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Night Hawk's Bride

Jillian Hart



Vintage Historical

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Night Hawk's Bride

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Hart J.

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The Forbidden Love Of Marie Lafayette...In a land ravaged by war and prejudice, Marie Lafayette met a man who became her destiny. Night Hawk was tender and courageous, and never asked her to defy the unspoken laws of her people. But as darkness fell, and their passions grew, Marie could only follow the demands of her body and soul! When Marie's angry father confronted the lovers, Marie fled, believing it was Night Hawk's wish. But Marie Lafayette carried the secret child of a man she couldn't forget, a man whose heart beckoned her return. Would Marie brave her father's wrath and fight for her love for Night Hawk...?

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Marie froze as a shadow rose from the darkness.

Night Hawk.

Savior of women and children, and wild-horse tamer. How could he be real? He had to be a dream, a figment of her imagination, her idea of a perfect man.

Except she was wide awake, and this was no dream. She could smell the straw and horse scent of the stable. She could see the flicker of light on the man's hands as he inspected the gelding's fetlock, feel the wind rustling her skirts.

And hear the beat of her own heart.

He stood—all flesh and blood man—and his gaze pierced through the shadows and pinpointed her. “Miss Lafayette. What are you doing out of your father's house?”

“I didn't make a sound.”

“Your skirts did.” The light flickered over him, worshipping high, sharp cheekbones, a well-proportioned nose and a hard, carved jaw.

Something within Marie's heart clicked. Just like that. As a lock finding its key at the right moment.

Could he be the one? The man she'd been waiting for all her life?

Praise for Jillian Hart's previous titles

Malcolm's Honor

"...a quick read with plenty of...treachery and passion."

—Romantic Times Magazine

Cooper's Wife

"Well-crafted and poignantly funny...this is a feel-good story for both veterans and newcomers to the genre."

—Romantic Times Magazine

Last Chance Bride

"The warm and gentle humanity of Last Chance Bride is a welcome dose of sunshine after a long winter."

—Romantic Times Magazine

Night Hawk's Bride

Harlequin Historical #558

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Chapter One

Fort Tye, Wisconsin
1840

The fort loomed like a fairy tale against the sparkling river and wild Wisconsin forest. Marie couldn't believe her eyes. Was this real? Was this truly where she was going to live?

She leaned out the open window of the stagecoach. Amid the rich green backdrop of the forest, the fort shone like newly polished wood in the hot summer sun. It was an impenetrable fortress like the castles of old. And it was her future.

"Welcome to Fort Tye, Miss Lafayette," Mrs. Webster said over the noise of the rattling stagecoach. "And stop leaning out of that window. Who would teach the children if something happened to you? Your father would have my head. Come in, now."

"I don't want to miss one single thing."

She felt as if a whole new world had been spread before her, and she was near to bursting with the wonder of it all. The beauty alone fascinated her. It was so different from back home with its tidy streets and tended houses all in a row.

This was a wild land untamed and filled with the possibility of adventure around every turn.

"Calm yourself, dear." Mrs. Webster, seated across from her, chuckled. "It's just a fort, nothing special at all and, believe me, after one Wisconsin winter, you'll be desperate to head back to your aunt's pretty little home."

Mrs. Webster didn't understand, and Marie knew she couldn't tell her why. She didn't want to speak of the pain of her childhood and of the father's love she'd always ached for. A love that seemed just out of her reach.

How did she say that here in this beautiful, wild land, she would live with her father again. Maybe this time she could make things right between them. Marie crossed her fingers and held the wish close to her heart.

"My Jeb works for your father, the colonel," Mrs. Webster continued from inside the stage. "Dear, you'll hurt yourself. Please, come inside. You're giving me a fright."

A sharp cry carried on the wind, and Marie tilted her head up. A hawk soared across a powder blue sky, wings spread as if to touch the brilliant sun.

"Have you ever seen anything like it?" Marie asked.

"Why, I must have seen a thousand of them."

The graceful bird glided on broad wings and out of sight.

The stage rolled around a corner, and a broad river sparkled with the sun's touch. A few houses and buildings huddled together near its grassy banks.

This is the settlement? It was smaller than she'd imagined. And beyond the huddle of buildings stretched a maze of thick woodland and danger. She felt a strange thrill looking into the shadows of the forest....

The stage bounced hard. Marie rapped the top of her head against the window frame. She rubbed her hand over the sore spot and didn't look away from that shadowed place in the forest. She felt as if there was something—someone—looking back at her.

The shadow moved, and darkness became a mounted man. Black hair, black eyes and bronze skin. He was as dark as the shadows. Dressed in trousers and a deerskin shirt, he looked as wild and proud as the horse he rode.

The stage jolted to a stop outside the fort's gates, and Marie almost slipped off her seat. She righted herself and turned toward the window.

He was gone. Only shadows carpeted the forest floor where no sunlight touched the thick ferns and bracken.

Had he been real or a dream?

Marie kept searching for him as she smoothed the wrinkles from her skirt.

"You take care now, dear, and give my regards to your father." Mrs. Webster hesitated at the door. "I hope Fort Tye is everything you've hoped it to be."

"I hope so." All her life she'd imagined accompanying her father to one of his posts, and now it was truly happening. Marie grabbed her reticule from the seat and took one last look out the window. The man—image, shadow or dream—was gone.

There goes your romantic fancy again. Marie sighed. She was always daydreaming, something her father frowned on.

Please, let him be glad to see me. She knew he'd be here to greet her—he'd promised her in his last, brief letter. Nerves gathered in her stomach and made her hands clammy beneath her gloves as she grabbed the edge of the door frame and climbed onto the narrow step.

Where was he? She searched the strange faces of the people bustling around the entrance to the fort. Where was Papa? This time he'd promised to meet her. And she wanted to believe this time was different than all the other times he'd forgotten or been too busy.

The sinking sensation in her heart felt as heavy as lead. Careful to keep her chin up, she hopped off the last step and touched solid ground.

Maybe he was late. Or she hadn't seen him yet in the small crowd. The stage was a few minutes early....

She stood alone, feeling like the stranger she was. Everywhere she looked people greeted one another, stopping outside the wooden steps to the mercantile to exchange news. Everything looked so different from home and she felt lost. Surely Papa hadn't forgotten her this time.

"Miss Lafayette?" A uniformed soldier broke apart from the crowd. "Your father, the colonel, sends his apologies. A situation arose—"

"I understand." Marie tried to steel her heart against the disappointment. It wasn't this man's fault Henry was the way he was. "Will he be along shortly?"

"I'm afraid he'll be engaged for most of the afternoon. I'm Sergeant James. I'm your father's assistant." The officer avoided her gaze, as if he didn't know what to say. "Are these your trunks?"

