up with a wolf pack away from camp.

Grays yurt was checked and yes indeed he was gone. Every one of his servants, slaves, and guards were turned out and questioned. Ace one of the guards that stood at Gray's doorway on the early night shift told them that Gray went out the night before and headed for the creek where his new slave girl was staked out, that was the last he had seen of him on his shift. The Khan Peter had been told and he tumbled from his bed and started bellowing for his slaves to dress him. His entire household worked quickly and with heads down trying to be as low profile as possible to not incur the Khans wrath. Even his wife Lacy who had rushed in from her yurt knew better then be noticed at this moment, but she was worried about her son, she had been told of his horse and him missing just a few minutes after the Khan had begun yelling for his slaves.

At that moment a commotion was going on at the edge of the camp. The Khan stepped out of his yurt as a man of the tribe and a ragged woman were headed in his direction. The both went to their knees and bowed to their heads when they came near him. People were gathering but keeping their distance wondering what the excitement was. Whisperings were going through the gathering crowd that Gray was missing and the old man and Gray's new slave were also gone.

As yet Khan Peter hadn't heard about the old man and the new slave, and none of them wanted the Khan to hear from anyone but the man that had come to tell him. The Khan tended to kill the messenger. News went through the camp quickly and sometimes the leaders were the last to know.

The Khan looked down on the guard and the slave, the slave was of no consequence so he ignored her.

"Your name man and state your business."

Kyle looked up at his Khan, gads why did he have to be the one to bring the Khan this bad news? He raised his head after being recognized.

"Great Khan both the old man and the girl are gone that were staked out, they were gone when the slave went out to give them their morning water ration. No trace of them has been seen."

The Khan's face began to turn red with anger and rage, "first Gray disappears and now news of slaves escaping, I will not have it."

Khan Peter lashed out and kicked the slave girl in her left side; she fell over with a scream and curled into a ball crying. He had just pulled his long 12 inch buck knife from his belt and stepped towards the guard when he heard a voice saying urgently, "Khan, Great Khan," almost in his ear. Khan peter turned quickly about to

drive his knife into the belly of who ever was bothering him and keeping him from taking his wrath out on the man kneeling on the ground. He stopped short just in time, it was his Captain Billy Bob Hansen. Billy's eyes were huge as he saw the Khan's knife a mere fraction of an inch from his middle. The Khan resheathed his knife.

Billy stumbled with his words but finally got out, "Khan we've found remains of a wolf kill, two men in fact and we're sure one of them sad to say was Gray. We're also sure Gray's horse was attacked by wolves. Do you want us to bring in the remains?"

Both men heard a gasp not far from them, it was Lacy and she ducked back into the Khans yurt.

"NO, leave the bodies as they are, I want to see this for myself."

Peter was grieved over the news but knew he must not show any weakness over the possibility that his son was dead. Another thing, if Gray had gone and gotten himself killed so easily then he never deserved to be the next Khan. It looked like the leadership was going to fall to Gray's younger brother Mike.

The Khan's horse was ordered brought along with Billy's, the other Captains, four of the Lieutenants, and several other riders. The Khan looked back towards the messenger his anger not being so hot now, he ordered the man to help get the horses and motioned another slave over to help carry the girl off, he didn't care where. He then gave orders for a few men to mount up and comb the valley for the escaped slaves, the old man couldn't have gone far or fast in the shape he was in.

Word was spreading like wild fire through the camp that there was a chance Khan Gray had been killed during the night. The escaped slaves were secondary to that news, unless they had somehow done the killing.

As the Khan and his men were mounting another man ran up and dropped to his knees, requiring the Khans attention. The Khan was impatient to be on his way, his horse could tell and stomped and snorted. Peter looked down at the poorly dressed tribe member.

"Look up and tell me what news you have for me."

The man looked up at his Khan; he was nervous and more then a little afraid.

"Oh great Khan when I heard the news that Gray might have met with trouble I knew I should come to you and tell you I saw him last night when he came to get one of his horses. He didn't tell me why he was riding out so late but was well and healthy at the time."

All the Khan said was, "fine, now I have heard and we need to be on our way."

With that the Khan kicked his horse into a trot and then a gallop, with his men behind him.

From behind a tent Taggard watched his father and the other men ride off, he felt nothing but glee in his heart. Wonderful, life could be so sweet after all, he was finally gonna get what was legitimately coming to him. Maybe now his father would see how important Taggard was to him after all. He would show all of those that had made fun of him and kept him under their thumbs all these years. He would be a leader this tribe would never forget, not soft like his half brother would have been. A slave walked in front of him and

he shoved the boy to the ground, “watch where you’re walking slave or I will have you beat within an inch of your life.” Then he strode away with a smile on his face.

Lacy happened to be sitting so she could see outside of the yurt; she saw the cruelty on Taggard’s face when he pushed the boy down and the gleeful smile as he walked away even through her blurry tear filled eyes. If Gray was indeed dead this wasn’t good news for their 17 year old son Mike. She would have to warm him quickly. She called her house woman Kristy and told her to have her main male house slave Bruno come to her immediately. She hoped he hadn’t taken off to where his father had gone yet.

Bruno watched helplessly with the message from his mistress as not far ahead of him Mike was already riding out of camp. A few of Mike’s friends surrounded him. At least he was pretty safe with his friends riding around him. Bruno turned to go inform his mistress he hadn’t been able to give the message to Mike.

A slave ran up to the new slave Penny, one of the master’s house slaves, the concubine Betty.

“Have you heard that one of the new slaves has escaped? The one that Khan Gray bought, she and the old man they had staked out were both gone this morning and so was the Khan’s son Gray her master, and the other rumor is that he has been found dead. Plus it looks like wolves were involved, oh how gruesome, she smiled. We haven’t had so much excitement in a long time.” Then off she skipped to go tell someone else the rumors, she didn’t care who it was, just so she could tell it.

Penny’s mind was reeling, that girl Rose has escaped! Her and some old man along with her, her mind just couldn’t seem to get a hold of the information. It just didn’t seem possible and if they were caught it would go very bad for them, she knew that. Penny had heard some of the horror stories and seen a few people that were limping around. They had been pointed out to her; they had tried to escape and the reason for their severe limps. She shuddered, she was brave but she didn’t know if she was that brave. But oh to dream of being rescued, but by whom, her family had been killed on the Huns raid. So she might as well say goodbye to that dream. She turned and picked up the clothes she was taking to the creek to wash, better to not be caught not working, she had already had one beating by the mistress, and she didn’t relish another one. She looked dreamily towards the mountains and maybe freedom, it wasn’t likely and she knew it, tears streamed down her face as she walked toward the creek. She hoped Rose had gotten away, if they caught her and she had been responsible for that Gray’s death? Penny didn’t what to think about it, she shut her mind off to it and went about her task.

The vultures were circling the area they were headed in. Peter knew they and other animals would already have been at the body, hopefully they would still be able to tell if it was Gray and what or who had killed him. He knew a guard was missing to but he was of no consequence to the Khan, an acceptable loss. They neared a large boulder and vultures flew off into the sky squawking. It wasn’t hot enough into the day for the body pieces to smell much yet, the Khan could see that. He quailed at the site. He turned to Bad Billy, “take a few men with you and look for that guard.”

“Yes Khan, it’s as good as done.”

Billy turned and picked five other men and they rode out in different directions. Peter dismounted to begin his walk to the pieces of the man that may be his son strewn about the ground. He bent down at the head, yes that was Grays color and cut of hair, and the pieces of the body had fragments of Gray’s clothes on

alright. He recognized his son's knife lying bloody on the ground. His heart sputtered and he hung his head for a moment. His men were collecting the other pieces and were also sure that this was Gray. Wolf sign was every where. Because of the dirt ground around the boulder you could look around and see large wolf prints. It looked like the smaller prints of coyotes and a few other smaller animals had also been at the body. Mike and his friends had ridden up, Mike had slid off his horse and just stood beside his horse watching his father and looking at the remains of his older brother.

It didn't seem to take long for Captain Billy and his men to return, bloody torn pieces of clothing in hand that must have belonged to the line guard. But in reality it had been more than two hours. The Khan had been kneeling on the ground not talking and in a state of shock. No one had wanted to say anything to him as they didn't know what his reaction was going to be. The Khan hadn't moved until the beat of horses hooves could be heard almost on top of him.

"Great Khan we found pieces of what we think is the guard's clothes, torn to shreds and bloody. It had to be wolves that got the guard as well."

Khan Peter looked up, at first his eyes lifeless and then he shook his head and hauled himself back up to his feet. He wasn't the Khan for nothing, he had another son. Apparently this one hadn't been as fit to be the next Khan as he had thought. It looked like Gray must have gone out after the slaves when he found them gone. But what he should have done is sounded the alarm on their escape. Stupid, stupid thing to do Gray, why couldn't you just have sounded an alarm? To Bad Billy he said, "Have someone bundle up Gray's remains in a blanket and bring him back to camp for a proper funeral."

With that the Khan went to his horse, mounted and without another word headed back to camp. His thoughts were on Gray, he thought he had and had others teach the boy better. He thought he was fully a man, but it looked like he hadn't been after all. Mike would have to be better trained it looked like and hopefully there were enough years left to do so. He had been too soft, yes that had to be part of it. Mike would have to be trained to be harder, tougher, and know what should be done at all times. Something like this should have never happened. Gray had held such promise. He had once thought Taggard would be his heir but the boy wasn't very intelligent, the mother's genes were bad, that was the only explanation.

The men jumped at the sound of a primal scream that rent the air. The Khan's throat hurt, now it matched his heart. By the time he reached the camp his face was normal again, he stepped down from his horse and had a slave lead his horse out to the field and met Lacy at the entrance of his yurt.

"Tell me, it wasn't Gray, it just couldn't have been, not our Gray?"

Peter shook her head yes. "It was Gray Lacy, I wish it wasn't but it was."

Lacy sat down hard, her face in her hands. Peter went over and sat in his chair. When their 14 year old daughter Mini came into the yurt she saw her parents and she knew the rumor was true. She dropped to the floor and her mother enfolded her into her arms. No one bothered the Khan or his family.

The rest of the search party rode into camp and a while later in another part of camp a wail of grief could be heard. The guard's wife had been told of the death of her husband to wolves. They handed her the bloody torn clothes and left her tent, she and her children were now on their own.

A wooden alter was made to lay Gray's remains on and a day later Gray's funeral bonfire was held, the black smoke rising up from the valley. All of Gray's household goods, property and slave alike would now be the property of Mike.

The men that had gone to search for the two missing slaves never found a sign of the old man or the girl. The Khan was told the day after the funeral and all he did is wave the reporting man away. He no longer seemed to care. He thought they were most likely killed by the wolves also, no better end for trouble makers. Peter looked around the valley after the report, it was time to leave this valley, no good had come of being here, it was time to move. He gave the order immediately, by tomorrow they would be on their way out of this accursed place.

Chapter 9

Rose woke to the loud dinging of her little yellow wind up clock, her eyes were blurring and her mind fuzzy. Her fingers managed to turn off the clock. Then she remembered nothing until the light of dawn was coming through her window. She woke with a start in a cold sweat from a nightmare, one in which she was staked out onto the cold wet ground, in want of food and water. She had yelled and yelled for help but no one had come. Then the light of the sun fell on her face and she awoke. She looked around her room and gave a sigh of relief. A nightmare, it was only a nightmare. She rubbed her right wrist; ouch, was it ever sore, she brought it up to her face as she lay in bed, there was a band of red around it, Rose frowned. She looked at her left wrist it also had a band of red around it that looked like rope burns.

Then it all came speeding back to her, her capture, being sold, turned into a slave, trying to escape, and not to forget being staked out on the ground. It wasn't a dream after all; it had been way too real. The last few months of wonder lust and the desire to see new people weren't in her blood any more. It was fully quenched with her adventure, as her father had said it may be decades before man would truly become civilized again with law and order having control. But eventually law would hold sway again as it had in the past but they may not live to see it.

Rose heard excited voices and then the front door of the house could be heard slamming with a soft thud through her closed bedroom door. All she had to do is slip her pants, moccasins, and blouse back on, she had never completely undressed yesterday as she thought she would be getting back up after a few hours sleep. She walked quickly, she didn't want to miss out on what was going on that would raise the household so soon. After all it was breakfast time at this time of the morning and she could smell the scent of bacon coming from the kitchen. She saw many of the family out by a rider in the yard as she went out the door.

She heard bits of pieces of what was being said as she neared the family members. Packing up, tents, gathering and herding, Huns. She spied her brother Cal, "Cal what's going on, what's this all about?"

"News is the Huns are packing up and moving out lock, stock, and yurts. Looks like they bought the death of the Khans son and its bad Karma or something here."

"What do you mean bought the death of the Khans son; he isn't dead or did something happen to him while I was sleeping?"

"Let's go get some breakfast and I'll tell you what Gilbert had up his sleeve when he went back down into the valley."

Rose thought this is gonna be good I just know it, especially if Gilbert came up with it, and she was awful hungry from missing both lunch and dinner the day before. Not to mention she wondered what they have done with Gray?

As they sat down to a nice big breakfast and a browned wheat hot drink, a substitute for coffee they had gotten used to, Cal went on to tell her what Gilbert and Lester Jr. had done to set up the death of Gray, as had been explained to the rest of them yesterday before the Wolf's went back to their ranch. Rose was

astonished but very happy that's Gilbert's plan seemed to work and that they wouldn't again be in a fight for their lives, at least not soon. The Hun's were a very large tribe and many of her loved ones both here and at the other ranches would have been killed. This had been on her mind since her rescue, only the numbness of sleep had taken it away, the when of the attack from the Huns. She knew the families had been setting up extra guard stations and were busy preparing for an attack. Now it didn't look like it was going to happen. Tears started to stream down her face, tears of relief.

What's wrong Rose, are you alright? I thought this would be good news to you."

Cal was concerned when he saw the tears.

"Oh Cal, it's wonderful news, I was so scared they would find us any day and the killing would start. I was afraid of how many we would lose and if they would over run all of us. I couldn't live with the thought of being captured again and being crippled as a punishment and the children and other members of the families becoming life long slaves to those barbarians. It's such a relief I can't help but cry."

Cal smiled at his sister; it looked like this adventure had matured her. It seemed like she now knew what was really at stake in their lives each and every day and that everything they did mattered. Maybe now she would stop larking off by herself like she had been told endless times not to do and if she was going riding take someone else along. But he didn't say a word of this to her, no sense in rubbing salt into her wounds. Rose would carry this with her for a long time; it was time to let her heal from it so it was just a bad memory.

Rose smiled at her brother and was grateful not to get any I told you so's from him. She wiped her face with a cloth napkin and sniffled.

Sorry Cal I didn't mean to get so emotional, that's not like me is it?"

"Don't worry about it Rose you've had a time of it, it's to be expected."

Their mom Debbie just sat listening to everything that passed between her son and daughter. Yes she thought, it sounds like our Rose has met some thorns and she will be wiser from now on. She had been young when we had the large battles for our lives, long enough ago she doesn't remember what it was really like. Now she sees what's be fronting us every day with adult eyes. I think I will be able to find some relief from the worry of her haring off by herself now. Debbie finished her wheat coffee and asked if they wanted anything else. Both declined and headed for morning chores, Rose smiled and thought I will never grumble about my chores again, I am only to glad to be home to do them. Oh, I forgot to ask how Fred was doing. Rose headed out to the barn to help with the morning milking of the goats and cows. Her father saw her walk across the yard to the barn and the smile on her face. As he walked back to the house he also had a smile spread across his face. Some times life could be good; he walked into the house and into the kitchen where his wife was washing dishes, he wrapped his arms around her waist and gave he a kiss on her neck.

She laughed, "You had better be my husband or you're in deep trouble."

She turned wet hands and all and gave him a hug and they just stood there for a few minutes. Martha, Cal's

wife choose that time to walk into the kitchen. Martha was all of five feet tall, freckles, flashing green eyes, and red natural curly hair. She saw them hugging and knew what a great relationship they had, but she couldn't help but tease them. She waited a couple minutes and then cleared her throat.

Kris and Debbie jumped and laughed when Martha said, "ok you two maybe you ought to get a room."

They both turned to see a large grin on their daughter in laws face and both Kris and Debbie started to laugh. They broke apart and both went back to their morning chores. After Kris left Debbie giggled at Martha, "smart aleck get a room indeed, just wait until I find you in a clinch again with Cal."

They both laughed and went about their chores.