"Yes." She hated the look of sympathy in his eyes. Sympathy for her. "He forgot, didn't he?"

"No, miss, he's simply busy—"

"He didn't realize that I arrived today." Marie refused to let the hurt show in her voice. "Don't worry, Sergeant, I'm used to it. I know my father."

"Just wanted to spare your feelings, miss." The sergeant tugged on his cap. "I'll see to your trunks."

Marie began to thank him when a horse's high, shrill neigh trumpeted above the sounds on the busy lane.

Suddenly a pair of iron-strong hands banded around her arms and yanked her back, away from the dirt road.

She stumbled against an unyielding, male-hot chest. Even through the layers of her traveling clothes, his heat scorched her and tingled along her skin.

For one brief second she felt the strangest thrill. She couldn't describe it. Her heart was racing, her chest tightened and an odd ringing filled her ears.

She knew she ought to be terrified, but she wasn't. Time slowed down, and there seemed to be nothing in the world but the protective shelter of his arms. She didn't even know who held her, whether he was friend or foe, young or old.

Then he released her.

Time snapped back, the noise from the street and the crowd filled the air, and Marie nearly stumbled. Breathing again, she felt him brush past her arm. He was running toward the street, and she saw the danger.

A runaway horse clipped past her so close she could feel the heat of his breath. His lethal hooves slammed into the ground, obliterating her shoe prints in the thick dust. The renegade flew past her, then swerved to avoid the stagecoach.

A little girl stood directly in his path. Marie leaped into the road, but she was too late. A man wearing a deerskin shirt scooped the child to his chest and rolled out of the renegade's path.

Not soon enough. The gelding was on top of him, skidding to a stop, bugling his fury. Wild, out of control, it reared up, hooves slashing the air, and then landed again. Marie heard a man's grunt of pain, and a bullwhip cracked in the air behind her. The wild horse leaped over the man in the road and flew toward the river.

"Are you all right?" The sergeant appeared at her side. "You could have been killed."

"I'm fine."

"Cassie!" A woman darted out of the mercantile and raced down the stairs. "Cassie!"

The man holding the child rolled one final time and climbed to his feet. Marie saw his face, the dark eyes and long black hair, the chiseled bronze face that could have been made of stone.

The man from the forest.

Just seeing him made her heart beat painfully fast. He was like no man Marie had ever seen before. She could only stare as he brushed the dirt from the child's locks and handed the girl over to the housekeeper responsible.

A tender gesture. Marie couldn't believe her eyes. How could such a tough man have such gentle hands? She remembered the strength in them as he'd pulled her safely out of the gelding's path. The same strength that kept a frightened child safe now.

Instead of crying, the little girl stuck her thumb in her mouth and gazed up at the man holding her. The child went wordlessly into the worried housekeeper's arms. The woman couldn't stop thanking the man enough for saving the child.

He's bleeding. Marie saw the stain on the man's shirtsleeve, spreading with each passing moment. He'd risked his life for a child, and she couldn't look away.

The housekeeper crossed the street, muttering about how fast children could move. The men mounted up to join the army officer to bring in the dangerous horse.

Marie stood on the side of the street as the men rode off, the dark hero among them. He guided his black stallion bareback without aid of bridle and raced out of sight.

Admiration burned like a new flame in Marie's heart.

"Looks like they'll need help bringing in that killer." The sergeant appeared at her side with a plump, elderly woman at his side. "This is Mrs. Kelsey. She'll look after you while I help with the roundup."

"Thank you, Sergeant." But he was already swinging up onto his horse.

"Dear me, what a sweet little thing you are." Mrs. Kelsey took Marie by the hand and tugged her toward the brightly painted mercantile. "I hope you weren't frightened at all. If it hadn't been for Night Hawk, I'd hate to think what would have happened to both you and that little girl. I was standing at the window, and what I saw nearly scared me to death."

Night Hawk. His name must be Night Hawk. Marie hesitated on the top step and gazed toward the bend in the road.

She could no longer see him, but the image of him lingered. Dark, brave, proud. His long black hair brushed by the wind. A man who would have traded his life for a child's without hesitation.

"Come right in here, dear, and let me get you some cold water." Mrs. Kelsey held open the stout wooden door. "You need to sit down after a scare like that."

"Really, I'm fine." Marie could still feel the heated imprint of Night Hawk's hands on her arms. "Is the child all right?"

"There's not a scratch on her." Mrs. Kelsey's voice lowered as she led the way down the aisles and through the noisy store. "Now, sit right down here on this stool and I'll fetch you a drink."

"Please, don't go to any trouble—" Marie started but couldn't finish the protest.

Mrs. Kelsey had already bustled away, her skirts rustling. She returned with a dipperful of sparkling cold water. "Drink it all, dear, you'll feel better."

An elderly woman stepped close to the counter, clucking sympathetically. "Poor dear, a near miss like that. Why, you must be the colonel's daughter come to teach our children."

"That's right." Marie took the dipper with trembling hands. A few drops landed on her dusty skirts. She could still feel the heat on her skin from Night Hawk's touch.

She drank the entire dipperful because Mrs. Kelsey kept fussing. When she was done, she looked over her shoulder through the small front window that offered a view of the dirt road and the river beyond.

Where was Night Hawk now? Was he safe? How badly had he been injured? Questions buzzed inside her like the conversations in the crowded little store. Most of the customers were discussing the renegade horse and how close the little Ingalls girl had come to being killed.

But no one mentioned Night Hawk.

Marie returned the empty dipper and thanked Mrs. Kelsey. The minute she slipped off the stool, the older woman was there, shaking her head.

"You're still trembling, dear, and flushed as can be. Stay right here and when Sergeant James comes back, I'll have him take you home straightaway."

"I came to no harm, thanks to Night Hawk."

As if saying his name had brought him to her, the door opened and he filled the threshold. Noble and mysterious, wild and civilized. The conversations silenced and a tension filled the room. Night Hawk headed toward the front of the store.

Directly toward her.

Marie slid off the stool, her knees suddenly like water.

But he wasn't looking at her with his dark, fathomless gaze. "Mrs. Flanders, how is Cassie?"

The housekeeper grabbed hold of another rambunctious child, a boy, ready to dart down an aisle and out of reach. Then she shifted Cassie on her hip. "First thing she did was try to run off. As you can see, it put no fear into her at all."

"I'm glad." Night Hawk's stone face relaxed into a slow grin and he brushed one bronzed knuckle against the girl's pale cheek. "Did you like me grabbing you like that?"

"Night Hawk! Let's do it again." Cassie smiled adoringly up at him.

"Not today, cowgirl." Night Hawk withdrew his hand and stepped away.

He was part dream, Marie decided.

Then the man named Night Hawk focused his eagle-sharp gaze on her. She felt it like a touch to her soul.

"Are you all right, miss?" He strode toward her with the grace of a wolf stalking prey. "I must have startled you, but I didn't want you harmed."

"I owe you a great debt, sir." Marie eased around the corner of the wooden counter, and there was nothing between them. "I cannot thank you enough. You saved two lives."

"I did only what any man would do."

"No other man took the risks you did today." Marie heard the breathlessness of her own voice.

"Miss Lafayette." Sergeant James appeared in front of her, separating her from Night Hawk with his presence. "Your father wants you delivered to his quarters immediately."

Marie blushed at the officer's rudeness. "I'll be ready in a moment. I—"

"Now, miss."

Marie could feel half the customers watching her.

"Good day to you." Night Hawk nodded formally and backed away.

It was too late to call him back, not with the sergeant watching her with narrowed eyes and the attention of so many strangers. Strangers whose children she would be teaching at summer's end.

Disappointed, Marie watched Night Hawk stride toward the door. A thousand questions itched inside her, and she desperately wanted to talk with him. Did it show on her face? Was that why the sergeant took her by the elbow and led her, stumbling, to the door.

When she tripped down the steps, Night Hawk was nowhere in sight. She looked through the shadows created by the immense log walls. She scanned the crowds of busy soldiers inside the fort once she'd followed the sergeant inside.

No sign of him. Had he vanished back into the shadowed wilderness?

"Why wouldn't you let me speak with him?" she demanded, frustrated.

"I'm under strict orders to bring you straight to the colonel's quarters," Sergeant James said in a clipped manner as he saluted the guards at the fort's wide gates and wouldn't look at her.

No, there was more to that. Was it Henry's orders? "It's because Night Hawk's an Indian, isn't it? I saw how everyone acted in the mercantile."

"You're wrong. His being an Indian has got nothing to do with it." The sergeant flushed. "He is a different sort of fellow."

Marie heard what the officer wasn't saying, and it made her angry. "It is because he's a native."

"Your father is more progressive than that!" The sergeant's commanding tone vibrated with anger, as if he didn't like being questioned by a mere woman, and it drew looks from uniformed privates mounting up in the nearby stable yard.

"Night Hawk keeps to himself. Doesn't seem to have much need for us. He's a real lone wolf type, and you'd be wise to keep your distance from men like that. Your father won't permit it."

So, that was the way it was. Did Henry still think of her as a little girl to be commanded and supervised, like any new enlistee? If that was true, then he was in for a surprise.

She was a grown woman, and she could make up her own mind about a man's character. Remembering how Night Hawk had brushed his knuckles down little Cassie's cheek with a father's tenderness eased the hot anger inside her.

A thousand questions buzzed on her tongue, so many she didn't know where to start. She was nearly out of breath trying to keep up with the fast-paced sergeant, who looked more unpleasant after their exchange.

"Tell me, please." She lifted her skirt and hopped over a rivulet of water from a garden's irrigation. "Does Night Hawk live here in the settlement?"

The sergeant's mouth narrowed, and he walked even faster.

Marie practically ran to keep up. "Night Hawk was injured. Does he have family to look after him?"

The sergeant scowled at her. The intent was clear to her. He wasn't going to tell her a thing.

She wasn't discouraged. Somehow, some way, she'd find the answers to her questions. Meeting Night Hawk today had left her feeling as if she'd been interrupted in the middle of a sonata, the harmony of notes fading in the air, unfinished and without end.

As she hurried past huge log buildings and the smaller log homes of officers, she remembered the low rumble of his voice, like summer thunder, and the protective shelter of his arms.

Maybe—just maybe—she'd see him again.

Chapter Two

What a wondrous night. Marie let the screen door slap shut behind her and padded across the porch. Like enchantment, the night sky glittered with the light of a billion stars. Big, white beautiful twinkles that made the heavens seem close enough to touch.

If only Papa were here to see it with her. He hadn't come home at all, and she'd eaten supper fixed by an unfriendly housekeeper alone in the echoing dining room.

A series of sweet mellow bongs spilled through the open parlor window. Eleven o'clock. Late for Papa to be out on her first day here.

She fought the harsh sting of disappointment. Her father was a busy man, that was all. She understood that. Surely a crisis had come up and detained him. That's what it was.

But she didn't think so. He'd promised he'd greet her at the stage. He'd promised he would have a new horse at the stables for her. Had he broken that vow, too?

There was only one way to find out. She took the steps two at a time and hit the dirt path with both feet, stirring up a cloud of dust.

Overhead a hawk cried, and she tilted her head all the way back to watch it spin across the handle of the Big Dipper. Exhilaration thundered through her.

Was it the same one she'd seen earlier today? Or its mate? The bird glided gracefully on wide wings, wild and free, commanding the night.

This wilderness was truly an amazing place to live. What other wonders would she see? Maybe Night Hawk. The thought came unbidden like a whisper in the wind.

It was easy to recall how he'd looked framed by the mercantile's doorway. As dark as forest shadows, he was striking with his shoulder-length jet-black hair, bright sparkling eyes and mysterious good looks. Just imagining him made her heart leap. A strange, shivery feeling gathered in her stomach.

Light from the stables tumbled through an open half door onto the path, as if beckoning her closer. At this late hour, no one should be inside the stables. Maybe it was her father, a part of her hoped. Was it possible he hadn't forgotten about her mare? Eagerly she pushed open the door.

A single flame burned in a lantern hung from one of the overhead rafters to light her way. She took two steps and froze at the sight of a huge dark horse cross-tied in the aisle, half-masked in shadows. His eyes rolled, and he tossed his head sharply. The ropes holding him snapped taut, keeping him trapped.

"Whoa, fella," a man's forest-dark voice soothed. It wasn't her father's voice. "Easy, now. There is no danger."

Marie watched in amazement as a shadow rose from the darkness at the horse's side, taking shape and substance as the light touched him.

Night Hawk.

He didn't appear to see her lurking in the doorway.

"Easy, boy." Night Hawk stepped into the light, circling around the nervous animal that watched him defiantly. Almost viciously.

How powerful and wild the gelding looked up close. He stomped one huge front hoof and tossed his enormous head in the air as high as the ropes would allow. His ears flattened against his head. She recognized the horse now. It was the same one that had almost hurt her and little Cassie Ingalls.

"That's no way to behave, boy." Night Hawk's words held no trace of fear.

The warmth in his voice made the sensitive skin at Marie's nape tingle.

"You can be a gentleman, I know you can." Night Hawk spoke with the hush of a lullaby and the power of a summer storm.

The horse responded with uneasy trust. She couldn't believe her eyes. The untamable runaway that had nearly turned killer today stood quietly for Night Hawk.

The big man knelt and ran his hand along the gelding's front leg, never losing touch with him. Night Hawk's words became too low to hear, but the gelding's head drifted down to eat from a small tin bucket on the floor.