Chapter 10

Down in the valley things were moving quickly towards the move. Yurts, tents, and teepees were coming down with great speed and being packed on wagons and travois. Slaves were being whipped to get the work done faster, this was not a good time for slaves of the tribe, the same could be said when they found a place to set up camp again.

In the middle of all the work and preparing to move Taggard thought this would be the time to strike. His slave and house personal were getting his things ready to move out, there wasn't much to get ready and his tent was small. So he had mingled here and there helping a little with this and that working his way closer toward his half brother Mike's yurt and processions. He didn't really know if Mike would be here or with the other young men helping to round up the horses. He hoped Mike was here it would give him opportunity to slide a knife into Mike's belly or back. Wait he had better use say a branch. Yes a branch of wood would make it look like an accident. Poor young half brother Mike was about to have a fall and just happen to fall on a branch. Taggard found a stand of trees and selected a good sturdy branch; he broke off the smaller ones that would impede the main one going into a body. Now he was ready to make his way back to find Mike. Power and superiority was in his grasp he could just feel it. Mike was indeed at his new yurt, which used to be Gray's, it was on the ground and he was directing the slaves in what he wanted to be done next. The slaves knew what they were doing, they had done this so many times, but directing things made their masters feel like the slaves were incapable of doing anything right without their direction. As with all peoples some masters were better than others. The new slaves learned in a very short time what was to be done and were usually given menial tasks until they learned the ropes of taking the camp down.

Taggard saw many others around Mike all the time, first one and then another or two or more. Darn it how long was this going to take; he needed Mike to be alone for just a few moments, then he would strike. The slaves had the yurt walls and top and were loading it onto a wagon and had their backs to Mike. The few friends he had by him had left to go back to their own tents to see how the work was coming or to help their families. Now was the chance Taggard was waiting for, he was only about ten feet behind Mike. Taggard ran up behind Mike and was about to shove the branch into Mike's back when he was clubbed over the head from behind. The attacker had been brought down inches from his goal. He lay splayed on the ground unconscious with a growing crowd coming over to see what was going on.

A runner was sent to the Khan to tell of the attempted murder of one of the Khans household, namely his youngest son Mike. The Khan told them to bring Taggard to him. Never mind that Taggard should have been one of his household also, Taggard was always considered to be more of an outsider to the Khans household. Now he was being dragged to the Khan even before he woke up. The Khan's huge yurt was down and nearly packed and much of his household goods. His chair was taken back off the wagon and brought over for the Khan for the judgment.

Everyone was running every which way with the excitement this had caused. Stu who now been assigned to be the steward to Mike was looking around, at his feet was the sluggard Taggard who he believed to be out cold. Beside him was the guard Lex also late of Gray's household. Lex also believed Taggard to be out cold, but he wasn't. Taggard had come to a few minutes ago and slowly opened his eyes a crack to take in the

situation he was in. This was all that brat Mike's fault. The Khan was not around yet; Taggard didn't know that a man had been dispatched to tell those guarding him to bring him to the Khan. Both Lex and Stu weren't paying him any attention. I have to get out of here thought Taggard, and I had better do it sooner than later, they must have sent for father by now, he isn't going to like this.

Taggard gauged his time, seconds were ticking away his luck wouldn't hold much longer, either they would find he was awake or his father would show up. A scream went up about 50 feet from where they were, a slave being whipped for lagging behind on her packing. Taggard took that attention grabber to quickly come to his feet and take off. He was off and around a half taken down yurt before Lex and Stu turned back around. Taggard knew he had a chance to get to a horse. At least one that wasn't too far from where he was but far enough not to get anyone's attention immediately. Ah good there was one, it was all saddled and ready to go and everyone close was helping to take down a large canvas tent. The man of the household wouldn't be doing that so he must have stepped off somewhere to go to the can or something. Taggard thought, what luck. The people at the tent heard the horse trot off and didn't really think anything of it until they heard.

"Ok, where did my horse go?"

All five people turned around at once, his wife and slaves, his wife very grieved and said, "We thought you took off on the horse."

She knew she would also be one of the people punished for his horse coming up missing, even though he had nine more. The bigger the herd you had, the more prestige in the tribe.

"I can't believe all your stupidity; I will take this up with you later.

Then he headed off for the Khan's tent to tell him one of their own had stolen his horse. It was an honor between thieves thing, no one stole from one another as a member of the tribe. Anyone else yes, but each other no.

By now Taggard was galloping out of camp, the guards that saw him knew nothing of his deed so no attempt was made to stop him. A few minutes later the guards were learning the rumor of the attack on Mike by his half brother Taggard. There was a lot of cringing going on and no one wanted to admit that Taggard had gone by them. But they would have to anyway, if it came to be known any one of them had let Taggard go past them and not said you wouldn't be able to give a plugged nickel for his life.

Taggard had taken off for the North; he knew what was in that direction because they had just come from that direction a few days ago. After a few miles he would turn and head west and hope for a stream to walk the horse down to disguise his trail.

Just seconds after Taggard ran both Stu and the guard turned back to find Taggard gone, at that moment a runner came up to them. Both gave a gasp.

"Where's Taggard, were suppose to haul his butt over to the Khan to judge."

Meanwhile Tate had reached the Khan's Yurt area and asked a guard to admit him to be presented before

the Khan, as he had a case to bring before the Khan. He had to repeat this to the Khan's deputy Bird after a few feet.

Bird then asked what the nature of Tate's business was as the Khan had a pressing case to judge at any moment.

"Someone stole my horse, it was right next to where my people were taking our tent down and they didn't even see who took it, the idiots thought it had been me so they didn't even give an alarm. I get back from the can and its gone. I want to get to the bottom of this I can't afford to have even one horse come up missing, and to be stolen right under the nose of my household is galling."

Bird looked over at the Khan who looked very mad and looked like he was getting madder with every moment that went by.

"Look Tate from the looks of our Khan this may have to be brought before him after he judges Taggard."

Tate looked at Bird questionably.

"Judging Taggard? What on earth did he do now?"

"You mean you haven't heard? I bet you're about the only one in camp by now that hasn't except for maybe the other guards pickets. Taggard tried to kill the Khans younger son Mike, he was stopped just in time and they will be dragging his rear in here any moment, at least I hope so from the looks of the Khan."

Tate looked down for a moment at the ground and got an idea he didn't like very well, putting Taggard and his stolen horse together.

He looked up at Bird, "Bird what if it was Taggard that stole my horse, think about it, think about it whom else would have reason to steal it?"

The Khan had come out of it long enough to hear the whisperings, something about Taggard and a horse. Then the runner that the Khan had sent out to tell the men to fetch back Taggard came running back to the Khan. Not far behind him was Lex and Mike's Steward Stu. But no Taggard to be seen. The Khan was livid, he had an idea Taggard must have slipped out of their grasp when the men showed up empty handed. Bird had by that time put two and two together. Taggard got away in all the packing confusion, stole a horse and away he went.

"All face me," roared the Khan, "I want to know why that scum of a boy Taggard is not in your possession and if he isn't why isn't he, then where is he, and what's this have to do with a horse?"

The men just stood there for a few seconds, no one wanted to be the first to speak up. Then Stu who had been with the tribe for 28 years cleared his throat, he knew it was better to talk than not to in a case like this then have it whipped out of you, sometimes it was a toss up and you took your chances.

"Master we don't know how he did it but Taggard slipped away when a slave screamed when being whipped, we just took our eyes off of Taggard for a second. Apparently he wasn't knocked out very long

after I hit him over the head and he waited for something to get our attention so he could slip away.”

Stu had been keeping a very close eye on his new master since he and Mike had been warned by Lacy’s man to watch out for Taggard.

Tate stepped forward then to tell the Khan about his stolen horse. So now they all knew Taggard had left the camp by now on Tate’s horse. The Khan just sat in his chair, sitting quietly. He turned his head now and then and continued to watch the progress of the packing. But by the looks his way Peter knew the news of Taggard’s escape must be all over the camp by now, not all the why’s and how’s, but that he had tried to murder Mike and had gotten away. The men in front of him were getting more and more nervous. This wasn’t like the Khan; he was never a quiet man. The time the men watched the Khan look around seemed like an eternity.

Khan Peter had decided to send his son Mike to help herd the horses to the middle of the valley to await the pull out. Mike had wanted to stay and be a witness to Taggard’s judgment, but Peter said there was no need for him to stick around, it was cut and dry. No one disobeyed the Khan not even his own family, so Mike did as he was told and went to help herd the animals, Stu would then continue overseeing the dismantling of his household tents and yurts. This also ran through the Khans mind as he finally turned back to the men standing in front of him. Life sure turns out strange sometimes.

“Well men this takes the cake, of all the times to screw up. This valley must be cursed for us; it’s been one thing after another here. Taggard’s gone and I say good riddance, I do not want one man going out to look for him. Were leaving here and never coming back, Taggard’s judgment is going to be exile, it would have been death and knowing what kind of person Taggard is death wont be far on his hells. I will say that if he try’s to make contact with anyone of the tribe he is to be killed instantly. Now I never what any of you to speak of this again or I will have you killed. Those of you who should have taken better care to hold him and you Tate for having a horse available for him to steal have all in one way or another contributed to his escape. You know to take my word to heart and its final. Now go about your tasks and let it be known to all you meet what I have judged, and then I don’t want to hear that boys name ever again. Now go before I change my mind about having you all killed here and now.”

Khan Peter then waved his hand and they all backed off, and then turned to go and do as they were told. The Khans guards who had heard this exchange could hardly believe their ears. What was wrong with the Khan, they had never seen him like this. It was darn right scary; they wondered when he was going to blow up and hoped it wasn’t going to be on their shift.

So the packing continued and by midday they were already leaving the valley. The scouts in the mountains could hardly believe the Huns were leaving. They had seen a lone rider make his way quickly to the north and wondered what was up with that. Most rode out to hunt and etc with other riders and then divided if they divided up at all. A rider was sent to notify the families at the ranches of the tribe’s departure but the scouts stayed to watch and make sure until the last animal and the last rider was making his way out through the south end of the valley. Then they rode for home with a sigh of relief.

Chapter 11

Taggard had made his turn to the west without seeing any pursuit. This was a bit surprising he was sure they would hunt him down like a dog and that he would have the ride of his life on his hands. He found himself a few hours later on a mountain side up in the tree line looking down into the valley and to his amazement he saw the tribe wending its way out of the valley to the south. He was just plain astonished, he just sat on his horse watching the tribe leave from far away. They were too small to make out anyone but he saw the colors raised by some of the men beside their households. In what seemed like no time the last of the tribe was leaving the valley and all that was left was the many different herds of animals be herded along by the men, boys, slaves, and dogs.

He had never really been away from the tribe by himself except for a few minutes here and there. There had always been other hunters and raiders along no matter what they were up to. He had always managed to get out of guard duty, that was too much work for him and if the other of Khan Peter's son's didn't have to stand guard duty why should he. He was getting hungry; Taggard had always left the camp with a day pack of food prepared by his slave. Time to hunt something down he thought, and then it dawned on him that he didn't even have his fire making equipment, bedroll or any other of the normal things he usually took along. Not to mention he didn't even have his bow and arrows, just the knife in his belt scabbard. Then he thought wait this may not be my horse but it was ready for the ride, so it must have a day pack and maybe other items for travel on it, I panicked too soon. Taggard stepped down off the horse it was still a little skittish as Taggard didn't have the smell or mannerisms of its owner. It danced around sideways and nearly knocked Taggard off his feet.

“Whoa there boy, take it easy.”

He patted the horse on its muzzle and scratched it between its ears. But what he really wanted to do was to it kick the living daylight out of it or shove his knife in its eye, but if he did that he wouldn't have any transportation. He needed this horse for now, the horse rolled its eyes he didn't like the smell of this man, he smelled wrong.

Taggard looked through the saddle pack and gave a sign, yes, food for the day with a small container of salt, a small pouch of flint and steel with some tinder for lighting a fire, some rope, wire, and another knife. The knife had a ten inch blade and would work well on the end of straight branch for a spear. Wonderful on the rope and wire to as he could set up some snares for small animals, that would get him by just fine and who knows maybe in a day or two he would come upon a homestead to raid.

The more Taggard thought about finding a homestead to take over the better he felt. He didn't need his father or the tribe, he would set up his own tribe, yes that's what he would do. Another thing he wouldn't be is soft on his people or slaves like his father was, no siree, he would rule with an iron fist. There wouldn't be

any warnings, first offence of any kind, not listening, or trying to escape would mean a severe beating, second offence would be death in what he thought was an entertaining manner. Taggard tingled with anticipation of his rule; he would be the great Khan Taggard, ruler of the mountains. Maybe even someday his tribe would be big enough to wipe out the Golden Hordes rulers and also make it his as it should have become at the death of his father. He took some jerky and hard tack from the saddle pack and remounted the horse. It was time to find a good place to set up a few snares; a creek or stream would do where animals came to drink. He knew he would need to set some medium sized snares also, and he would need time to cut some small branches for them and branch boxes to trap the animals, daylight was burning and he would need food for tomorrow.

Now up at the Wolf Ranch Gray was watching the family members go about their daily chores through a window in the shed he was being kept in. If he hadn't been chained to the floor to a strong metal ring on a trap door he could have escaped. The chains wrapped around his ankles and were paddle locked in place by two paddle locks; the chains formed a Y eighteen inches before his ankles. He had to wait under gunpoint while they had cleaned the storage out and readied the shed for him to reside in. He still hadn't figured out why they had brought him here, they had kept that to themselves. All Gray could think of was maybe they wanted to trade him for safety, so the tribe would leave them alone. If he knew his father he would be traded and then the tribe would attack anyway. His father the Khan was not known for keeping his word or having mercy in any way shape or form. It would all be in vain, or maybe these people thought just keeping him would stop word from getting back to the tribe of their presence. But if Gray knew his father they would scour the countryside until Gray was found and then these people would be wiped out. To put hands on one of the Khans household was to invite sure death. Which was a real pity because from what Gray could tell these people and the others at the first ranch, which seemed to be Rose's family were very talented and would make a good addition to the tribe's knowledge. Not to mention the old man was at Rose's place, the tribe needed that mans knowledge badly to make them stronger.

Gray had enough room to pace from one small window to the other, about 6 feet in total. He had a pail for his waste, a jug of water sitting on the floor along with a couple of blankets, which was on the floor also. He had been fed breakfast at the other ranch tied to a tree by the horse trough. He hadn't seen Rose again but he had seen the old man the tribe tried to get information from walk down to a semi large cabin with one of the men that was with his captors, at the cabin other men had been coming out clean. He then looked around at this place; it was amazing to see a group like this that didn't have to wonder from place to place. Of course they had raided many such homesteads but he did see the benefits of staying put, raising food, animals, and a strong work ethic among your people. With his people the slaves did the hard work and were the most talented and had the knowledge of how to help the tribe survive, build, and make things that were necessary. Gray had wondered about that and how wise that was, if they lost those slaves before they could pass on that knowledge they would lose that know how. He thought the tribe members should learn more then they have, even most of the bow making was done by slaves. Only a few of the men of the tribe could make simple knives, bows and arrows. But most it was considered menial work. Gray knew his tribe sure wasn't like the Huns of old, a slave that had been a history teacher had told him what the Huns of old could do and knew.

No way his tribe really compared to them, his tribe may smell like them, but the rest of it was in name only.

“Gads I have too much time to just think, just sitting here will drive me crazy,” he said out loud to himself. The afternoon wore on, he chaffed at being chained like an animal but then even that wore off. He thought, maybe my father was right I am soft after all and think too much; I heard that often enough growing up. I think too much and was too soft on the slaves over and over again, and then finally the shed door opened. It was a relief and he was happy to see someone and maybe talk if even for a few minutes. It was funny; he realized he wasn't mad anymore at these people, Rose, or even being here, now wasn't that strange.

The man that brought his food was one of his captors; he had told Gray his name was Gilbert Wolf on the way to this ranch. Not one of the people he met here was afraid of him or treated him like an enemy, which was another thing that puzzled Gray. He would have thought him being here would mean they felt some peril. He didn't see any extra lookouts or gathering of weapons in preparation of the coming battle with his people. There was just his guard that they stationed by the shed as they walked him in here. Gray sat down against the back wall by his bedding while Gilbert closed the door behind him. Gilbert walked over and handed the tray of food to Gray and sat a small thermos down he had hanging on his arm. Gilbert had his son George come down with him to the shed and hold Gilberts, knife, holster, and pistol while he delivered dinner to their guest. No sense in taking chances with Gray even if he had seemed to calm down, so Gilbert didn't have a weapon on his person that Gray could try to take away from him to force Gilbert to let him go. Gilbert then sat down on the other side of the shed while Gray ate; no way were they going to leave him with anything Gray could use to break out of here, even if it was just a spoon. The plates and bowl were plastic so he couldn't break them quickly and use as a weapon to.