The scent of corn and molasses tickled Marie's nose.

What kind of man was Night Hawk? Saver of women and children and wild-horse tamer. How could he be real? He had to be a dream, a figment of her imagination, the fantasy of a perfect man. Yes, that was it.

Except she was wide-awake and this was no dream. She could smell the straw and horse scent of the stable, see the flicker of light on the man's hands as he inspected the gelding's fetlock. And hear the beat of her own heart.

He stood—all flesh-and-blood man—and his gaze pierced the shadows and pinpointed her. His eyes were dark like the night. "Miss Lafayette. What are you doing out of your father's house?"

How long had he known she was there? "I didn't make a sound."

"Your skirts did." The light flickered over him, worshiping high, sharp cheekbones, a well-proportioned nose and a hard, carved jaw.

Marie felt a lightning bolt strike her, but there was no storm, no thunder. Her feet left the ground, she was sure of it. When she looked down, she saw the straw-strewn earth directly beneath her shoes.

The wind gusted, snapping her skirts. The gelding trumpeted, loud and shrill and sidestepped violently, fighting his restraints.

Night Hawk spoke, gentle soothing sounds of his native tongue while holding tight to the gelding's halter with one hand. He stroked the horse's gleaming coat with the other. The animal fought, and the man's muscles corded beneath the deerskin shirt, holding him steady.

Night Hawk's touch was magic, and the dangerous horse calmed.

Unbelievable.

"He cannot harm you. I have him cross-tied and hobbled." Night Hawk caressed one bronzed hand down the gelding's neck with the ease of a natural-born horseman. "Devil is not used to a woman's skirts."

"Should I leave?"

"No. I can control him. You have nothing to fear."

Something within Marie's heart clicked. Just like that. As a lock finding its key at the right moment.

Could he be the one, she wondered. The one she'd been waiting for all her life?

Excitement flickered through her in hot, bright flames. She dared to step forward, wanting, no—needing—to be closer to him. "I saw you save the little girl's life. How badly were you injured?"

He didn't meet her eyes. "I will heal."

"I saw the blood on your shirt. In the mercantile. When you spoke to me." She felt breathless, as if there wasn't enough air in the building.

"Cassie Ingalls is my friend's daughter. I would trade my life for my friend."

"Or for any child." She could feel it, the kind of man he was at heart—brave, noble and humble. A dream man who couldn't possibly be real.

But the real flesh-and-blood man stepped out of the shadows and into the light. "Does your father know you're here?"

What did she look like, a girl and not a woman grown? Heat flamed her face and it took all her self-control to modulate her words. "I'm my own woman, Mr. Night Hawk."

"Just Night Hawk." He spoke deep like rolling thunder and as gentle as twilight.

Another jolt spiraled through her.

He cupped the stallion's front hoof in one hand, leaned his solid shoulder against the horse's side and lifted.

Marie saw the rivulet of blood streaking the animal's delicate fetlock. "He's injured."

"That's why I'm here. No one under your father's command could get close enough to treat him."

"Then you work for my father?"

"No. I came as a favor." Night Hawk reached up to reposition the lantern and didn't look at her.

Bright light illuminated the angry gashes on the gelding's neck and the man's big, healing hands.

Such gentle, masculine hands.

Marie shivered deep inside. She couldn't move away. "It looks to me as if you need some help."

"Does it?" He lifted one dark brow, measuring her. "You're not afraid of Devil?"

"Not with you here."

He nodded toward the shadows. "You can fetch that basin for me."

She lifted the hot enamel container from the shadowed dirt floor. Mossy-smelling steam brushed her face as she knelt in the crackling straw beside the horse.

"Closer to me," Night Hawk urged.

Closer? She was already near enough to see the bold, high cut of his cheekbones and the wide, lean cut of his shoulders. He smelled pleasantly of night and wind. She managed to crawl a few more inches on her knees.

He dipped a cloth into the steaming basin and wrung it well. He was big but his ministrations were gentle as he cleaned the blood from the horse's wounded fetlock.

She had never seen tenderness like this in so strong a man.

"Now that the wound is cleaned, come closer," he said. "Help me with the bandaging."

Unable to speak, Marie obeyed. Kneeling together in the shadows, she could feel his body's radiant heat.

Night Hawk held a roll of muslin to the gelding's fetlock. "Hold this in place for me. Right here." He caught her hand and pressed it to the bandage just above the gelding's hoof.

His touch was like sunlight, his nearness like dawn. New sensations burst to life within her.

Then Night Hawk released her hand, but the sensations remained. He bent over his work, wrapping the horse's wound. His rock-hard biceps brushed Marie's shoulder. His jaw grazed the crown of her head. Bright, hot yearning ripped through her, leaving her trembling but not weak.

He knotted the muslin strip and eased the hoof back to the ground. The gelding nickered, as if in thanks.

"You have a gift." She breathed the words, and embarrassment warmed her face. Couldn't she hide this admiration for him better than that?

"A gift? No, nothing special. Not like my father had." Night Hawk straightened, towering over her, tall and proud, and then extended his hand to her. "I merely have a love for horses."

"So do I." She placed her palm against his and climbed to her feet. Touching him this way felt unreal. As if it were part of an amazing dream.

If only he would look at her. If only some of what she was feeling reflected in his dark, mysterious gaze. But she could tell he wasn't interested in her. Not one bit.

He thinks I'm too young. She bit back the urge to ask his age. To ask a thousand burning questions about him.

Night Hawk spun in the direction of the door. "Here comes your father."

She didn't hear anything. A few seconds later footsteps tapped on the path outside and a tall, imposing man marched into the dark stable.

"Papa!" She launched herself past Night Hawk and Devil, skirts rustling, heart lifting. "I'm so glad to see you. I've been waiting all day. I knew you were busy—"

"Now, daughter, contain yourself." Colonel Henry Lafayette held up both hands as if the sight of her running at him, arms wide, was no way to behave.

Marie stopped short and folded her arms around her middle.

"I had an unavoidable crisis. Only just got it resolved. A bear is threatening the settlers, hardly surprising on the frontier, but there you have it. Sergeant James tells me you've settled in. What are you doing here?"

Why had she expected, after years apart, he would be different? She hugged herself, feeling alone. "I came down to look for the mare you promised me. You did remember, didn't you?"

"I'm a busy man, Marie. Horses are dangerous. Not only that, but I can't think it would be the best for your reputation. Ladies ride in buggies, not on the backs of animals." Henry's face changed and Marie saw a brief apology.

Then it vanished, leaving only the commander's stern manner. "And what about your behavior tonight? This is the frontier. You can't walk around on your own, especially at this time of night."

Disappointment tasted bitter. She should have known. It's just that his letter asking her to come had been so surprising. Now she could see she'd misinterpreted his meaning. He hadn't wanted her as much as she'd hoped.

Night Hawk's moccasins made no sound on the straw-strewn floor as he approached. "Colonel, sir, I have been watching over your daughter. As you see, no harm has come to her."

"I owe you a debt of thanks, Night Hawk." Henry shifted his attention on the silent man in the shadows and, again, his stern demeanor faded. "How is the gelding?"

"Devil needs a few days' rest. I'll leave instructions with the stable master." As if she wasn't there, Night Hawk turned and looked past her. "Good night, Colonel."

Night Hawk stepped into the shadows and disappeared. Marie stared into the darkness, wishing, just wishing.

"Honestly, Marie," Henry boomed loud enough for every last soldier in the nearby barracks to hear. "I expected you to remain home until I arrived."

"Oh, Papa. I couldn't wait forever in an empty house."

"How am I to maintain discipline in my ranks when I cannot command my own daughter? This is no way to start out your tenure here."

"My tenure?" She'd been a fool to think anything had changed between them. She'd traveled all the way from Ohio for this? "I'm not one of your privates ready to jump at your every command. I am a grown woman—"

"That is quite enough, girl." Henry pushed open the door. "Come, before I lose my temper."

Marie steeled her heart and headed into the night. A pleasant breeze caressed her face and tangled through her long wavy locks, scattering them every which way. She heard her father's gait behind her, tapping brisk and even.

"Good thing you came across Night Hawk. I run a tight fort and I command good men, but that doesn't mean you should wander the grounds without an escort. The stables aren't a proper place for a young lady."

"I can take care of myself. I'm not the girl you remember."

"No, but you are my daughter, and if anything should happen to you, I could never stand it." A touch of warmth softened his stern manner. "I want you safe, Marie. A gently raised young lady such as yourself is not used to the dangers of the frontier."

"I'm not afraid—"

"You could have been trampled today," Henry interrupted. "You would have been had it not been for Night Hawk. That's twice I'm indebted to him now. Twice. Do not put yourself in danger a third time."

Marie followed her father up the steps and onto the porch. Not knowing what to do, she leaned against the railing and gazed out on the night. Her father sat down in the shadows, and the wooden chair creaked. A match flared to life, a brief flame against the darkness. The first burst of smoke lifted on the wind.

From Ohio, with his letter in hand inviting her to join him, it had seemed like an opportunity to make things better. Was it even possible to change things between them?

He might be her father, but he was a colonel first. Always a colonel. Never a parent to remember birthdays and gifts. Never someone to turn to when the loneliness became too much to bear.

“Go on up to your room and get some sleep, Marie.” He sounded gruff, just short of harsh, but he sounded strangely affectionate, too.

“I’ll choose my own bedtime, thank you. The night is beautiful and there are so many things I want to say to you.”

“Not tonight, daughter.” Embers glowed at the tip of his cigar as he inhaled. “I’ve had a tough day.”

“I see.” So, he would dismiss her. His daughter. She pushed away from the porch.

“Mrs. Olstad will have breakfast on the table at six hundred sharp. I’ll see you then.”

“Yes, Papa. Good night.” She fled before he could answer, turning her back on the lonely night and the canyon of distance between them.

She hurried up the staircase and down the dark hallway, trying not to turn their first not-so-warm encounter into a disaster. He was tired. She was disappointed. Maybe tomorrow would be better.

Her room was dark, just as she had left it. The white curtains lashed at the open window as if beckoning her. It was still early and she wasn’t a bit tired, so she knelt on the soft cushions of the window seat and let the wind breeze across her face.

It was a night made for dreaming, with stars so bright and the wide horizon brimming with possibilities. A hawk’s cry snared her attention and she watched the noble hunter cut the sky with silent wings.

Marie breathed in the fresh air and listened to the call of a coyote. The swirling emotions inside her began to ease.

A movement in the shadows caught her eye—a broad-shouldered man, lithe and powerful. Night Hawk. Mounted, he rode tall and proud, his long brave’s hair dancing with the wind.

Her heart soared just like the hawk overhead. The strange floating, shivering sensation she’d experienced in his presence returned.

She’d never felt so alive and the feeling remained long after he’d ridden from her sight.

Night Hawk saw the young hawk circling overhead in an ever-widening spiral away from the fort. Other creatures filled the night sky—the hoot owls, the mosquito-eating bats and a mature male eagle hunting the fields for food for his young.

It was likely that only the young hawk had no mate to fly with and no young to hunt for. A solitary life was no comfort for a bird.

Or a man.

The wind gusted, stirring a woman’s scent clinging to his shirt where he and Marie Lafayette had briefly touched.

The colonel’s daughter.

A cold weight settled in his gut, and Night Hawk urged Shadow into an easy lope. Even to notice the smallest detail about the colonel’s daughter was trouble.

In truth, he hadn’t noticed her. He’d memorized her wavy, dark brown hair and how she smelled fresh as morning sun on a spring meadow. The oval cut of her face was soft and so beautiful it hurt to look at her.

You’ve been without a woman too long, he told himself. But even as he thought the words, they rang false. It wasn’t lust he felt. It was something greater, like the sky without horizon, like time without end.

Who did he think he was? Marie was too young, too pretty and too white. She was the colonel’s daughter. She was out of his reach like the stars above.

He halted his stallion in the shadow of his home where there were no windows lit and no woman waiting.

If loneliness battered him, he refused to feel it.

He dropped the pack he carried on the front steps and made a vow never to think about the colonel's daughter again.

Chapter Three

"You're late."

Marie pulled out the wooden chair and eased onto the tapestried cushion. "I had trouble finding all my clothes. Only one of my trunks arrived."

"Then I'll have Sergeant James see to it." Henry's stern demeanor softened. "Did you sleep well?"

"I tried." Marie couldn't contain her excitement. "I've never heard so many strange sounds in one place. Coyotes howling, owls hooting and creatures moving in the forest outside the fort walls."

"We'll see if you're of the same opinion next week." The colonel sounded harsh, but his dark eyes twinkled.

There was hope, Marie decided as she grabbed a slice of crispy bacon. For the first time in her life, she was alone with her father over a meal. It was a time to talk, to bond and share opinions and experiences like other families.

Where did she start? "Papa, I'd love to see the new schoolhouse. I—"

But Henry wasn't listening. He'd turned toward the opened front door, just visible through the parlor, where footsteps pounded across the porch.

"Excellent!" he boomed. "Come right on in, Major. Do you have the report?"

"I do, sir." The screen door whispered on its hinges as a man entered. He marched across the parlor with a painfully straight posture and wearing a spotless blue uniform. "This is the latest report from the field."

"Give it here, Major. I have decisions to make." The colonel snatched pages of parchment from the lesser officer's fist. Paper snapped as he flipped through the pages, skimming. "Yes, it looks complete. Major, you must meet my daughter. Ned Gerard, this is my only daughter, Marie. Marie, say hello."