Gray ate and looked up at Gilbert from time to time; Gilbert was trying to give this young man time to think and come to Gilbert with questions. He had another vision about this young man and knew what he would become if he chose the right path. But that is how it is in all of our lives the different paths we choose determine our future. Gilbert could tell Gray was curious about something but so far was being too stubborn to talk about it.

Gray was nearly finished eating when he finally decided he just had to ask a question.

“Gilbert can I ask you a question?”

“Sure Gray, go ahead and ask I'll answer it if I can.”

Gray looked straight into Gilbert's eyes, he was sure by doing so he could tell if Gilbert was telling him the truth or not.

“I have been watching and I find something curious, I don't see you preparing for an attack from my people, their sure to find this ranch and the other ones while their looking for me. Do you think you're that well hidden or are you so sure of your capabilities?”

Gilbert would have loved to have smiled but he kept his face neutral, he didn't think Gray would think the information he was about to hear would be such great news. After all weren't Indians always known for being stone faced and unemotional. He was smiling on the inside with his own joke. He looked Gray in the eye also; he knew this would need to be believable even though it was the truth. He would start with just the basics and let Gray ask for more information as he could adjust to it. Well here goes nothin.

"I might as well tell you before you hear it from someone else here on the ranch. For your information your people have left the valley lock stock and barrel. We received word today by rider, their gone from the valley every one of them. So that's why we aren't preparing for a battle, we don't think there will be one. Oh we have extra look outs and so on keeping an eye on things, namely the progress of your tribe to make sure they are truly on their way out and away from the valley and us and that it's not just a ruse to make us feel safe from them. We are not naive after all we know to keep an eye on your type of people."

Gray had stopped eating and was just sitting there in shock. His mind whirled with the news of his people leaving, why, how could they not be looking for me, is father dead, that's the only way they wouldn't be an all out search going on for me, he wouldn't leave any stone unturned until he has found me I am sure of it. What in the world is going on? What he said was.

"I don't believe you; there is no way my father wouldn't have sent search parties out looking for me."

Gray I don't know the whys of their leaving the valley but their not looking for you is because they believe you to be dead."

"What do mean they think I'm dead, how can they think I'm dead without finding my body? This is just getting wilder and wilder."

Gray started to get up quickly like he was going to go after Gilbert and the food tray, plates, and all tumbled to the floor. Gilbert jumped up to his feet, "whoa there Gray, take it easy; I'm telling you the complete truth."

Gray checked himself a second later realizing there wasn't a thing he could do even if he tried. Attacking Gilbert wouldn't get him anywhere and that included more information about what was going on. He stepped back and slid to a sitting position on the floor again and was silent for a few seconds. Gilbert stood there letting Gray calm down and think. Gray finally looked up at Gilbert who had not moved.

"All right do you have any idea as to why they think I'm dead?"

Gilbert looked at the ceiling for a few moments while he thought about how to approach this part of the story. Gray waited getting a bit impatient.

“Well are you going to tell me or not?”

“Yes Gray I’m going to tell you, I am just trying to figure out the best way to tell you this. After we had you give us your clothes, we took them and your horse back down to the valley. Lester Jr. had to kill one of your tribes outer guards, he didn’t want to but he had no choice. So to make a long story short we put your clothes on him, made him look like you and then tore his body apart, in turn we torn up his clothes, bloodied them up and scattered them across the valley a ways away. We called the wolves and let them take care of the rest; they and the other animals should have just about completed the picture for your people. So there is your explanation on why they think you are now dead.”

Gray sat there on the floor with his mouth open, he started to say something several times and only got out “but, but, but.” It took a few more minutes for Gray to make a whole sentence. The only life he could remember flew before his eyes. Now what, was he to be this people’s slave, as he and his people had done to others? No way would he be he would die first. If he had to he would force them to kill him.

Gilbert could see the flash of thought going on in Gray’s eyes, and a black expression come upon Gray’s face.

“I don’t like what I see in your eyes, and on your face Gray. You need to know we won’t treat you badly and in a few weeks if you wish you may get out of this cabin, you have the opportunity of becoming one of us if you so wish. But for now we need to keep you here to keep you from possibly running away and telling your tribe of us. We can’t take any chances of them finding out there are so many ranches up here. The further away they are the better for us. So tell me why the dark expression on your face?”

Gray looked up at Gilbert and straight into his eyes. He could see truth written in them. So he wasn’t to be made a slave after all, that really surprised him, did he ever have some thinking to do. How could a people be so different from his? Could he really manage to fit in here and learn another way of life? Most of all would these people and the ones on the other ranches really accept him? And the biggest question of all, did he want to stay with them or just pretend to until they trusted him and then take off and make his way back to the tribe? I’ll just play along for now and decide later, I don’t have to decide just this minute. Seconds had only gone by as Gilbert sat waiting for Gray’s answer.

“I’m going to take you up on that offer, after all what are my choices? It’s not like I came here willingly and just maybe I will like it. My father always said I was different.”

Gilbert smiled to himself, so the young fox thinks he will outsmart me, not likely boy. But the last laugh is going to be on him; after all I have seen a part of his future. But he said, “Wonderful Gray I will tell the family your decision; this will help ease their nervousness about you.” After all not all the family knew of Gilbert’s vision about this young Hun yet. But he would make sure all knew

by the end of this day, yes sirrie the last laugh was indeed his. He let just a bit of a smirk show on his face, enough to make Gray think he had Gilbert's confidence. Gilbert's mind was a wash with all kinds of plans for this young man for the next few weeks. He planed on keeping Gray very busy and to tired to do much but sleep at the end of each given day.

Gray noticed the ghost of smile on Gilbert's face. Good he had Gilbert fooled into believing he had made up his mind. He could hardly wait to get out of this shack and into the fresh open air. He couldn't hear the soft billowing of the wind on the yurt sides, funny he now missed that and never realized that was part of sleeping. But he felt and heard nothing in here, it was all muffled.

"Now that I have agreed to do things your way Gilbert, how soon can I get these chains off and out of this shack?"

"We will start tomorrow morning Gray, you can help on wood splitting and whatever else needs doing around here. Winters are long and hard up here and a lot needs to be done to get us ready and as you know we are also always on the lookout for marauders. One more night chained isn't going to hurt you and will help you from changing your mind over night and trying to slip away on us, good night my young friend."

With that Gilbert got up and exited the cabin, as he walked out the door he had a genuine smile on his face. The guard thought Gilbert looked like the cat that ate the canary. George gave his dad a strange look as he handed back Gilbert's weapons.

"I see you think you got your way dad, would you like to fill me in?"

Gilbert filled his son in on his conversation with Gray and the out come.

"So dad you think you can nudge him in the path you have seen in his future, I hope you are right, our lives may depend on it."

"Me to son, me to."

Gilbert was very right as the first couple of weeks passed Gray fell into exhausted sleep each night, not to awake until the next morning for breakfast and more work. He was no longer chained but the shed was now his home. The door locked and the windows shuttered at night. Even if they weren't locked he would have been to tired to do anything about it. He was amazed with the ranch and how it ran so smoothly. Children were being taught all fasces of the operation and he noticed hunting tactics, bow and arrow making, weaving, spinning, soap making, saddle making, and leather repair, moccasins and clothes, along with horse breaking and animal care and anything else that was needed to be learned for living on the ranch. He also noticed girls and women weren't excluded in any of it, in fact they seemed to be some of the best riders. They held their own that's for sure. One Saturday a halt to the work was called for the afternoon. He cleaned

up at the wash house with the other men and headed for a nice lunch. Afterward he went with the others not knowing what was going on, they headed to a back field not far from the house. Gray was surprised at the outfits a large group of children were wearing; they ranged from 5 years old to around 13. Their ponies were beautiful, colorful strips of cloth hung from the reins and braided into the horse's tails. Hand prints in many colors were made with their owners small hands on the horse's rumps and down their legs. Gray felt someone on his left; he looked over to see Gilbert there. Gilbert gave him a nod and a smile and looked back at the activities on the field. Gray also looked back. Gilbert began to talk and answer questions Gray hadn't asked but were on his mind, it was like Gilbert could read his mind.

“It's our children's show day. They show what they have learned in the way of their horse back training, and their traditional clothes they have mostly made themselves. The little ones getting help from the older ones or handed down to them from the ones that outgrew last years and so. This is their graduation to the next group up. Ah here we go it's about to start.”

The children were lining up with 4 in a row going back each row by age with the oldest ones last, all stood beside their horses. Across at the other side of the field maybe 600 feet away was a spear with colored cloth and feathers tied to it flying in the wind. Arrow with a blue shaft was shot into the sky. Gary could see it fly and start on its way down to the ground. He glanced over to see the children watching it to, when it hit the ground the children with a grace and ease that was unbelievable 1 little boy and 3 girls in the first row climbed upon their horse's.

The children were hanging upside down and spinning around to jump off their horses and leap back upon them again to end up standing in one stirrup on the right side of the horses. To then leap into the saddle again and do the same off the other side of their horses. When they reached the spear the children were hanging off the sides of their horses with two going around it on the left and the other two going around it on the right and meeting up again side by side in a row far enough apart to leap back off the back of their horses again and back to the side stirrup. These people could out ride most men of the tribe as mere children, so he hadn't even begun to see what the adults could do. As the different age groups went each set did harder and harder antics. The last two age groups were wearing quivers on their backs and bows around their chests. Half way across the clearing as they hopped back into their saddles from the ground they each took an arrow from their quivers and shot an arrow next to the spear. Then as they rode around the spear they dropped down along the sides of their horses and plucked their own arrow from the ground. They then shot it and three more in succession to the middle of the clearing, all in a circle of about four feet around. When the group got to the middle of the field they were riding a round the arrows hopping off of their horses plucking an arrow from the ground and then back to the horse then back off to get another of their arrows from the ground. Their arrows back into their quivers as they reached the other children again and the next group left to begin their own run.

Finally it was over and the children were all riding to the middle of the field. The Elders of the family began to walk out to meet the children. Gilbert grabbed Gray's arm and hauled him along. Gray hadn't known if

he was suppose to go or not, so he had just stayed rooted to where he was, until grabbed. But that answered the question for him before he had a chance to ask. Gray heard the people around him begin a chat in a strange language. When they reached the children everyone stopped and all were silent for three or four minutes, then Seth stepped out in front of the crowd. He was dressed in the full regal dress of a Chief. Gray had never seen such a costume, the head dress with it's eagle feathers reached to the ground. Quill work in red ran down the arms of the long sleeved leather shirt, and down the front and the back on the left and right of green quill work which ran straight down the middle. Long leather fridge hung from the sleeves and down the sides of the pants in-between the quill work which matched the shirt. Gray saw the toes of the moccasins poking out from the long pants were also worked in red and green quill work down the toes. The rest he couldn't see as the leather pants hid the rest. Seth said something to the youth that Gray hadn't caught but then the children chanted and sang back to him the words he had chanted. Seth then turned around to face the crowd.

The first words Seth said were in a language Gray didn't understand at all. He then changed to English, "for people who don't know our language, like our new comer here, he then dipped his head in Gray's direction, we will do the rest of the ceremony in English this time. Maybe by the next one Gray will have had some lessons."

Gray thought to himself, well that shows how much he knows, no way I'm sticking around here that long. It is different though, and I am sure to learn a few new things while I am here. Gary caught the tail end of the graduation ceremony for the children and then it was time for a picnic by the main house. One thing he saw, the food was simple with a few treats and things he had never tasted in his life, but hey had plenty. He wondered if it was always like this. No one here looked like they went hungry, old and young alike. There was plenty at each meal he had attended so far, even when he was chained n the cabin they had fed him good. Something that sure didn't happen with the tribe. Prisoners were fed very slim rations. Why waste food on them until it was known if they would be any good or a benefit to the tribe even as a slave. He did see in an epiphany that a well fed slave would be a better slave, as he sat there eating his corn bread, beans and venison. A huge cast iron kettle sat by the food tables, there was applesauce in it and was the dessert tonight, spiked with cinnamon and honey. He could hardly wait, he could smell it from where he sat, the wind was blowing toward him from it's direction and it smelled heavenly.

Chapter 12

A month rolled by, summer was beginning to wane in the mountains, the nights were getting much cooler and soon the temperatures would be dropping toward freezing. Taggard still hadn't found a place to take over and claim his own. But he had seen smoke rising from the west and was headed that way, slowly and methodically. He didn't want to be spotted by anyone. He wanted his presence to be as unknown as possible. He did wonder what had happened to that new slave girl of Gray's and if they had ended up punishing her with death, or maybe just slit one of her ham strings or one of her Achilles heels to keep her in control. What a shame she was a looker, and he would have loved to have taken some of his revenge out on her. Burr it was cold this morning. And he blew on his hands before he began to saddle up his horse, it danced slightly to the left and away from him as he raised the saddle to throw over after the blanket, it seemed to sense the hate emanating from the man.

* * *

Rose had been up for almost an hour this morning, she was back into her old routine but better. She no longer took advantage of her mom's good nature, but was up and in the kitchen to help with breakfast and morning chores right before the crack of dawn. As the bacon cooked Rose lifted her eyes to the kitchen window to see the first light of sunrise begin to peek over the ponderosa pine trees to the east. It looked like it was going to be a beautiful day. As she worked she hiked her sweater up on her arms so as not to get it wet in the water as she rinsed off a bowl in the sink. She had made a big batch of batter biscuits and they were already baking in the oven of the wood stove. She had stopped looking at the scars on her wrists now, it had been a shock a couple weeks back yet to see them there and realize her capture had not just been a nightmare. The nightmares in the night were slowly becoming less and less. Last night she hadn't even had one to wake her in the night. They would begin the cooking later today for the fall gathering this weekend, she could hardly wait to see everyone again from the other ranches. Plus there were all the activities and contests that were going to be held on Saturday. She had been practicing her axe throwing again after her wrists had healed for the last two weeks now. She hadn't lost her touch one bit. The prize to the winner this year in axe throwing was a young mare, a one year old appaloosa colt. All the prizes had been posted at all the surrounding ranches and everyone had been practicing for what they were trying for. Rose was sort of day dreaming yet working, she was setting the bacon over a rod that was part of a holder which had been sat in a pan to drain the bacon over. The bacon grease was precious to these days, every bit was saved that was possible. Many a pie crust had been made with bacon grease and it was a must to cook venison in, just two among many of its uses. The bacon rack held two pounds of bacon easily. She grabbed a pot holder for each hand and took the biscuits out of the oven, the gravy was already made.

Her mom bustled into the kitchen she had been setting the table and had run to the root cellar after butter and another jar of plum jam. She smiled at her daughter as she watched Rose put the biscuits in a large bowl to take to the table. It may have been an awful experience for Rose but she seemed to have matured greatly by it. Sometimes things do work out for the best. Who knows why this had happened to Rose and their

family, but it did work out in the end, they hadn't lost their daughter. A tear slid down her cheek as she thought of the anguish it had caused her when Rose was gone and finding out what had happened to her, she quickly brushed the tears off her face before Rose turned to see her crying. No need to keep rehashing, let Rose heal and then years down the road they would all talk of the time when Rose had come into the hands of Huns. Maybe even to Rose's children. After all grandmothers were allowed to tell stories and she was sure Rose in a few years could talk of it without bringing the nightmares back. It would just be an old learning experience in her past. Rose turned with the gravy in one hand and the bacon now on a plate in the other.

"Here Rose let me take the gravy and the eggs, you get the biscuits."

The door to the dining room was already open, the wood cook stove helped heat the house in the mornings. It wouldn't be long and they would be firing up the living room wood stove. It was getting darn right chilly now at night.

As Rose and her mom entered the dining room, old Fred stood up, so the other men did to, which was her dad Kris and her brother Cal. They had told him it wasn't necessary but he insisted, he had always treated his wife with that courtesy and felt it meant respect for the ladies in his new family. The gathering this weekend would mean the formal adoption of Fred Boone into their family. He was very excited about it, and called it reversed adoption. As he was an old man getting adopted instead of a child. After he had recovered he had joined in with working on the ranch with gusto. It was hard to get him to slow down. He had begun classes also for anyone who wanted to learn what he knew. He said he knew his years were short and he had a lot of knowledge to pass on before he was called to join his wife in the hereafter. This is how the days had slid by, normal every day activities and the preparation for the fall gathering. Fred had also been secretly making a special bow for Rose in the evenings. It was his treat and reward for her for her part in his rescue. He had thanked her a few times but she had said all she did is get captured being stupid and then getting into even more trouble so she ended up beside him staked to the ground. But he insisted it was all her doing anyway. There was no convincing him otherwise. He also never failed to thank the people he recognized from the rescue party. Of course he knew he needed to stop telling them so he didn't drive them up a wall, so after 3 weeks he eased into the ranch life and stopped driving them crazy with his thank you's. He now mostly had his health back and was enjoying teaching again. They had made him stop doing a lot of chores and take responsibility to teach those things that the future generations needed to know. That was as important if not more so than having him slopping pigs and milking.

The days counting down to the gathering went by pretty darn fast, doing chores along with the extra foods to be cooked, tables set out and all the other things that needed done to accommodate the families from the other ranches made the days go by very quickly. Just like that and it was the morning of the gathering, Rose felt more excited than she had in years. Her mom had helped her make a special outfit of buckskins just for

this occasion. They had to let urine set for days in a large tub so it would become stale and then put the deer hides in. It was soft as could be as she slid the buckskin pants on, and then the shirt over her head. She had decorated it with fringe and beads both across the front and a few beads worked into the fringe down the arms and legs. Her moccasins from the year before worked well with it so she didn't bother to make a new pair. Mom had taught her last year how to make the special leather. The leather had been worked with her own hands six months before for this very occasion. One of the odd things that had happened since she was rescued, Alan Rice had shown up at the ranch every Saturday afternoon. Each time he came over he brought her something, a red rose bush to plant by the back door, a fancy hand mirror he said he had picked up a while back at an abandoned house and so on. Rose decided Alan had a wonderful smile.

Rose could see a few riders coming up to the ranch from her window; it looked like that was the Rice family now. Things would really start popping now; it shouldn't be long before the Wolf's showed up also. Rose slid on her belt and attached the knife scabbard and then her axe holder, she turned to admire herself in her mirror. Not bad, not bad at all. Something about herself caught her attention, she looked a little closer at her hairline, and she could swear she saw the beginnings of a white streak about an inch or so wide right above her right temple. She would have to ask her mom if she was seeing what she thought she was seeing or was it a trick of the light. The porch belt was ringing and that brought a smile to her face, it was going to be a wonderful day. Even with the work that still had to be done and helping to feed both animals and people. Extra cabins, tents and tepees were all set up and ready to be lived in for the weekend. As Rose headed down the stairs she heard the Wolf calls, the Wolf family was riding in, that eerie sound always brought a chill down her spine.

Chapter 13

The rest of the family was already outside as she stepped out onto the porch. The day was beautiful and the morning fog was rising out of the pines surrounding the homestead and woods around them, and the sun would soon burn all the fog off. The Rice's were all ready dividing up into a cabin for the older folks and tents for the younger ones. Their packs were being lifted off their horses and hauled into the right cabin or the tents and then the horses were being led off toward the pasture by the Fairbanks teens and children. Soon the Rice children were joining them having been shooed off by their parents for being so jumpy and underfoot.

Everyone turned to look down the road the throaty howls of wolves could be heard and it sent another shiver down Rose's back. The wolf cries were getting louder by the second, and then two horse men appeared charging up the road, bone chilling cries coming from the mouths. Feathers and leather fringe flying in the wind off their spectacular outfits. It looked like some of the Wolf family had out done themselves this year on their clothes. The riders were George Burning Fire Wolf, and Isaac Brightwater. They were both breath taking in full war paint and their horses painted and rising on their hind legs in front of the porch as they neared. Then another rider was coming, his horse at full speed as he jumped down and back onto the horse and then off the other side and onto his horse again. Another two riders behind him doing the same with extra cries, the rider behind them riding in standing on the rump of her horse with the whole clan riding in behind her. A cheer went up through the Wolf clan as they stopped and then they all dismounted in unison. Moments went by before any one said a thing. Then a WOOOOOOOO HOOOO went up from Cal and everyone started to laugh and clap. The families started to mingle with the Wolf's and show them were the rest of the cabins, tents and tepees were around the side of the house where the Rice's had resumed unpacking and settling in after watching the goings on of the Wolf's.

A few of the children of the Wolf's remounted and went back to where they had left the pack horses and brought them in. Then they were directed to the remaining sleeping arrangements for their families.

Rose never noticed there were two sets of eyes on her from two different directions. Alan Rice followed Rose's every move and even when his dad said something to him he never replied and Joe just smiled and shook his head and continued unpacking his horse. Ella Rice his mom also noticed where Alan's attention was and her husband a wink. The other set belonged to none other then Gray as he stood beside his horse, the sight of Rose in the white buckskin had taken his breathe away and that smile on her face made her light up. He had never seen any one so beautiful, he wondered if she had recognized him if that would taken that

smile off her face. He was glad she hadn't, his hair had grown out and he was dressed much like the rest of the wolf tribe and painted to the hilt. He still hadn't really made up his mind what he was going to do, stay or go? He had been putting off making that decision for weeks now. He was no longer guarded and the cabin had become his home. Many of the Wolf's had chipped in to make the place comfortable for him. He also thought of Gilbert Wolf as a very close friend even if he was older. Then to see Rose again he never dreamed of what that would do to him. He found he had what could be called a hunger for her approval and he wanted her to look at him with those beautiful eyes and not see what she had once seen.

Was I that bad he wondered; and after living all this time with the Wolf tribe and seeing how they treated their women and each other, he could answer his own question? Yes I was that bad. I thought the way we lived was our right even if we could improve things but father didn't want to. He believed his way the old way was the only way; well I think I just answered another of my own questions. I'm staying, I now know different there is a better way to live. With that his mind was made up and he would ask Gilbert if he could become one of the Wolf tribe and as far as Gray was concerned he was wholeheartedly one of them from here on out. Now to get everyone to believe he wanted to live among them and to trust him.

A horn sounded he had been so deep in thought that it startled him. He chuckled to himself, time to get his things into a tent and join the fun. The tent was large the same kind you find at camp grounds like they used to set up for scouts up off the ground with a wooden floor, 4 sets of bunks with a blanket and a small table in-between. Most brought their own blankets or sleeping bags for the weather was colder then one blanket would work for. But the hosts were doing their best they could to help everyone be warm, the cabins had wood stoves or fireplaces but they went to the families with women and children or the teepees which also had small wood stoves on the inside. Everyone knew the young men could take a few nights of cold and not complain; after all they were supposed to be tough. He quickly threw his things on a bottom buck that was empty and headed back out for the start of the festivities.

He watched where everyone was going and became part of the flow of people that were headed to the back of the main house and in to a clearing. It seemed this ranch was set up much the same as the Wolf's ranch, there were a few differences here and there but the houses and what surrounded them were much the same.

Rose who had come down off the front porch turned also to head toward the back field she had been talking to her almost sister Annie Boyd, Hank Boyd's wife when a young man of the Wolf tribe walked past her and nodded his head. She couldn't put her finger on who he was but he sure seemed familiar, there was something about his eyes. She decided it didn't matter right now it was time to enjoy the day. After a few more steps she found Alan at her side and they went the rest of the way together.

The small clearing was surrounded and in the middle stood Kris, Joe and Seth, the leaders of their people. Not far off stood Hank, the large cow's horn hanging from a rope around his neck. Hank raised the horn and gave two loud blasts and stepped back towards his Kris and the other two leaders. Kris stepped forward and talked loudly, "first of all we welcome all of you we know a lot of you will be going home every other day to trade places with the others left at home to guard and work as usual, we are very happy to host the gathering this year. We hope all will enjoy this years gathering and games and we give a big welcome to our newest addition to the family Fred Boone. Fred would you step forward, half way around the field the older man stepped forward and bowed and then stepped back into the crowd, he didn't care for all the attention. All of us are gaining new knowledge from him and he now has several apprentices. Someone else I want to introduce to all of you is the other soon to be member of the Wolf tribe. Gray Lloyd would you please step out into the field.

Gray's mind was spinning, how could Kris Fairbanks possibly know, he himself only finally made the decision a few minutes ago. But then he steeled himself and stepped forward and out of the crowd around him and into the field. A low buzz of voices started up this was a very big surprise to the Fairbank and Rice Clan's. No one could have been more shocked with this announcement from her own father as Rose was at this moment. She stiffened and her first thoughts were how could they? Gray is a savage, a murderer and he tried to debase her, along with trying to make her his slave and who knows what else would have happened to her if she hadn't been rescued. Beside her Alan felt the change in Rose and slipped his hand into hers, he leaned toward and told her.

"Rose relax your home and safe he can't do anything to you. Gray is the duck out of water and if he chooses to change and become a Wolf all the better for all of us, that means we are out of danger from him at least. Your dad wouldn't have even announced it if he hadn't been told it was for real, you know that."

All Rose did is shake her head yes and looked up to see a Wolf 60 feet from her, or who she thought had been a Wolf step out in front of the crowd. Why that looks like the man that had given her a nod as he passed her on the way here. So that's Gray. It sure was hard to tell who it had been with all that face paint, no wonder she hadn't recognized him. Still it made her feel scared deep within and her stomach had tightened up; she knew she must over come that, she was even now considered an adult. It was time to leave her fears behind her along with the childish running off like she used to do. She was brought back to the present when Alan squeezed her hand.

Seth Wolf had walked up to Gray during her pondering and had Gray by the right shoulder. She couldn't hear what was being said but she could see Seth and Gray were talking.

Gary was asking Seth, “How did you know I wanted to be adopted into your tribe? I don’t understand, because I just this evening made up my mind what I was going to do.”

A smile grew on Seth face, “that’s an easy question to answer Gray, Gilbert told me.”

“Gilbert told you, how would Gilbert know something I hadn’t even known yet, how did he know what I was going to decide?”

“You don’t know about Gilbert yet do you son, well I will let him explain it to you sometime, are you serious about joining us, if you are give me your right hand. That’s all that important right at this moment.”

Gray had no idea what this was about but he knew he was serious, so he stuck out his right hand. Seth slipped his bowie knife out from the sheath up behind his neck. Gary had heard about that knife but had never seen it, he thought everyone was kidding. The knife quickly slashed across the palm of his hand and then Seth did the same thing to his left hand. Seth was good the cuts were only about 1 inch long and not real deep, just enough to have blood flow. He clasped Grays hand in his and raised them in the air. Wolf cries were heard among the crowd of clappers and hooping.

Seth announced loudly, “We now have a new Wolf, for now he will be known as Gray Thinks Hard Wolf until he picks his own name during his naming ceremony in the spring. I want to tell you he didn’t come upon this decision lightly.”

With that he whispered for Gray to step back into his place and Seth went back to the center of the small field. It was time for Joe to announce the start of the games and what order they would be in. Some of the games would be held simultaneously or it would take more then a couple of days to get them done.

Rose didn’t really believe it, why would he choose to live as a Wolf, just an everyday guy when he was a prince in line for the rule of his people. What were his choices after his capture claim to become one of them and at the first chance take off for his people to tell them of these ranches. She didn’t know how she was going to keep an eye on him, Rose trusted the Wolf’s, but her fright made her think she had to have a talk with Gilbert Wolf, and see what his insight told him. She didn’t think she could even compete in any of the

events until she did.

“Alan I need to find Gilbert Wolf and talk to him, do you mind? You go ahead and head for the bow event I will see you later.”

“All right if you are sure you’re ok?”

Yes, don’t worry Alan I will catch up with later, good luck.”

With that she went up on her tip toes and gave him a quick peck on the cheek and went in search of Gilbert. She found him ten minutes later at the calf roping competition for the children. Gilbert was one of the judges. She waited another 30 minutes for him and was getting antsy; the time was getting closer and closer to her event the tomahawk throwing. The women’s bow competition wasn’t until tomorrow so she didn’t have to worry about that. As the calf roping for the 8 to 12 year olds came to a close she waved and caught his eye, and he headed in her direction.

As Gilbert came up to her a smile grew on his face.

“I see our Gray was a big surprise to you Rose.”

He saw the surprise look come across her face, which was better than the fear and even a little anger he was reading from her.

“You’re Gray? How in the world can you be taken in by him Gilbert, what if he’s just playing along until he can escape? We will all be attacked and killed or enslaved.”

“Whoa there Rose calm down” Gilbert took her by her left arm and began to lead her away from the people that were still around. “Come over and sit with me for a few moments and I will explain, and maybe more than I had wanted to for awhile yet.”

Gilbert was also trying to think fast, and was thinking to himself; guess I don't see everything coming. He was also wondering just how much he could tell her without changing the outcome in the future. Ok Mr. know it all you better think fast and do this right.

They came to a bench under some trees and both sat down. For the moment Rose had forgotten the event she was signed up for but she still had plenty of time to reach the tomahawk throw.

“Ok Rose I know you must be upset by this outcome, but I can assure you Gray is on the level. I myself have seen the change in him. No, now wait I see the look on your face. You know my talent right?” Rose shook her head yes. Now so you know I have seen a vision of Gary living here among us, he isn't fooling us and I understand that worry. But he is more than how he was raised I can tell you that; now does that allay your fears?”

She thought for a moment her abuzz withal of it. She knew Gray was at the Wolf's but she had never dreamed she would have to interact with him ever again. Frankly she just hadn't thought of it at all, now wasn't that stupid. We had taken him prisoner did I think he would be kept for the rest of his life chained up or something or killed?

Gilbert was watching all the different expressions flash across her face.

She decided it was something she would just have to continue to think about and chew over, she believed Gilbert after all he had the gift of sight.

She looked into Gilbert eyes. “Alright Gilbert I believe you and trust your word. It's just going to take me some time to get used to it, after all it's not like I will be round him or even see him much. I am sorry to have doubted you and your father. I trust you if it wasn't for you I would either be dead or still a slave down in the Hun's camp.”

‘No problem Rose I am only to glad to help and assure you. Gray isn't going to be a problem, in fact he will be a great help; I have seen it. Now does that help a little more?’

Gilbert was happy to see Rose's beautiful smile spread across her face.

“Yes Gilbert that does help; and I am just going to stop thinking about him and enjoy the gathering. I feel much better. Good luck with judging the events and I hope I didn’t keep you from any of today’s obligations?”

Rose then hurried off relieved and feeling much better. And talking to herself about doing the best she could to forget Gray and concentrate on her throwing. She continued; forget him, forget him, he’s nothing to me he can’t hurt me, for get him, but his eyes kept popping up in her mind.

Whew I almost went to far feeling sorry for her, I hope I didn’t go to far as it is, I best get my butt where I am suppose to be next, and as Gilbert watched Rose hurry of he then turned and headed to where the 8 to 12 year olds were going to be barrel racing.

Meanwhile Gray was competing in the same bow competition as Alan Rice, and doing very well if he could say so himself; just two more targets and there would be a winner. There was another Wolf in the contest who very good indeed, George Burning Fire Wolf the teenage son of Seth. Another Rice out of the contest with this last round, Toby Rice he had just barely missed in points and now it was just the three of them. They each had 3 shots; George went and struck 2 bull’s eyes and the last shot just barely out of the bull’s eye. On Alan’s turn he got 1 bull’s eye and 2 barely out, Gray could see the disappointment on Alan’s face. Gray took a deep breath to steady himself and stepped up to the line. His first shot went just outside the bull’s eye, another deep breath. Let it out slowly and relax he told himself. He let the arrow fly, bull’s eye, ok one more to go, breathe, relax and pull back and away went his last arrow. He watched the arrow as best he could and it hit just a hair out of the bull’s eye.

“Awe shoot” he said out loud.”

George walked up to him and told him he did a great job for his first competition and clapped Gray on the back.

“Congratulations George” Gary said as he shook George’s hand. Alan stepped up and congratulated George a few seconds later, and stepped over to Gray to tell him he did a good job. Alan felt a little funny doing that after finding out this Wolf was who he was, but he knew he was going to have to interact with the man once in awhile, he just hoped Rose didn’t feel betrayed somehow.

Rose was just sitting down to some lunch when Alan caught up with her again and he sat down beside her.

“I thought you were going to catch up with me when you were finished Rose?” Alan told her with a bit of hurt in his voice.

“Sorry Alan I know I did but I had something to talk over with Gilbert and then get over to my event. Finding Gray here among them really bothered the heck out of me and I wanted to make sure Gray wasn’t just going along with everything to get free.”