"I know how to speak without your instructions, Papa," she reminded him gently. Really. Hadn't he looked at her enough to notice she was no longer a child needing instructions? He was embarrassing her.

But the newcomer, Major Gerard, struggled not to chuckle as if he knew Henry all too well. He was a pleasant-looking man.

"I'm pleased to finally make your acquaintance, Miss Lafayette. Your father has spoken often of your teaching achievements."

"Achievements?" Leave it to her father to make teaching English sound like she'd negotiated the Louisiana Purchase. "I'm not the best teacher there is, but I am lucky to be here."

"I'm sure you'll be a wonderful aid to your father's work." The major bowed slightly.

Marie noticed her father's face was hidden mostly by the papers he was studying. But his brows knit together as if he were smiling.

Smiling! Marie grabbed her plate and stood, working hard to contain her anger. "You gentlemen appear to have business to attend to, so if you'll excuse me, I'll leave you to it."

"Marie," Henry warned. "You'll stay and finish your meal at the table. This is the frontier, but that doesn't mean we can give up any—"

"Goodbye, Papa." Marie tapped across the room, refusing to give in. "Pleasant meeting you, Major."

"And you, ma'am."

She could feel Henry's fury all the way into the kitchen. Too bad. He wasn't going to do this to her. She absolutely refused to allow it.

Introducing her to the major. Next it would be an invitation to supper. Then her father would be pressuring her to marry the major. She hadn't come here to let her father run her life, that was for sure.

She marched down the kitchen steps and into the backyard.

A three-foot-high split-rail fence walled in a well-tended vegetable garden and a cool patch of mowed grass. Ancient sugar maples cast long morning shadows across the yard. She spotted a log bench beneath them. It was the perfect place to enjoy her meal.

She ate in solitude, if not exactly silence. Outside the small haven, she could hear the sounds of the soldiers beginning their busy day. Voices rang. Doors slammed. Someone—perhaps a new recruit—raced past, hidden by a row of bushes, muttering to himself that he was late again.

A rabbit darted out from behind a clump of beets to nibble on delicate carrot greens. He lifted his chocolate-brown head, wrinkled his nose while he studied her and then returned to his breakfast.

Marie finished hers. This strange new land wasn't home yet. Last night she had missed her comfortable bed—the familiar feel of it, the sound of Aunt Gertrude rising to prepare breakfast, and the regular routine of their days together.

Here in Fort Tye, there were no lending libraries, no ladies clubs and no supper theater. But Marie watched a finch light on a limb of the sweet-leafed sugar maple, and a sense of rightness filled her like heaven's touch.

Happiness was awaiting her. She could feel it.

Night Hawk's entire body screamed with exhaustion as he hauled fresh water from the well. The two huge buckets felt like boulders as he emptied first one and then the other into the trough.

The bay mare in the corral with him nickered softly to her newborn foal and gratefully dipped her nose into the water. It had been a long night and a tough morning, but Joy had brought forth a strong foal. The tiny filly walked at her dam's flank, her knobby knees threatening to buckle. Her bristle-brush mane ruffled in the wind as she nursed.

The big black dog napping in the shade of the house let out a single woof and climbed to his feet. Tilting his big head, he listened to the faint clip-clop of a newly shod horse.

Night Hawk dropped the buckets. It wasn't his friend, Josh Ingalls, riding over the crest of the hill. Judging by the faint jingling of a harness and the rattle of wheels, it was a buggy from the settlement. The dog wasn't used to many visitors. Night Hawk ordered Meka to stay.

He wasn't surprised when one of the fort horses crested the rise, pulling the colonel's buggy. He tried not to curse the Fates tempting him when he saw a spray of blue fabric ruffling in the wind—the hem of a woman's fine dress. Sunlight gleamed on a lock of wavy dark hair, and his blood fired.

The colonel's daughter.

He gritted his teeth, but the images of the night returned in a fiery rush—her porcelain face in the lantern light, the summer-breeze scent of her skin and the feel of her next to him like something lost finally found.

She was the colonel's daughter, he reminded himself and forced the images from his mind.

The sergeant at Miss Lafayette's side reined in the thick-legged army horse a good distance from where Meka sat on his haunches warily watching the newcomers.

"Night Hawk." Humphrey James climbed down from the buggy and offered his hand to the woman. "We've come to look at your horses. Miss Lafayette would like to purchase a mount. Something gentle and easy to handle. An older mare, I should think."

"Sergeant, I'm capable of speaking for myself." In a graceful sweep of blue silk, Marie Lafayette stepped out of the shadowed buggy and into the dappled sunlight. "Night Hawk. I asked around the settlement this morning and everyone agreed that you had the best horses."

She spun in a half circle, her full skirts and dark locks swirling as she quickly scanned the pastures and corrals of grazing horses. "Looks to me that they were right."

"They were wrong. I have no mares to sell you."

"What? You have plenty of horses." She flipped one silken lock behind her ear, and a look of wonder flashed across her gentle features as she noticed the corral. "You have a new baby."

"She was born this morning." He couldn't keep the pride out of his voice, or the way his gaze kept straying to the colonel's daughter.

"She's beautiful." Marie knelt outside the wooden corral where dam and foal were alone. "How old is she?"

"Four hours."

"Look how well she walks. And her legs are so long."

She curled her delicate hands around the wooden rails. "I've never seen such knobby knees."

"That only means she'll grow up to run fast and far." He itched to step closer. Just close enough to smell the sweet scent of Marie's skin and the wildflowers in her hair.

The foal wobbled away from her dam's side and stretched her skinny neck toward the fence and Marie's fingers.

A part of him ached to be the foal, stretching toward the beautiful lady dressed in a rich blue dress like a tropical bird on this plain and simple land. Night Hawk's chest felt as if it had filled with sand. Too many longings filled him. Yearnings for home and family, for a woman to love.

The foal lipped Marie's fingers, then leaned a sun-warmed cheek against her palm.

His heart simply stopped beating.

"What's her name?"

"I haven't gotten around to that yet. What do you think?"

Marie's spine tingled at his question. She couldn't imagine having the right to name this fragile and amazing creature. The adorable filly's lips were velvet soft against Marie's skin.

Then the wind caught the hem of her crinolines and ruffled a lace edge. The foal hopped backward a few steps and braced herself on her knobby knees. Those long legs were at off angles, but still she managed to hold her balance.

"It's all right, little one." Marie tucked the offending lace edge beneath her blue skirts. "See?"

She felt Night Hawk's gaze on her like a touch to her cheek. Felt his scrutiny as the filly ambled closer, braver now that the lace had vanished. The wind picked up Marie's skirts again and the foal leaped so fast she was a blur as she flew to her mother's side. Her long wobbly legs promised a lifetime of speed.