“And did you find out for yourself that everything was alright and the Wolf’s really do know for sure he is legit, and how did you do?”

“Oh I only took first price.” She gave her best smile then as she turned towards Alan.

Alan rolled his eyes, “is that all you only took first price, why you little minx, I oughta turn you over my knee and give you what for,” he laughed.

“You just try it Mr. Alan Rice and you will pull back a stub,” she replied with a twinkle in her eyes. She gave him a push and he fell backwards off the bench, those around them broke out laughing and Rose’s face turned a bright red as Alan was getting back up and brushing himself off. Alan was also laughing and told Rose, “I believe you, believe you me,” but he was laughing so hard he had a hard time getting it out.

Neither Rose nor Alan saw Gray look their way as he went to one of the tables to pick up a sandwich, they also didn’t see the longing in his eyes. He even surprised himself with the flash of jealousy he felt rise in the pit of his stomach as he watched their byplay.

Chapter 14

The smoke and smells had drawn him here in the wee hours of the morning. He just knew he had seen smoke on the horizon last night. He had headed this way before the sunset and broke camp this morning before the frost was even off of the grass. He came upon a well worn path this morning and quickly took his horse into the thicket and then further into the dense woods and it was a good thing he had when he did. He tied up the stupid horse and made a dry camp for the day and then headed out closer to the path to follow along it to see where it led.

First Taggart heard and then saw many riders as he peered through the branches of the trees; they looked like they were dressed for some kind of occasion. He had never seen anything like this; these people sure were strange he thought. "Good thing I stayed back here in the trees," he said to himself and then realized he had said it out loud. He had gotten used to talking to himself more than he used to these past couple of months. He quickly put his hand over his own mouth. He was cold and hungry and more than willing to take a few risks, but not against this many. Taggart could hardly believe his eyes, girls and women were actually riding among the men. It shocked him; he had never seen such a thing. For a few seconds he was stunned at the very thought of such a thing. These people needed a lesson but he just couldn't figure out how and what he could do about it. Something would come to him he just knew it, mean while he would wait and bide his time.

His stomach growled he also had to figure out how to get more food into his stomach, he had lost a lot of weight. There has to be chickens or cats and dogs hanging around if there was a lot of people in the area, it shouldn't be too hard to snatch something.

Taggart pulled further back into the forest as the last of the riders passed his location. Behind the riders Barry Rice was taking up the tail end of the Rice family, he caught a faint rank smell in the wind, but dismissed it as either a dead animal or a skunk. Man alive he thought that's bad.

Taggart followed behind the riders in the shadow of the forest and spent the day lurking in the woods far enough back in the shadows to not be seen but close enough that he could see what was going on, he had been right the riders had been dressed for some kind of festival. He saw just as many women and girls competing in the contests as he did men and boys. He even spotted the witch Rose who had cut him, he licked his lips, it looked like he may even get a chance to get even with her. His eyes roamed further to a whole group of people dressed like Indians and that included being all painted up. He really would have been mad if he had seen the adoption circle and found out Gray was alive after all and welcomed in the Wolf Clan. But he had been working his way through the woods at that time and was trying to go around a guard he had spotted.

The guard Tex Brandt caught a whiff of what he thought had to be a skunk as he made his rounds around his section of the ranch.

“Pee-uu that’s ranks, gees,” he said and then continued on his way.

Sad to say the guards weren’t on their toes very well any more, the fact that there hadn’t been any real trouble in quite some time didn’t help matters and some of the people had gotten lax. Then the Huns moving out of their area added to their sense of safety.

Taggart went around a few big trees and saw many people sitting at these strange looking tables, the wind was blowing towards him and he could smell some of the aromas, dang was he ever hungry. All he had caught yesterday was a couple of chipmunks and there wasn’t very much meat on them along with steeping some pine needles to drink in his small metal pan. If he wanted to hunt or set traps he would have to go back deeper into the mountains again, and he really didn’t want to leave the area. He would just have to chance things to luck.

“Yeah right, I have luck, when have I ever had any good luck?”

Taggart didn’t even realize he was voicing his complaint out loud again. He turned and looked both to the right and the left and then slowly backed deeper into the woods, he needed to find another location to watch from because the smell of the food was driving him crazy.

Taggart went around and the breeze carried across the horseshoe pits. The 12 to 15 years olds were just about finished with their last set. One of the girls, Daisy Wolf began gagging. Many of the other teens were holding their noses.

“Oh my goodness what is that,” Daisy said as she recovered, she knew as a Wolf she wasn’t suppose to react like that, so she sucked up her courage as fast as she was able to with that putrid smell in the air. They all looked around for a few minutes including Leonard White of the Rice family, that smell was bad but seemed to be fading.

“All right kids what ever it was its almost gone so let’s finish this up and see which team is the winner ok.”

The Wolf’s number two team took first place and the Fairbank’s second. All four of the first place kids received a brand new 12 inch blade bowie knife just made by the directions of Fred Boone. Second place

was an 8 inch bowie knife, both teams were very happy with the prizes. Even the teams that lost gathered around the winners and oownd and aawed over the other teen's prizes.

Taggart just had to get where there were less people and maybe be able to snatch something to eat. He found himself on the far side of the ranch away from all the festivities. There were tents, cabins, and tepees, with only a few people mostly women with small children. This was still no good; he would have to keep hunting. A little further and there was only a person here and there; he should be able to sneak behind a building he saw not far from him. In fact there were a few small buildings here and one of them must hold some food of some kind. He glanced around the left side of a small shed and saw no one; he sided up to a small window and peered inside, just horse tack and leather. Dang, his luck wasn't getting any better yet he would have to get over to the next shed; at least it was only 20 feet away. He went back around to the back of the shed and kept an eye out, yep there was a man walking past. Taggart pulled back and waited a few minutes and then looked around the right corner of the shed again. The man was gone and no one else in sight, he quickly ran over to the other shed and looked around it, still clear. He went around to the left side of the building, no window, so he went to then back and around to the right side, no window on this side either. He went up to the front right corner and looked at the front of the shed no windows on the front that meant he would have to open the door. He knew he might not have much time before someone else came around with the place being so busy. He kept low and went over to the door, pulled a wooden bar latch up and slide inside, closing the door behind him. Pay dirt, there were all kinds of green beans hanging on strings, called leather jackets, onions, garlic, and jar after jar of dried fruits and vegetables sitting on back slanting shelves. There were large white buckets that read, pinto, red, lentil, navy, and peas. Drool was sliding down his dirty chin. He tripped over a handle on the floor, a trap door, he pulled up and the handle and the hinged trap door came up. This building was larger then it appeared as it was dug deep and there were stairs down to the next level of shelves, he went down a few stairs and bent down and looked, the basement of the shed was huge and went both to the right and to the left with rooms off of rooms with closed doors. He went down closing the trap door behind him.

He decided to take a better look at what was in the other rooms and began to open doors. Taggart found out the place was indeed a food storage area infact it was a much extended root cellar complex. Down here were rooms with canned vegetables, fruits, meats, soups then potatoes, and so on. He opened one to find it was huge and full of smoked meats. He had to decide fast what he was going to do and take. He went back to the room with canned meats and each side of his coat could take 2 quart jars, he tool 2 jars of elk and 2 of beef, and his inside pockets on each side could fit quite a few potatoes. In the smoked meat room the best thing he decided was to put several long links of sausages around his neck and shoulders. This should hold him until he could get back in a few days at least, he began to gnaw on a link if sausage to abate his hunger somewhat as he made his way back up the stairs. He slowly lifted the trap door just a crack to make sure no one had come in while he was down below, empty. He hade his way up, closed the trap door and slowly cracked open the main door of the store room. He didn't know how long he had been down there and he had seen the huge amounts of food that were being served over at the tables meant someone may come this way at any time to get more. He needed to get back to the woods and now, his luck had held this long there was no sense in taking to many chances by being here longer then necessary.

He made it around to the back of the shed and looking around carefully dashed for the woods. He continued

on through the woods and stopped at a creek and filled his canteen and walked until he was back to his dry camp he had enough of watching these stupid people for one day, he was going to fill his belly and get some rest. It hadn't even occurred to him his horse had been tied to a tree for hours and was hungry and thirsty.

* * *

Fifteen year old Hannah Boyd along with the visiting 14 year old twin Rice girls Betsy and Beatrice were headed for the root cellar; mama wanted her to get 2 smoked hams and a couple sacks of potatoes. It was getting towards mid afternoon and mama and the other women wanted to make sure there was enough meat and potatoes until dark. Then if any was left over it would put in one of the cold boxes for part of tomorrows meals. The girls came down the path laughing and giggling over who liked which boy the best, not really paying attention to anything but each other. Hannah turned at the last moment as she cleared the thin trees and saw a flash of a man's form going into the woods. She didn't really think much about it, she only thought it was one of the roving guards. When they got into the shed, Betsy who was first in noticed a foul odor.

"Bleck did something spoil in here?"

Hannah held her nose for a moment and looked around, but didn't see anything in the shed that could have spoiled.

"I don't see anything up here that could have spoiled girls, let's go down maybe something down there did, we have to get the ham and potatoes from down there anyway."

Hannah lifted the trap door and started down the stairs with the other girls following her. She noticed the odor was down here also. They split up and looked around and found nothing, the meat, fruit room and vegetable bins were just fine.

"Well," Hannah offered, "everything seems to be fine, just the awful smell. I'll tell mom when we get back."

With that the girls got what they were sent for, retraced their steps and made their way back to the main house. Hannah told her mom that there was a bad odor in the root cellar but that she and the other girls didn't find anything rotten, and her mom Millie said she would look into it in the morning.

Chapter 15

Gilbert awoke with a start, usually his visions happened when he was awake, this dream wasn't the same but was the same as a vision and it had been very vivid, but for some reason part of it was clouded. The dawn was still an hour or more away, he would have to get up and meditate on the dream. It had been so disturbing he just had to know what the other part was he hadn't been able to see. He quietly and as softly as possible got out of the bed, he was glad he had his wife sleep against the wall. He padded over to the fireplace and sat down on the oval rag rug a few feet from it and stared into the coals. An hour later he was startled when he was touched on his right shoulder. Without Gilbert even realizing it his wife had built the fire up and made a hot drink.

"Sweetheart how much longer are you going to sit down there," his wife Odessa Light Eyes asked him.

He smiled up at her, "I might as well get up Odessa it doesn't seem to be doing me any good sitting down here anyway."

With that and lightly as a uncoiling cat he rose from the floor.

Odessa was worried, visions didn't usually come so hard to her husband this was really different and she could see it was worrying him. Maybe if she could get him to talk about it, it would help him. She stood near him by the table where she had started to lay out breakfast; it was just some parched grain coffee along side bread and cheese.

"What is it Gilbert would it help if you talked about it?"

Gilbert was now sitting in a chair and he reached out and wrapped his arms around her ample waist drawing him closer to him and laid his head against her.

"I have part of it, but the rest just isn't clear and I can't understand it, I know there is something or someone dangerous but the who or when seems to have evaded me this time. You don't think I am losing my gift do you?"

"No I don't think you are losing your gift. God has given this freely to you as long as you use it for good, I think he is just making it a little harder this time or he isn't ready to have you see it all this time. Maybe someone else is involved or is here to help you, who knows but when the time is right he will let you see it, I have confidence this is so."

Gilbert lifted his head to look into her face. “I hope your right Odessa, I really do, I have an idea we are going to need to know soon what the problem is. I need to discuss this with Kris, dad and Joe today, and help everyone give a heads up for approaching trouble. That’s the least I can do”

Seth was walking out of the adjoining bedroom right then, “what’s the least you can do Gilbert? Sorry I had the door open and couldn’t help but overhear.”

“Father can I wait and tell you, Joe and Kris at the same time, then I won’t have to repeat myself.”

“Sure son no problem we’ll go talk to them after I get some breakfast in me.”

It didn’t take long for the two to finish eating, wash up and be on their way. Seth was concerned; he didn’t think what Gilbert had to say was going to be good, so much for a happy Harvest Festival.

The grass was frosted white and the two men left foot prints across it as they made their way to the main house, there weren’t many others up and about yet. Seth and Gilbert came up on the Fairbank’s porch just as Kris was coming out the front door. Kris seemed surprised to see them this early in the morning.

“Morning guys what brings you to my door so early this morning?”

Seth spoke up, “Gilbert has something to tell us but we need Joe in on it. We figured since you’re in the middle and closest we would start by collecting you first.”

“Well then we best go get him,” Kris stated.

So Kris started down off the porch and led the way over to where the Rice’s were staying. It wasn’t all that far, but they had put themselves in one of the end cabins along with daughter Alice and her family. Kris knocked on the door of the Rice’s cabin and Leonard Jr. answered the door. All three men looked at the young man but Kris was the one in front and so he asked if the boy’s grandpa Joe was up and if he was they needed to talk to him. They heard Joe’s voice asking who was at the door so they knew Joe was up. Leonard Jr. looked backwards. “It’s Uncle Kris, Seth and Gilbert grandpa.”

“Well let um in boy just don’t stand there holding the door, invite um in.”

All three men were smiling when Leonard Jr. said. “won’t you please come in?”

All three nodded and walked into the small cabin. It looked like the whole family was up so things were pretty busy. Joe was sitting at the small table not far from the wood stove.

“What brings you three over here at this time of the morning? I get the idea I’m not going to like the answer am I?”

Both Kris and Seth looked towards Gilbert. Gilbert decided he would like to tell the men what he had to say in a little more private area.

“Can we do this a little more private first I would feel a little more comfortable with out so many around us just yet hearing this?”

Joe groaned a little as he got up out of his chair, “I was afraid you were going to say that. Let’s take a walk outside.” Joe grabbed his jacket which was on a hook by the door and followed the other men out.

Leonard Jr. was disappointed that he wasn’t going to hear what they had to say, he knew whatever his uncles had come to tell Grandpa Joe must have been very important to be here so early in the morning. Leonard as well as the rest of the children of the Ranches knew that they weren’t related by family blood, but that his grandpa Joe, Kris, and Seth were blood brothers, so it was almost the same thing as real blood. Maybe if he made up an excuse to go outside to his mom he could go ease drop on the conversation. Leonard Jr. was 16 and one of the men of the family after all. He saw the wood was running low by the stove. All right there ya go an excuse, he thought. He saw his mother cutting bread at the side board, here goes.

“Hey ma I’m going out to get some more wood ok?”

“Ok Jr. thanks.”

As Alice his mother heard the door close she realized she had said yes without really thinking and suddenly thought, he doesn’t usually volunteer to do that, he normally claims it’s his younger brother Fairchild’s job now. That boy’s up to something.

The men hadn’t gone far from the cabin but far enough that no one even in the tents could hear them. The sun was just beginning to peak over the mountains so Leonard Jr. could easily just sneak behind a tree and he could hear what they were saying. It didn’t take him but a few minutes to get where he needed to be. Uncle Gilbert was still talking good. Gilbert was in the middle of a sentence.

“And I tried to bring back the vision this morning to get the rest of it but couldn’t.”

Kris was rubbing his chin, “well as I see it, all we can do is heighten our security and add a few more guards on watch and make sure they tell the head of their details anything that seems to be out of the ordinary. I don’t see what else we can do right now, at least until you know the rest of the vision Gilbert. But let us know as soon as you can.”

Gilbert nodded his head and started back towards his cabin with the other men doing the same. Leonard Jr. thought, Oh crap, and headed back as fast as he could. He was standing at the wood pile getting wood as quickly as possible so it looked like he had been there a few minutes when Joe got back and saw him and decided to help the boy bring wood into the cabin. They both came in Leonard Jr. heading the way, he glanced at his mother and she had a strange look on her face. All most like, now what haven you been up to boy. He looked away incase she happened to see a guilty look on his face. He didn’t know how she could tell but she always managed to anyway.

Leonard was still in that all arms and legs stage as his dad put it and was growing into his feet nicely. For a while there Leonard Jr. was going through a size of shoes every two weeks, good thing his moccasins kinda grew with him for a bit or he would be barefoot half the time before ma or grandma could get him a pair made. They tried not to go into their stocks of extras, only when necessary. He had sandy colored hair with a white streak at the right temple just like his dad and deep blue eyes with a straight nose. He wore his hair just long enough so the streak stood out when he tied it back at the back of his neck. He had been trying to get Hannah Boyd to notice him the whole festival so far and he didn’t think he had made much progress on that account. Well today was a new day.

“Leonard, Leonard, earth to Leonard.” His ma had been talking to him and he hadn’t heard a word.

“Oh what ma, sorry I was thinking.”