"Wind." Marie decided. "I would name her Wind."

"Good choice."

He towered over her, silhouetted by the sun's golden light. Marie gazed up at him and a jolt of pure sensation traveled from her heart to her soul, leaving her trembling.

What was it about this man that made her feel so much? And so strangely? As if she were alive for the first time? Before she could think about it, Night Hawk tore away and kept his back to her, striding on his moccasins to where the sergeant stood in the shade of the buggy.

"Sergeant," he said in a cool, even tone. "Please see Miss Lafayette safely to the fort."

He was sending her away? She climbed to her feet. "I came to purchase a mare and that's what I intend to do."

"Either Josh Ingalls or Lars Holmberg may have an older mare for sale. Sergeant, take Miss Lafayette to see one of them." Night Hawk didn't look at her. It was as if he saw not a woman but a child too young to be bothered with.

He whistled to his dog, which leaped to his side, and strode off toward the fields.

"Come, let's try Mr. Ingalls." Sergeant James held out his gloved hand, waiting to help her into the buggy. "No doubt he will be more cooperative. Night Hawk is a loner. He doesn't take to people butting into his business."

"But I want to buy a horse from him." Only him.

"Ingalls is a good man. He'll give you a fair price for an old, gentle mount. Something for a young lady to learn on."

She was getting tired of being a young lady. She was a woman, capable and intelligent, and she wasn't going to let a man who handled horses the way he did refuse to negotiate with her.

Determined, she set off across the stable yard. The sunlight was warm on her face and the tall seed-heavy grass snapped against her skirts. Grazing horses lifted their muzzles to study her.

Where had he gone? She scanned the lush green acreage of grazing pastures and growing crops, all neatly fenced.

There he was—near the tree line. He was nothing more than a shadow against the dark woods, but she'd recognize his proud profile and the set of his wide shoulders anywhere.

She watched his spine stiffen as she drew nearer. He deliberately kept his back to her as he lifted an ax from a thick stump.

Let him try to ignore her. She would show him. She wasn't a feeble-minded female who could be pushed around.

The dog let out a friendly woof and wagged his tail in greeting until a low word from Night Hawk commanded him to sit. A few dozen horses grazing in the field lifted their sculpted heads in unison and trotted eagerly toward the split-rail fence. Their coats gleamed in the sunshine—an array of rich browns, vibrant reds, pure whites and deep blacks.

A few of those horses were mares. Wait—every single one of them was. Anger kindled, and she could barely contain it. To think that he'd lied to her!

"You said you had no mares," she challenged. "But here's a pasture full of them."

"They are not for sale."

"That's right. Because you won't sell to a woman."

He lifted the ax high and sank it deep into a tree already on the ground. Steel drove into wood, and the log split its entire length. "I never do business with women."

"Then let's pretend I'm not a woman just for the few minutes it takes for me to pick out a mare and pay for her."

He lowered his ax. Instead of answering, he narrowed his eyes to study her. "Are you sure that you're the colonel's daughter? I expected someone obedient and well behaved."

"I am well behaved. But don't make the mistake of thinking any woman ought to be obedient. I suppose that's how men think, a woman would be easier to manage if she wore a bridle and had a bit in her mouth. Just like these horses."

"What if I agreed?" One brow crooked.

"Then you, sir, are not what I had hoped." She fisted her hands, not sure now if he was serious or if he was teasing her. "No wonder you're alone. No woman in her right mind would have you."

"Maybe I have three wives who obey my every command."

"Yes, but there's no one else here. If you have three wives, they obviously came to their senses and left you."

Now he laughed, rich and deep like summer thunder rolling in from the horizon. "I do think women and horses should be treated the same."

And he could say that with sincerity in his voice and integrity warming his eyes? She said, "You've finally convinced me. I don't want to do business with you."

How could she have been so wrong about him? Marie marched through the grasses, disappointment whipping through her.

"I've changed my mind, too," he called out. "I will sell you one of my mares."

"One of your old, obedient, submissive mares?"

"If that's what you wish."

"You have no notion of what I wish for." Now she was really mad. He mocked her? Or was he amused by her? And what of the man with the gentle hands and iron strength she'd seen last night? Who tended wounded horses with care and made her feel alive? "I know what I don't want, and that's a horse from you."

“Too late. One has already chosen you.” Night Hawk gestured toward the field.

A mare walked on the other side of the fence, her ears pricked and her mane and tail dancing in the wind. Her big brown eyes held a shining question.

“I told you, I’m no longer interested.”

“She’s interested in you.”

“The sergeant will take me somewhere else. Somewhere I won’t have to be insulted.”

Night Hawk’s gait whispered behind her, and the mare’s hooves clomped on the hard-packed ground alongside her.

Don’t look at either of them, Marie commanded herself.

“It’s said it’s best when the horse chooses her master.” Night Hawk caught up with Marie, adjusting his long-legged stride to match hers. “When one heart searches for another and finds its match. Look at her.”

Marie tingled at his words and at the depth of them. “I’m not looking for a submissive horse. I’m looking for spirit.”

“You misunderstood me.” His hand curled around her elbow, branding-iron hot and iron solid. “I meant what I said. A woman and a horse should be treated the same—with respect. I will only sell a horse to a rider who understands that.”

“Is that why you wouldn’t sell me a mare earlier?”

“No.” He released her and stepped away. “Look at the mare.”

She was beautiful. The mare’s red coat gleamed like fire beneath the sun’s touch, and a narrow stripe of white delicately marked her well-shaped nose.

A spark of affection flickered to life in Marie’s heart, just like that.

The sorrel reached above the rail. Marie laid her fingers on the mare’s nose. She would never want any other horse.

“I can’t believe it.” The sorrel caught a bit of lace on Marie’s sleeve with her teeth. “She’s mine. My very own horse!”

“She’s not broken to ride.”

“She seems gentle. Could you train her for me?” Laughing, the sweetest trill of music and delight, Marie extricated her sleeve from the mare’s teeth. “I’m in love with her already.”

No, his conscience warned him.

Yes, his heart answered. “I could train her to a buggy in no time.”

“No, I don’t want to drive her. I want to ride on her back and race the winds.”

Night Hawk was enchanted. The colonel’s daughter burned with the light of a thousand suns, this quiet softly shaped woman with a will as strong as oak. A longing burst inside him so fierce it left him weak. Far too weak.

“Please, don’t tell my father. He has very rigid ideas of how women should behave, but I’m not his little girl anymore. I make my own choices.”

No. That should be his answer. “It will be our secret.”

Her smile made her too beautiful to gaze upon.

Night Hawk broke away from this woman he could never have and stared hard at the mare. “I will contact you when she’s fully trained. We’ll agree on a price then, with your father’s approval.”