His dad was laughing by this time, “your mother has been talking to you for quite a while son I think you were more then thinking. More like day dreaming, it wouldn’t be about a certain someone would it?”

Leonard Jr. was turning red in the face and both his parents realized that his dad had hit the nail on the head.

“Leonard don’t tease the boy so, you were once his age you know and were courting me.”

Then Alice turned to Leonard Jr. again. “Son I want to know what took you so long to get wood; you went

out the door right after your Grandfather.”

Leonard Jr. hadn't even had time to think about the little he had heard outside, “I didn't think I had taken long ma why?”

“I think your trying to pull the wool over my eyes son and I wasn't born yesterday you know.”

Joe had been keeping an ear on the conversation with his grandson son-in-law and his daughter. So the little imp thinks he can outsmart us, he turned in his chair by the small table and decided he best just take this to the head before any rumors got out.

“Leonard Jr., now son just what did you hear outside between Kris, me and Gilbert, I need to know because I don't want you repeating anything before we really know what's going on ourselves.”

The young Leonard just sat there with his mouth dropping open and a very shocked look on his face, he was trying to look innocent but hadn't succeeded.

“And don't look so shocked there is nothing you can do that I or your dad hasn't all ready done or thought of so there is no sense blustering about it to trying to deny it.”

With that being told him by his grandfather he hung his head, and they could barely hear him when he spoke.

“Stop mumbling son we can't hear you and get your head up, “his grandfather Joe told him.”

So Leonard Jr. spoke up, “I said I didn't hear very much by the time I got to where you were talking you were almost finished, all I know is there must be some kind of trouble brewing and they are going to step up guards and guard duty. I didn't mean to make any trouble grand dad and I wasn't going to tell anyone I promise.”

Joe looked around at his family who all looked concerned at this news.

“It's ok my boy no harm done, but I see I will have to tell the rest of you and have you wait until later to hear from Gilbert, Seth and Kris, we had planned on telling everyone just before today's activities started. Before any of you start talking about it to anyone else outside the immediate family. Gilbert tells us trouble

is at hand but as yet doesn't know just what kind, so we're all to be very observant the next few days. I have noticed myself even our guards have gotten lax in their duties, this will not do. So that's enough for now maybe we will know more later, remember not a word that you know something is amiss. Thank you for telling us the truth Leonard now don't think another thing of it and lets get ready for our day."

With that Leonard's dad ruffled the boy's hair and he and Leonard's mom went to finish their breakfast.

Young Leonard let out a sign of relief and went to get more breakfast for himself. Nearly got myself in a lot of trouble, he thought and that's when he noticed his younger brother Fairchild giggling as quietly as he could. Leonard Jr. let it go this time; he didn't want to take the chance of getting into any more trouble today.

* * *

Deep in the woods Taggart was getting himself some breakfast, he had two links of sausage stuck on a stick and hanging over the fire and a potato in the coals at the edge of it. He had eaten far more of his food last night before he realized it and would have to make his way back to the food storage shed at least by tomorrow. His stupid horse was making too much noise stomping the ground and snorting its eyes wide and wild. It dawned on Taggart he hadn't taken the horse to water yesterday and hadn't changed the horse's area so it had something to eat. Well neither had he until last night, what was good enough for him was good enough for the stupid horse. So the horse would just have to wait. Later with breakfast done Taggart decided he best water and find some forage for the horse. It was making even more noise now, he walked over and undid the tie on strap and the horse reared up and the reigns slipped from Taggart's hands. The horse's hooves pawing in the air Taggart ducked behind the tree, he heard the horse's hooves hit the tree and saw bark flying he ducked back again. By the time he looked around the tree the horse was running off into the woods to the left towards the creek. Taggart was scowling and mumbling to himself.

"Stupid horse now I'm gonna have to walk down through the woods and get it."

He grabbed his canteen thinking he might as well fill it back up while he was down there and began his descent into the woods. He just walked off left his food laying in an open leather satchel and his fire blazing. Taggart wasn't the smartest when it came to details like that, it's a wonder he hadn't had a visit yet from a nice unfriendly bear. As it was while Taggart was off after the horse that he did have visitors, raccoons.

Taggart was almost to the small creek when he heard a voice.

"Whoa there boy where did you come from?"

It was still early morning and Martin Green was on the last hour of his roving guard shift. He was on his way back to the ranch when he spotted the beautiful black horse at the creek.

“Well, well you still have a bridle on,” the horse shied a bit but liked the tone of the mans voice even if he did smell strange. Martin ran his hands down the horse from neck to rump. He noted a few fresh scars like from a strap or whip and frowned automatically. It also looked like the horse had been ridden hard and not fed well. The ribs stood out to much and its coat was dull.

While Taggart watched and listened he made his way behind the guard. Martin sniffed the air a rotten smell was in the wind. He began to turn and a knife caught him in the back. He grunted and while falling forward accidentally hit the horse, the horse took off. Taggart had a evil grin on his face until the horse sprinted off again. Taggart took off after the horse but was unable to catch him even after chasing him for almost an hour. Every time the horse would stop and bend down to eat some grass Taggart would run up to the horse but the horse would side step him and then be off all over again. Taggart finally trudged back to his camp and was still in the dark of the trees when he looked up at a noise, to find men from the ranch all over his camp. Now what was he going to do? All he had was what he carried on his person, the horse had taken off so fast he hadn't even taken the time to stop and get his knife out of the guards back; he figured he could always do that later. Now no horse, no knife, no gear and no food. He backed further into the trees and when he could take his eyes off the camp area turned and ran, trying to get as far as quickly as he could. He headed in the general direction of the ranch; he figured no one would suspect him of getting closer instead of further away. Plus that way he would be closer to where he could at least replace his food. Taggart hadn't bothered to think the men might have horses tied up close by and he might have been able to steal one.

* * *

Oscar Lightening Strike Wolf found the track of the horse and then the sloppy trail of a man headed in the same direction. It had looked like the horse had been tied to the same tree for quite some time. They had found the camp by the smoke of the camp fire, only someone very careless would leave a campfire unattended. And to top it off the camp had been rifled by raccoons who had scattered the gear everywhere and everything stank. They could tell from the equipment it must be a Hun.

“Hey Colt and Thomas over here, I found a trail,” Oscar gave a nod of his head in the direction of the trail as he began to follow it. Colt Forsyth and Thomas Brandt continued to watch carefully as they followed Oscar further into the trees, making sure they neither followed to close to Oscar or to one another. Oscar could tell the horses and man's trail were headed to the creek to the north of his camp. It was a well used creek used by the animal population and there were many game trails around it. Both Colt and Thomas had figured out by now to as to where they were headed. Oscar took a knee before he went out into the little clearing, he looked and listened carefully. He spotted a boot and scooted a little further around the tree, and then as he worked his way up from boots, pants and coat to the tattered Bronco's cap, he now knew who it was. It was Martin and he was slumped against a tree with his head down. He motioned for Colt and Thomas to come over to him.

“Look over to the right both of you.”

Colt gave a gasp, "Martin, its Martin." And he started to head over to him, Oscar grabbed Colt's coat.

"No Colt we're not going to rush out there, what if it's a trap? We'll get to him but we need to go around in behind him and make sure there is no one else here first. The three of them went stealthy around the trees, no one saw a thing. Oscar saw why Martin was off to the side of the tree, a large knife was embedded in his right lower shoulder.

"Crap," he said in a whisper. He waved from the right and the left and had Colt and Thomas join him and also went to their knees, when they got close he told them.

"There's no one else here guys, let's go get Martin."

All three stood up and made their way over to Martin, he didn't look very good and there was lots of blood down the back of his coat. Martin groaned at that moment.

Thomas gave a sigh, "Oh thank goodness at least he's still with us."

Oscar lifted Martin's chin, "Martin it's Oscar, how you doin bud? Who did this to you do you know?"

Colt and Thomas were now on each side of Martin but also looking around and keeping an eye open for trouble

Martin opened his eyes and tried to talk. He managed to get out, "didn't see, gasp, found a half starved horse first, gasp, then pain and blacked out. When I came to I, gasp, pulled myself over here. Then Martin passed out again.

Oscar was still looking at Martin and felt his neck, making sure he was still alive, "we need to get him back to the ranch pronto. I want you two to carry him back to the horses and get him back, I'm going to continue to follow the trail and see where our intruder went to. We don't need any more surprises like this. But when you get him back, you two get your butts back here with some more tracking help, all right?"

Both men told Oscar they would be back as soon as they could and then picked Martin up by each side in a fireman's carry and headed off to the horses. Oscar went over to the creek and found where Martin had dropped to the ground, there wasn't much blood because Martin's clothes had absorbed most of it. Oscar could see where the horse had muddied up the creek and then stepped over and went into the trees on the other side of it. He also saw a rather large set of mans foot prints going off into the direction.

So your horse got away from you did he, well let's see just how far you're going to chase him, or if you manage to catch him. Then Oscar disappeared into the forest.

Colt and Thomas got back to the horses and put Martin up on Oscars they kept Martin in the middle of them as they rode to keep him on the horse. The first line of guards heard a whistle; it was the trouble whistle coming from the trail to the north of the ranch. The next round of guards was then notified someone was coming in, in trouble. All three horses were allowed to pass, with just a brief talk of what was going on. No one wanted to keep them from getting help for Martin.

Even as the festival was going on the trouble alert was sounded and all games came to an abrupt halt, with all going to stations or back to their cabins and tents where they had sitters to look after the children and herd them to places of safety in bunkers. The children 5 to 6 and over pretty well knew where they were supposed to go. No one knew what to expect and even though the children had been trained through practices nothing had happened for real the last few years. Things went more or less smooth, the sitters started to get the young children to the bunkers immediately.

As Colt and Thomas rode in with Martin they were surrounded by the leaders and their best Doc Charlie Jones who was the best they had who had some medical training. He had gotten pretty good over the years and had been training apprentices. The medical books they gathered before the crap hit the fan had really come in handy for the years of fighting. He was now a pretty darn good doc if he could say so himself. The men lifted Martin off the horse in front of the ranch clinic and Charlie had them rush Martin inside. The knife had gone in about 4 inches, luckily whoever had thrown it hadn't been very good and it glanced somewhat off the shoulder blade and went in slanted between the shoulder blade and his spine. Martin had lost a lot of blood and would have to be watched carefully. In the mean time Colt and Thomas were filling the other men in on where they and Oscar had found Martin and what they had found. They had to get back with some trackers to help Oscar track the scum down that had knifed Martin and to top it off Oscar thought it was a Hun who had knifed Martin. That got an inhale and a few gasps from the men. Martin's parents Furlong and Annette Green came rushing by and into the clinic; they tried to push their way over to where

Martin was.

One of the nurses Doc trained, Gwen Bluet stopped them.

“Just a minute and Doc will come over to talk to you, so far as we can tell the guys got him here without any more harm being done. The knife went in about 4 inch’s, oh here comes Doc now.”

“Evening Furlong and Annette, sorry this has happened to your boy, but he has at least a 75 percent chance to recover. He will need around the clock care for a few days until he is out of the woods. We worry the most about infection as you well know. After that we will keep him here of course until he recovers enough to trust he isn’t gonna set himself back by doing something dumb.”

Annette looked over at her son who seemed to be sleeping, “don’t worry Doc we’ll help with his care.” She was about to say something else when their 2 daughters Delilah and Violet rushed up to their parents side. The girls 18 and 15 had tears running down their faces. The couple took the girls into their arms, Furlong told them their brother had a good chance of making it and that he was going to need their care for awhile.

“Oh pa I’ll be glad to help take turns caring for Martin,” Delilah chocked out.

Violet was shaking her head to the affirmative.

“Me to, I’ll help, I’ll do my chores and be over here anytime I’m needed.”

“Thanks girls we know you will be, we’ll get through this,” Furlong told them.

Doc clapped Furlong on the back and had the family come sit by Martins bed. Furlong looked up when the door shut hard. Kris was headed their way.

“How’s your boy Furlong? I needed to know before we headed out to hunt down whoever did this to him.”

Furlong looked Kris in the eye, “so far so good Kris, Doc gives him a 75 percent chance, so his chances are pretty good. And I’m going with you.”

Annette looked over at her husband, she knew there would be no changing his mind and there was nothing he could do for Martin sitting in here, his going and helping to stop who had done this might help someone else from being hurt or killed. She stood and pulled him to his feet; she got on her tip toes and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“I’ll go with you to the house to get your pack and rifle, girls you stay here with your brother I’ll be right back.”

Both Kris and Furlong watched Annette go out ahead of them.

“You’ve got a good woman there Furlong.”

“I know I do Kris I think all of our women are; even my girls didn’t say a word about me going. They know what the price could be to any of us here.”

With that Furlong and Kris parted as they went out the door, Furlong headed to get his gear and horse and Kris to get his.

Before Thomas left again he stepped back into the clinic, he wanted to see Delilah before he left and get another look in on Martin. He and Martin had grown up together spring. But things like this tend to show you that life can be full of surprises and life could be shorter than you thought it was going to be. He decided he would ask her as soon as they knew Martin was out of the woods. He slipped a small gold band from his right little finger. Delilah had turned and spotted him coming towards her, she rose from the chair. Violet followed her sister’s stare and saw Thomas was coming toward them and turned back around. Thomas stood in front of Delilah a few feet from Violet.

“We’re headed back out in a few minutes I wanted to see how Martin was doing and see you.”

Thomas was holding Delilah's left hand and looking into her soft brown eyes and as he talked he slipped the small gold band on her ring finger.

"This is just to remind you I love you and want you for my wife."

Delilah opened her mouth to talk and he quickly put his right index finger on her lips.

"No don't say anything yet I'll ask you properly when I get back from this."

Delilah laid her head on Thomas chest. "All right Tom I understand take care of your self and I'll be waiting."

Delilah stepped back and Thomas gave her a kiss on her forehead then turned and went back out to the other men. Everyone was mounting up when he reached them. Time to go and he mounted up and took his place with the rest of the men. Delilah stood at the door and watched the men ride off and didn't go back to her sister's side until her mom was walking up the stairs to the clinic, she to had watched her man ride off with a prayer on her lips.

So instead of just a few trackers 20 men and woman headed out. Before they left Kris, Seth and Joe had other parties of men, women and teens teamed up to keep watch and double the guards. Also small teams of 3 to 4 people started to scout the area around the ranch for sign of the Hun. No chances were to be taken; anything unusual would be investigated and reported. Everyone was being asked if they had seen or heard anything out of the normal recently. Millie Boyd thought about what her daughter Hannah had told her yesterday.

Cal Fairbanks, Barry Rice and Homer Wolf were put in charge; they were all 3 disappointed they had wanted to go out Hun hunting to. Millie found the 3 talking over more strategies on what could be done to tighten security in front of the main house.

"I need to interrupt your bull session men, I think we may have had an intruder and didn't know it. I was gonna go over to the root cellar shed and check it out myself today until all this happened. Now going over to it by myself doesn't seem like such a smart idea. First I don't know if this means anything but yesterday afternoon Hannah and the Rice twins came back from the root cellar to tell me there was an awful smell in

the cellar but they couldn't find a thing wrong or spoiled. So I am reporting it before I get some one to go with me and check it out."

Barry sat there for a few seconds and just as Cal was going to say something Barry spoke.

"An awful smell you say, what kind of awful smell?"

"I don't really know for sure, Hannah didn't really describe it, jus that they smelled it but couldn't find anything spoiled."

This time Cal asked, "Did they notice anything else or anyone around the building?"

"I have an idea, Homer said, send a runner for the 3 girls and we will ask them what else they noticed and then send in someone to check out the cellar."

Their runner was Hector Boyd, since it was the Fairbanks ranch Cal sent him off to find the girls. Millie told them Hannah was still at the house finishing her morning chores. Hector knew right where the twin's family was staying. He and the other boys around the age of the girls had been trying to get the girls attention for the last few months, especially during the festival. Hector took off in a run he knew his errand could be very important, he had heard the whole conversation and of course he could seem just a little more important to the girls. Within 10 minutes Hector had all 3 girls standing in front of the men and Millie. Barry began to question them since he had something running through his mind about the smell he had picked up yesterday morning.

"Girls we asked you here to ask some questions about that odor you smelled in the root cellar yesterday. Can any of you describe it?"

All three girls looked at each other and Hannah being the oldest spoke up first.

"Well I thought something had spoiled but now that I think about it didn't really, it was really bad but

seemed to fade the longer we were there, wouldn't you say girls." The other girls shook their heads yes.

"Now think girls did you notice anything or anyone around the cellar shed before or after you went in.?"

Both the Rice girls fidgeted and Betsy said, "No Cal not a thing but we were not really paying attention, we were kind of talking and thinking about something else when we were walking over."

Hannah spoke up again, "I did I saw someone going into the woods behind the cellar shed, we were just walking past the trees, I thought it was just a roving guard. It kind of looked like he had something around his neck. I just didn't pay very much attention. Then when we got into the cellar all I thought about was the bad smell, sorry."

Millie stepped over and wrapped her arms around her daughter and told her, "There was no way you knew he may have been an intruder honey, and you did report the smell when you girls got back. So at least someone knew about that."

Barry still wanted to know more, "Ok girls just what did the smell, smell like?"

He didn't want to talk about the smell he encountered; he didn't want to influence what they were going to say about it.

Hannah said, "Well at first I thought it was spoiled food but then I thought maybe a skunk got in, or something had managed to get in and die. But we didn't find anything like we said. She then looked at her mother Millie, "Oh mom I forgot to mark the ham and potatoes off the check list."

Her mother just nodded at her.

Beatrice who hadn't talked yet, she was on the quiet side, managed to add, "Yes what Hannah says, it was really bad like something died."

Then Beatrice turned red and hung her head.

“Thanks girls that was a big help, Millie would you have Debbie and maybe my wife Martha go with you to the cellar shed, and see if you can find anything missing.”

Cal looked into Millie’s eyes and knew he had made the right choices. Cal saw the look of worry on Barry’s face and knew something was up and so did Homer, it was written on Barry’s face like a book. They waited until Millie and the girls had left, only Hector stayed put in case he was needed.

Chapter 16

Short one Dh is home sick with a relapse of the flu and has been sick off and on for 2 weeks. Had grandkids for 3 days. Puts a crimp in writing.

Chapter 16

Barry was thinking, why I didn’t mention the smell as we rode in. I could just kick myself. But would anything of come of it if I had? People would have just thought the same thing I did. He looked over at the other men who were waiting for him to speak.

“What”

Homer just smiled and said, “We were just waiting until your wheels stopped turning and you decided to talk.”

Barry rolled his eyes, “Your such a smart alec Homer, a real card. All right I’ll spill what I was thinking about. It was yesterdays morning and we were just about here I was riding tail and I smelled this horrible smell, like something was dead or a really potent skunk, but hen it started to fade, so I didn’t think anything of it, but now I’m not so sure. I think we ought to ask around and see if anyone else has noticed a smell like that around the ranch. What do you two think?”

Cal and Homer’s answers were the same, “darn right we need to.”

So Hector was given orders to start asking around and have others ask so it made it all through the ranch and those that had come to the festival if any one had smelled a bad odor anytime yesterday or this morning. Not long afterward Leonard White, Tex Brandt and several teens showed up. All told their stories of the smell that had hit them, Tex in the woods, Leonard and the kids at the horseshoe pit the day before. Tex had to tell his tale quickly as he was headed out as a team of 3 to the north of the ranch. Leonard was also going out

but to the west. The kids were supposed to get ready for their events but there wasn't going to be any until the invader or invaders were found. They also were part of roving guard teams due to go out as relief for some of those out now.

In the mean time Millie, Debbie and Martha were in the root cellar taking stock. Millie picked up the check list and marker off the ham and 2- 25 pound sacks of potatoes. Each took a room and went through the checklists in them and checked all the contents against what was still supposed to be in there.

Debbie came out of the root vegetable bin room, "well there are a few potatoes missing only way I could tell is the sack was cut open."

Martha put in, "there are 4 jars of meat missing from this room."

Then Millie announced, "we're missing several links of sausage as far as I can tell 6 to be exact. I didn't find a thing spoiled did either of you?"

Both the other woman said they hadn't found anything spoiled either, so it was time to take their report back.

* * *

Taggart sat back on a rock in the woods he had been about to make his way to the food shed when the 3 women had come out of the trees and headed for the shed. He couldn't seem to catch the stupid horse and his camp had been found and he was hungry again. Not even his knife to help kill something; he was in a foul mood. Hopefully whatever the women were doing it wouldn't take long. He couldn't stay here to long, he had noticed more guards then there had been yesterday. It was still many hours before dark but he knew he would be better off and could easily stay out of sight then and get to the shed with no problem. Yeah that's what he would do wait for dark. Stay low and stay out of sight then make his way to the food, he told himself.

* * *

Gray was with the men heading to find and meet up with Oscar and see what he had found, he had mixed feelings when he heard it was a Hun's camp that had been found. Some didn't feel real comfortable with Gary here, they didn't know if he would turn on them and try to help the Hun when they caught up with him or them. They looked to Gilbert for information when it concerned Gray, Gilbert didn't seem to have a problem with it so they would try not to also.

Gray did wonder what the other men thought; if may be he caused an itch at the back of their necks. After all just because he had declared himself didn't mean he was really committed to this new life. He could just see the wheels turning in their brains. Before he knew it they were dismounting at the edge of the tore up camp.

Thomas told them they hadn't looked at everything real close after Oscar had found the trail the horse and man had taken and then they found Martin.

Every one scattered and looked closer, Gray went to the tore up pack, and it was Hun alright. Someone else found the empty jars of meat in the bushes and knew instantly whoever it was had been in the cellar on the ranch. A few gathered around George Burning Fire Wolf.

"That's canned meat from the ranch," said Sue Sweet grass Wolf.

John Boyd took a jar from George, "It sure is Sue and that's Debbie's handwriting, we need someone to hightail it back to the ranch and let them know the ranch was invaded and someone is lurking around. George was picked to get back to the ranch and alert them all about the root cellar having been found by the Hun. George took his assignment seriously; he knew lives may be on the line. It only took him 10 minutes to get back to the ranch, his horse was winded and he left him at a water trough. Others came running as they saw Gorge ride in at such a fast pace, thinking maybe someone else had been hurt or they had caught the would be killer already. Cal was beside George in a flash.

"What's wrong George, why are you back here so soon?"

"I was sent back to warn you, that Hun has been in your root cellar, we found empty jars of meat at his camp. We had fund some one had been in there, Millie Debbie and Martha did an inventory and found canned meats and sausages gone. We just weren't real sure of who took the stuff; we had an idea because of the smell the girls reported after he had been in there yesterday but went for certain. We started asking around the ranch and who ever this Hun is he stinks to high heaven and if the wind is right you know he is around. Let the others on the hunt know that ok, and thanks for coming in to tell us incase we hadn't found out George, good hunting.

"Thanks Cal I'll tell them."

With that George climbed back on his horse and headed back to the Hun's deserted camp to catch up with the other hunters and give them the good news that the ranch knew the Hun was around.

* * *

Rose was in her room she had changed out of her fancy white leather clothing and into her every day buckskins when she heard the news this morning. Her mind was racing; Alan had gone off with the other trackers, and it was really funny to see Gray among the trackers, she didn't know how she felt about that. Was he really serious about being a Wolf, well it looked like it. I am not going to sit in here and be afraid; no one's going to make me do that.

She strapped her belt with her bowie knife around her waist and an extra knife down the side of her knee high moccasin boots. She was determined to go out with the other guards around the ranch and do her part. On the way out the door she quickly strung her bow, slung her quiver of arrows around her shoulder, then did the same with her bow and headed down the stairs. Debbie her mom was just coming back into the house from reporting what they had found in the root cellar and conferring with the men left in charge as Rose go to the bottom of the staircase.

“Rose, where are you going honey?”

“Out to help mom, I can’t sit by and let others do all the work, maybe I can help find who ever knifed Martin.”

“We found out who did it Rose, and he was also in the root cellar, it was Hun, we think just one as far as we can tell so far.”

The news came as a shock to Rose and at first she couldn’t find the words.

“A Hun, you sure mom?”

“Yes we’re sure, and he was watching us yesterday, we found he stinks and at different times during the games and in the woods yesterday people had smelled him when the wind was blowing right, and another thing he raided the root cellar to. Hannah and the twins were sent to collect some things and Hannah saw his back as he was headed into the woods and when they got into the shed it stunk and so did the root cellar, she reported it to her mom and today we added two and two together. Then George came riding in a few minutes ago to tell us empty jars were found from here in the Hun’s camp. So that’s who their tracking.”

I’m gonna help anyway mom, I don’t care who is out there.”

And with that out the door she went. The first person she ran no was her brother Cal.

“Cal I want to know where you can use me, I am ready to go out on patrol if need be.”

Cal was surprised he didn’t think after her experience this past summer she would shy away from things like this. He guessed she had more gumption then even he thought. He thought for a few seconds.

“Rose that’s good to hear lets go find Barry and Homer I think I know just where you’ll be needed the most.”

They found Homer and Barry over by the milking barn where some of the people had gathered that they were sending off on different patrols.

“Hey everyone,” Cal nodded at all those gathered, “Homer and Barry could I talk to you for a few seconds.”

Homer and Barry took the few steps over to where Cal and Rose stood.

Both had questioning looks on their faces. Cal had an idea and he wanted to run it by them both.

“I have an idea and wanted to see what you both thought about it.”

“Ok,” Barry said, “go ahead and spill it, we need to get these people going on their assignments soon.”

“I was thinking we should go ahead and stake out the food cellar, hopefully it’s not too late to do so. But not with anyone to close on the ground, I was thinking of sitting someone in a tree so they can see the shed but not be seen very easily from any where on the ground unless you really knew where to look. And if he shows up to steal more food to have a signal relayed to let us know.”

“Um, sounds good to me how about you Barry, what do you think?”

Was what came from of Homer.

“Sounds good to me to Cal, I say go for it, we’ll ask for some volunteers.”

“I already have one right here, Rose and then we need one more that she can signal to and get help to head out and capture or kill our Hun.”

They stepped over to the rest of the people who were waiting for their assignments.

Cal spoke up, “we need a volunteer to keep an eye on Rose when she signals from a tree, were going to have her keep hidden and wait and see if the Hun shows up to get what he thinks is easy pickens for food we’ll have him.”

Rose didn’t know if she was going to like just sitting around in a tree, but she had said she would help where they needed her, next time she needed to be a little more exact in her request. Cal pulled his red handkerchief out of his back right pocket and handed it to Rose.

“Here you go Rose if you spot the Hun around the food shed wave this behind you, its ok I put in my pocket clean this morning.”

Rose smiled and giggled a little, “well all right then,” and took the hanky from her brother and stuffed it in the waist of her pants.

Cal looked at the people waiting for their assignments, “who will volunteer to be Rose’s contact and another for here at the ranch?” All hands went up at once.

“He laughed, “That’s good folks thanks a lot but just two will be enough.”

Cal, Homer and Barry talked for a couple of minutes about who would be the best for what may be a long wait through the day. Cal’s eyes fell on Ollie Johnson, Ollie didn’t need to be off in the woods after this Hun he was still raising his 12 year old son Carter. Ollie’s wife had been killed in one of the raids on the ranch 6 years ago.

He told the other two, “Ollie would do just fine. Ollie you’re the one, you stay back where you can see Rose signal then we will have you signal someone else. That’s gonna be you and Ruth Wolf you’re his contact. Now to give the rest of you your assignments.”

As the rest were told where they would be assigned Rose, Ollie and Ruth worked out the signals and hoped it wouldn’t take all day. Rose would take 4 hours in the tree, and then Ruth then back to Rose again. Ollie wasn’t the best of tree climbers anymore he wasn’t old by any sight but he was 37 years old and had a bad leg from beings injured in the same raid his wife had been killed in.

“Well I best get up that tree, do you have hanky Ollie?”

“Yes Rose its blue but I think it will do, that will won’t it Ruth, you will be able to see it all right wont you?”

“Yeah Ollie I should be able to see it just fine and good luck Rose.”

So Rose went up a tree to make sure she could see all around the food shed and found she would have to change trees. She settled in the next tree and looked through the leaves to see if she could see Ollie she couldn’t, she shook the hanky. Ollie stepped out just so she could see where he was and he gave a thumb’s up and then stepped back into the brush. He could barely see Rose through the branches but he would be able to see her wave the hanky with no problem. He made sure Ruth could see him wave his also, now they were all set and the wait was on.

Chapter 17

Eleven year old Dorcus was sitting on the stairs of the basement under the main house twirling her long hair in the fingers of her right hand. She was watching the adults settle the little ones down. There were two ways down into the basement and she had come down the outside storm cellar doors, she could see others herding children down the inside stairs from the house kitchen pantry. There was a hidden door at the back of the pantry by way of a moving shelf that had to be unlatched to find the stairway. The bar hadn't been put across the storm cellar doors yet but soon would be where she sat. Dorcus's eyes lit, you could tell she had just thought of something, she looked around to make sure no one was looking her way and slowly inched her way backwards back up the stairs. Soon she was sitting with her back to the slanted doors and pushed with her back until one of the doors slowly opened. She quietly stood up and stepped up on the other door and closed the trapdoor, she slipped out of quickly. She was one of the helpers being an older one but they didn't need her until the younger kids were all quieted, the younger children didn't always listen to Dorcus because of her size. Who wants to listen to someone who is the same size as you are?

Dorcus looked around her she only saw a couple of people at the moment no one had noticed her. They were to busy going their own way. She made her way to her family cabin; she just knew Brownie had slipped out of her collar.

Brownie was an 8 month old part Labrador and part German shepherd, but she had ended up more brown then black hence her name. Dorcus began to look for her dog; she didn't want to call her, because she knew she would be noticed then and be sent back to the cellar. Now where would Brownie have gone? Think Dorcus think she told herself.

* * *

Taggart found himself just a few feet from the last line of trees before the clearing and the shed's, one being where he wanted most, where the food was. So far so good he thought; there doesn't seem to be anyone around. He had noticed as he made his way here that there seemed to be more patrols than yesterday. He had to avoid 2 patrols on his way here just the last half mile making his way around the perimeter of the ranch. He made his way to where he was behind the right shed and stepped over to the last tree.

Rose had a good angle of sight on the food shed but couldn't see around the back and part of the right side. She rubbed her eyes form time to time as she strained to keep and eagle eye on it and the surrounding bushes and trees. She slipped a piece of jerky out of her pouch she had tied at her waist and began to tear off small bites and chew very slowly, trying to soften it at the same time. She had been in the tree for 3 hours now and it wasn't getting any softer, she wished whoever the scumbag was he would get here and they could get this over with. At that moment she heard a faint barking coming from the woods behind the food shed. She thought; there's only one reason for a ranch dog to be barking, someone was here that didn't belong here.

Rose wasn't the only one to hear the barking, in fact Taggart turned to find a rather large brown dog not 10 feet from him. It was no longer barking it had its nose all snarled up and was growling at him. Taggart had his small knife left in his belt, he slowly drew it out.

Meanwhile Ollie had heard the bark to, he looked up into the branches of the tree and saw Rose wave the hanky one time. She didn't go all out in waving it so he bet she knew there was something up but hadn't seem there prey. He slowly made his way out of the bushes and moved toward Rose's tree. When he got to the base of the tree he looked up into the face of Rose who was hanging partway down from the large branch she had been sitting on.

"I don't see anyone yet Ollie but the dog had to be barking at someone, what do you think?"

"I would say the same thing Rose, that's pretty fishy, I'm gonna go ahead and make my way around and see if I can spot anyone, you ought to stay in the tree and keep an eye on things just in case. But first I best tell Ruth what I'm gonna do. First I will get Ruth to take my place."

He hadn't wanted to wave his hanky and have Ruth go running back to the ranch to get help, so he went to her and told her what was up and just what he was going to do. He wanted her to go to his spot in the bush and keep an eye on Rose. So Ruth took up his post in the bush and he pointed Rose out to her and she wished him safety and off he went. So Ollie began the slow and tedious trip around further in the woods to the back of the food shed.

* * *

Taggart was sliding up towards the stupid dog and as he got a bit closer to it, the dog backed up. So it wasn't going to attack him it seemed but stand there snarling and drawing attention to his location, this wouldn't do at all. He either had to scare it off or kill it. He thought about being able to throw the small 4 inch blade but didn't think he could kill it that way, just wound it and have it make even more noise yelping when hurt. He looked down around his feet for a rock to throw at it; maybe he could just scare it away. The longer he stood here the better the chance of getting seen. Taggart was getting frustrated and mad at his dilemma.

* * *

The men hunting the Hun had followed Oscar's sign and the Hun's tracks and yes the tracks were headed for the ranch, a round about way but still headed that way. Oscar was close now to the man he hunted he could feel it. As it was he knew the ranch wasn't far from him either.

* * *

Taggart decided he would throw his small knife at the stupid dog maybe he would get lucky and kill it right off, he slide his knife out of its scabbard with his right hand and gripped the handle to throw it when he heard a twig snap to his left. He slide his eyes left and spotted a man just coming from behind a tree. He turned quickly and threw the knife catching Ollie in the left side of his neck. Ollie's hands went to his neck and the knife as blood spurted between his fingers, all he could think of was *oh my poor boy*, and then he crumpled to the ground.

Taggart was surprised he hadn't really intended to hit the man in the neck he was sort of aiming for the guys chest. But who cares the knife took care of him and this time he wasn't going to leave even the small knife behind. Meanwhile the stupid brown dog was now barking. Oscar heard a dog barking through the trees and so did Rose sitting in her tree and she hadn't seen anything of Ollie and she was worried. Taggart picked up a rock and threw it at the dog, the rock missed. At least the dog was back to just snarling again and that wouldn't be heard to far. Taggart ran up to the dog quickly and kicked it in its side before it could get to far from him, Taggart knew with all this noise he best get out of here as soon as possible. The dog yelped loudly, loud enough for Oscar to hurry his steps and for Rose to climb down out of the tree. She waved her hanky first and Ruth ran up to the tree. When Rose got down she told Ruth to head for the ranch for some help because there was certainly something going on in the woods.

Ruth turned and hi-tailed it back to the ranch and Rose started to make her way towards the woods in about the same place Ollie had. All of a sudden Oscar stepped out in front of Rose as she silently made her way around the food shed. Rose inhaled deeply startled out of her wits, Oscar quickly slid his hand across Rose's mouth incase she was tempted to scream, he knew he has surprised her. Rose looked into Oscar's eyes and realized who it was; he took his hand away from her mouth.

"Gads Oscar what are you trying to do to me, she whispered, give me a heart attack?"

Oscar looked a little sheepish and whispered back, "sorry Rose but I am sure that scumbag is close and I didn't want to take the chance on scaring him off."

Rose gave a nod but Oscar saw she was still miffed by the look on her face.

Right then they both heard the dog yelp even louder and they both ran to where they thought it had come from. They found Brownie, Dorcus's pup lying on the ground whining and trying to get up. Rose and Oscar quickly looked around they needed to find Oscar looked at rose and nodded his head off to the left, she nodded back and knelt down to see how bad the pup was hurt while Oscar continued through the trees. It looked like the dog may have a couple broken rib and his right front leg was broken. She hated to leave the poor dog but she had to, the dog would most likely live Ollie didn't and who ever met up with the Hun next might not either.

The rest of the search party wasn't far behind Oscar and Rose, they had just barely heard a dog yelp and headed in that direction fanning out at the same time to see if they could surround the area and head off the fleeing Hun. They figured it had to have been him, at least they hoped so. Gray took the far left and continued veering left and around.

* * *

Taggart was heading through the woods as quickly and silently as he could, he knew someone had to have heard that stupid dog squeal. He had kicked it twice to get it to shut up and it only made it holler louder. He was just rounding a large pine when he was run into. "Oaf" and a little girl went down on her behind, she

looked up and let out a scream and tried to rise and scamper away at the same time. Taggart reached over and grabbed her by her long hair.

“Let me go,” she demanded.

“Well, well what do we have here, got myself a minnow. You just might just come in handy for something. If nothing else I needed a slave and I’ll think of another thing or two you might be good for. Dorcus decided she best keep her mouth shut there was no sense in making this smelly man angry and no way was she gonna tell him how old she really was, the younger he thought she was the better. He picked her up easily and held her under his left arm. Dorcus thought she was gonna throw up this man smelled like rotten meat. She heard a dog yelp a little while ago and wondered if he had done something to her Brownie, she sure hoped Brownie was going to be alright. It was hard for Dorcus to see where they were going but she was trying anyway, when she looked to the left she saw someone coming past the trees there. Her heart surged with hope.

Oscar and Rose broke through the trees in two different places in time to see the Hun with Dorcus under his left arm. Well at least now they knew who had screamed. Oscar was ahead of Rose and coming at a different angle and Taggart saw him out of the corner of his eye and spun around and put his knife to Dorcus’s throat, Taggart slowly turned the girl so he was holding her in front of him with the top of her head by his throat. He slowly began to back up towards a large ponderosa pine. He wanted the tree at his back so no one could sneak up behind him and just maybe he could slip behind and keep going. If he could keep enough room between himself and them he just might be able to get away. These soft people wouldn’t want to take the chance on him killing this child of theirs he was sure of that, so all the better to help him get away. By now he was sidling around the right of the pine tree and was about to turn and run for it. That’s when he felt the tip of cold steel just below his right ear and someone was whispering in his ear.

“Drop the girl.”

Taggart was shocked, how could this happen? There were only 2 people and one was that little witch that had cut him and got away. He hadn’t heard or seen any others. He felt the knife bite deeper while his mind seemed to be in a fog of indecision.

“I said drop her, now,” came the whisper again in his ear. And the knife slid deeper. Taggart dropped Dorcus and she scampered away and flew into Rose’s out stretched arms.

Gray spoke out loud for the first time.

“You’ve gotten yourself in a fine mess haven’t you Taggart?”

Taggart being surprised at the sound of Gray’s voice was putting it mildly. *It couldn’t be he’s dead.* He sucked in his breath and quickly turned and came face to face with Gray. Gray’s 10 inch knife blade ran a line of red around to the front of Taggart’s neck. Malicious hate filled Taggart and the snarl of an animal came from Taggart’s throat. All the searchers were now standing not far away and heard the snarl of hate. Taggart snarled and screamed his rage and tried to leap on Gray. Gray reacted quickly and shoved his knife up and through Taggart’s chin and on up through his mouth and on. Taggart stopped and his eyes grew wide and dropped like a rock to the ground. Gray then finished the job by slicing his knife deeply across Taggart’s throat cutting the artery. Gray cleaned his knife off on Taggart’s filthy clothes and stuck it back in his scabbard. That’s when Gray noticed the arrow in Taggart’s back. Gray looked up and everyone was looking at him and then at Rose, who stood there with Dorcus standing beside her and he bow in her hands.

“What, what’s the problem?” Gray asked.

That seemed to break the spell and everyone started to move towards him. Kris was the first to speak up.

“Good job you two, but we did kinda want to make sure that he was the only Hun around.”

“It was just him Kris, I don’t know why he was left behind but he was always a trouble maker even with the tribe,” Gray told them.

Oscar barged in with, “not me I would have done the same thing, only right away. Gray gave him too much time to live as far as I was concerned.”

Kris looked at his daughter, “and you Rose?”

“That scum ball killed Ollie dad.”

That brought a groan from the whole group.

“Not Ollie gads poor Carter well we’ll take the boy in with us, I just hate to have to break this to him,” Kris said with a catch in his voice. “Now who’s gonna volunteer to drag this piece of dirt over to the nearest gully, he doesn’t deserve a descent burial. Oscar would you grab someone else and bring Ollie home you know where he is.”

Oscar gave a nod of his head and grabbed one of the young men and made their way back right to go get Ollie.

Two “here’s” were heard as Thomas and Homer stepped forward and continued to where the body lay and Gray still stood. The both grabbed an arm and began to drag Taggart’s body off through the woods. The group still began to make their way back to the ranch, the rank smell of Taggart still in the air.

Kris noticed both Rose and Gray looking in each others eyes before they each turned toward home. Well that’s interesting, he thought.

Dorcus was walking beside Rose and looked up and asked, “Aunt Rose was that Brownie I heard scream?”

“Oh gosh Brownie” exclaimed Rose, “yes Dorcus that was Brownie. She is hurt and over by Ollie. Dad Dorcus and I are headed behind Oscar to go get Brownie.”

So Rose and Dorcus veered off and Kris asked George Burning Fire Wolf to go with them.

“You got it Kris, replied George.

And he to veered off to follow Rose and Dorcus. Kris saw Gray watching Rose walk off into the trees. Nothing like attraction to help a man change his ways, at least it doesn’t hurt. Now to find Carter and tell him about his dad, first his mom now Ollie, I don’t relish this one bit. This scum cost us a good man and I hope Martin makes it so it doesn’t become two.

As the men made their way back to the ranch they all thought of Ollie and his great sense of humor he sure would be missed. And in their hearts they trusted this ex Hun just a little more.

Rose arrived just a few minutes behind Oscar and Mark Brandt. Rose noticed poor little Brownie had crawled over to Ollie's body. Little Dorcus burst out crying and ran to her dog but most of her tears were for Carter, tears found tracks down Rose's cheeks. Oscar and Mark were looking down at Brownie lying beside Ollie and been unable to bring themselves to move the dog away.

"We'll get Brownie guys and you can get Ollie," then Rose picked up Brownie as best she could. The dog yelped and whined some but quieted down as they began their walk back to the ranch, the men behind them with the body of Ollie in their arms as they walked side by side.

Chapter 18

The families stood at the grave site singing How Great Thou Art, young Carter Ollie's son stood beside Kris. He would be 10 years old next month; all he could think of is how much he was going to miss his pa. The only reason he remembered his mom's face was the picture of her and his dad sitting on the fireplace mantel in the main room of their cabin. Now it sat on his bedroom dresser in the main house. All his dad's personal things were stored away for when Carter could use them; all he kept out was 22 rifle, the 30.06 and one colt with holster and of course the ammunition for them. The small cabin would house someone else soon, most likely a newly married couple.

Carter looked up at Kris as he began to talk about Carter's dad, he hadn't realize his dad meant so much to Kris and every one else. It just wasn't something a 9 year old thought about, but he would now. He would carry most of the words Kris said about his dad for the rest of his life. Kris bent down when he was finished speaking and looked into Carter's eyes.

"Carter it's time to say goodbye, take a hand full of dirt and sprinkle it into the grave and tell your dad goodbye for now."

Carter was still in a bit of shock, but he knew just what he was supposed to do from watching other funerals here on the ranch. He walked over to the pile of dirt and got a big handful, walking only a couple feet away to the grave he began to say his goodbyes.

Everyone in turn did the same with Kris being last, "Till we meet on the other side Ollie keep a place open for the rest of us, we'll miss you and that weird sense of humor that kept us in stitches, adios blood brother. Everyone headed up to the yard for lunch and to reminisce on the family already passed into eternity.

Rose and Alan were sitting side by side when Gray walked up and stood behind Rose. He stood there debating with himself. Her mom and dad, Kris and Debbie along with more of the family sat at the long table on the other side watching but trying not to watch. Everyone on Rose's side of the table was busy doing the same. All were trying not to glance over at Gray to much. Rose knew some one was standing behind her but didn't know who. Then finally he spoke up.

"Um Rose could I please have a word with you in private?"

Rose turned in surprise Gray hadn't made any attempt to talk to her since he came with the Wolf clan. She still didn't know how she would react alone with him, everyone else kind of held their breath. They didn't

know if she would explode at him or what. She looked up at Gray though for what seemed like forever and then said.

“I will if we don’t go far, I am not sure I am ready to trust you yet.”

Everyone let their breath out and smiled at each other, then quickly went straight faced.

“That’s fair Rose,” Gray looked around and no one was on the stairs leading to the back porch about 25 feet away.

“How about over there by the stairs?”

Rose looked to the right and agreed the stairs would be fine. She had been finished eating anyway so she brought her right knee up and over the bench and after standing led the way over to the house.

“Ok Gray I’m here now what do you want?”

“Do you want to sit down Rose?”

“No I don’t want to sit; you can tell me what you have to say with me standing, now what is it?”

Needless to say she wasn’t being the nicest in the world. She had finally gotten to the point she wasn’t having nightmares about her time with the tribe.

“I know I deserve your wrath Rose, I didn’t understand before, it’s the way I was raised. I can honestly say I didn’t know any better. But I do now and I have come to apologize if you can find it in you to forgive my actions when you were a captive? I am doing everything I can to learn a new way of life because I see this one you all here on the ranches is so much better for everybody, men and women alike and I find I like it. No ones better then anyone else, no slaves no masters and everyone teaches and in turn learns; I haven’t seen anyone go hungry. So please Rose will you’re at least think about forgiving me?”

Rose just stood and looked into Gray’s eyes and she could see sincerity in them and if he was truthful about this it would be a real relief, there had always been a small fear that he was just bidding his time until he could slip away and get back to his people. Well he could have slipped away when e was out with the search party but he didn’t. He stopped the scum form harming Dorcus or taking off with her.

“Alright Gray say I believe you but it I will still have to think about the forgiving part.”

“That’s all I ask Rose and thank you that means a lot to me. If there is anything I can do to further make you believe me I willing to do it.”

“I can’t think of anything that will prove your being truthful with me and the family Gray, but I know time will tell. By the way you knew that Hun what was he to you and why did he growl at you, he sounded like he hated you?”

“Yes I knew him, he was my oldest half brother, he hated me my whole life even before we were the tribe. Even before I was born his mother seeded hate into his heart. He never ceased trying to hurt me in one way or another. I don’t know how he got left behind but it wasn’t to thwart me because he thought I was dead. Knowing Taggart he got himself shunned or something.”

Finding out the Hun was Gray’s half brother shocked Rose for a bit until Gray continued to explain just who and what Taggart the scumbag was.

“So you don’t think he was a scout left behind to find out where I got off to?”

“No I don’t Taggart would never go out scouting anyway that would have been work as far as he was concerned. No he had to have been left behind on purpose for another reason and they didn’t care what happened to him. I was told the tribe moved out of the valley in one day quickly, so they weren’t worried about finding you or there would have been hunters out. No the tribe left him alright so I don’t think the family has to worry about the tribe any time soon, that should be some relief I hope?”

“Yes Gray its thank you and I will think about what you told me.”

And with that she turned and went back to the table and got her plate and other things. Alan asked her what all that was about and she told him she would tell him later. The rest of the family figured they would find out sooner or later to, but were still more then curious about Rose’s and Gray’s talk.

After the luncheon the families broke up and went back to their ranch’s this fall festival hadn’t turned out quite like they all thought it would. The goodbyes this year were solemn. Carter went to his new room that night and cried himself to sleep as he would do for a few nights. One thing Kris gave the young man a little more work when he wasn’t being home schooled and made him another young apprentice to Fred Boone

never hurt to have more backups and maybe the boy would take a liking to the things Fred was teaching

Rose lay in her bed for a few nights wide awake thinking on what Gray had asked her. He had stayed even when he could have gotten away but if he knew that Hun hated him maybe killing him wasn't all to protect Dorcus and the family. But maybe she was just thinking about it too much. Time would tell and at least he wasn't where she had to be around him everyday. It was time to stop losing so much sleep over it; she had to get on with life. But Gray still had the most beautiful eyes, and that was her last thought as drifted off to sleep.

Gray in turn now back in his own bed at the Wolf Ranch was tossing and turning; he just couldn't get Rose's face out of his mind. The quilt he felt now not only for her capture and near death at the tribe's hands. But all the other slaves he had helped take from their families these last few years as he became old enough to go on the raids. They were now like ghosts haunting his dreams. He spent many nights running after and apologizing to the people in his dreams. He would have to spend his life knowing there was no way to make it up to those people. All he could do is live a better life and help others now that he knew there was a better way. At least he knew of one Hun that was dead and gone and unable to torture anybody else.

Alan was another one that did some tossing and turning but his dreams were about losing Rose to Gray, some how she would be standing beside him looking up into his eyes and then he would fall and Gray would step into his place beside her. Her smile for Gray just as pleasing as for himself Alan. Alan still didn't understand why Gray had been accepted by all the leaders it was like they knew something no one else did and he just couldn't put his finger on what. But it was time to ask Rose to marry him, he needed to just step up and do it at the next best chance.

Gilbert Dreaming man Wolf was laying in bed smiling with his hands behind his head, his wife looked over at him.

"I see you're smiling like a Cheshire cat Gilbert, you must have solved the problem you had with your vision?"

"Yes it all resolved itself nicely and I don't feel any apprehension, everything's alright for now. And I sure hope things just stay calm for a while, we could all use some down time."

Odessa Light Eyes snuggled into Gilbert's side so happy he was home safe again. She had hoped and prayed so many times that they were safe finally but it looked like they were never going to be truly safe again. *Well deal with it Odessa and stop being such a wuss, we knew this was coming and what it would mean for our lives.* But to Gilbert she said, "Goodnight Gilbert I love you."

"Night Odessa I love you to, sweet dreams hon."

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