“Papa had his chance. He could have chosen an old plodding mare for me to learn to ride on, but he didn’t. So I figure he doesn’t have the right to complain about whatever horse I purchase with my own savings.”

“I don’t want to anger the colonel. He’s been good to me and my people.”

“Don’t worry.” An ember of mischief glimmered within her. “I can manage my father.”

Longing speared him. It’s loneliness, he told himself. He’d been without a woman’s company for more years than he could count. All he had to do was say goodbye. Then Marie Lafayette would climb back into the buggy and drive out of his life.

"I will leave word with Sergeant James when your mare is ready," he promised. "Good day."
He spun on his heel. Every step he took put welcome distance between him and the colonel's daughter.

Dainty feet padded against the dusty earth behind him. "Night Hawk."

He should have kept walking, but he turned.

She looked like a dream with her long brown hair waving in the wind as she ran. The sky-blue fabric hugged her soft woman's curves.

Marie smiled with the innocence of a woman who didn't know the power she possessed over a man. "Does the mare have a name?"

He watched her slim, long-fingered hand caress over the sorrel's white blaze with a woman's tenderness.

The heat in his veins burned.

"I call her Kammeo." His words sounded strangled to his own ears, yet it was the best he could do. Want swept over him like a wildfire, and he couldn't control it.

"It's a beautiful name. What does it mean in your language?"

There was no trace of prejudice. Only a bright curiosity and a quiet interest that left him speechless.

He couldn't deny his attraction to her. To a woman too fine and genteel for the likes of him. He'd bet his land and every last horse he owned that Colonel Henry Lafayette wouldn't want his precious daughter alone with a man like him.

Night Hawk hardened his heart, turned his back on her and walked away without answering her.

If she had shown abhorrence for his culture or disdain at his people's ways, it would have been easier. So much easier to keep his back turned. To put distance between them.

But she'd been respectful. It's a beautiful name. What does it mean? He could still hear the music of her voice and feel the bright light of her presence as he returned to the far pasture.

Trees shaded him as he lifted his ax and swung, taking his frustration out on trees that had fallen last winter.

Over the thud of the ax, he heard the squeak of the buggy's wheels as it bounced along his rutted road. Dust lifted like fog in the air and larks playing in the grasses startled skyward.

Meka lifted his big head and howled a melancholy goodbye.

Night Hawk could feel Marie Lafayette's gaze like a hot burning flame to his back. He worked until she'd driven past and then he stared into the cloud of dust in her wake.

Loneliness settled around him like the dust to the earth—a loneliness that ached and thrashed within the deepest places of his heart.

He had no family. No wife. No children. That was how he'd always feared his life would remain.

Maybe that was why he felt such an attraction to Marie Lafayette. That was all. Loneliness. A man's natural yearning for a wife.

He felt warm velvet of a horse's muzzle graze his knuckles. He hadn't realized that he'd stopped splitting rails and was leaning against the wood fence. Kammeo, with her coat of red flame and spirit, lipped him quizzically as if asking where Marie had gone.

Kammeo. It meant one and only. It also meant soul mate. A man's one and only love for all time.

Fate would not be so cruel, Night Hawk was certain, as to make his kammeo a white woman he was forbidden to love.

Chapter Four

The wonder of Marie's day remained even when the front door slammed open with the force of a bullet and rattled the windowpanes in the house.

"Marie Janelle, front and center this minute!" Henry's voice filled the house like a cannon blast.

"No need to shout, Papa." She laid the last sweater into place in the bureau draw and pushed it closed. "I'll be down in a minute."

"Now."

"When I'm finished emptying this last trunk."

She winced at the angry drum of his boots on the floor. Not even the thick wood ceiling between them could muffle it. There was no time like the present to start standing up to him and to change their relationship.

His footsteps punched up the stairs and knelled down the hallway. Marie took a deep breath and lifted the last of her sweaters from the bottom of her trunk.

"Good evening, Papa." She crossed to the bevel-mirrored bureau. "It doesn't sound as if you had a pleasant day."

"Not when I discovered you coerced my sergeant into taking you from the settlement."

"Coerced?" Marie saw her father's reflection in the mirror behind her. Angry tension stiffened him like a well-seasoned board, and his face was ruddy. "I merely pointed out that I would find the way on foot if I had to. The stable master refused to allow me the use of a horse and buggy. Your instructions, he said."

"I don't want you running off, Marie. It's unsafe." Soldier-fierce, he clomped into the room, and yet when she looked again in the mirror, gray gathered at his temples and marked his beard. The fall of once jet-black hair over his brow had turned completely gray.

They'd lost so much time, she and Papa. So much time to be a family.

"Papa, I didn't mean to be difficult." She pushed in the drawer and faced him. "I know there's a bear threatening settlers, but I had Sergeant James with me. He was armed—"

"A musket won't always stop a raging bear. Everyone knows that." Henry's anger flared but beneath it lurked something else, something harder to discern.

Marie closed her trunk lid. "As you can see, nothing happened. You don't need to be worried after the fact."

"Worried?" Henry sounded surprised. "I'm furious that you'd disobeyed a direct order, Marie."

"It wasn't direct to me. I was furious because you broke another promise."

"I'm a busy man."

"You're my father, not my commanding officer." She yanked the empty trunk from her bed and set it with an angry thunk on the floor. "I bought my own horse today, so there's no point in you rushing to find me the mare you promised."

"My secretary was supposed to—"

She slid the trunk with force into place beneath the second window. Papa always had his excuses and she wouldn't listen to them. She wanted more than excuses. She wanted more than his attempts to be her father—attempts lacking heart.

She settled the trunk into place with a final thud and straightened.

Henry merely looked angrier. "I brought you out here to help me with my work. There are children who need to learn. Both the settlers' children and the Indian children have to be prepared for the changing world awaiting them. That is what I fight for every day. Bettering the lives of the civilians I defend."

"That's good and fine, and I admire your principles, Papa. I always have. But I came here because my father asked me to. My father." She marched past him, losing her temper. "I'll be downstairs."

He followed her out into the hall. "Marie, Mrs. Olstad is putting supper on the table. You straighten up. I want you presentable in five minutes. Major Gerard is coming—"

Not wanting to hear more, Marie flew down the stairs and through the kitchen. Ignoring Mrs. Olstad's disapproving frown, Marie dashed outside and shut the door behind her with enough force to echo up the stairwell. It wasn't a slam, just a statement. She wasn't going to settle for a colonel. Not when she wanted a father.

The evening was hot and humid when she stepped out onto the porch. Sunlight played through the tips of trees, casting long shadows. The wilderness outside the tall, stout fort walls beckoned her.

This was her adventure. She'd come to Fort Tye for several reasons. Being with her father was only one of them. There were children to teach, a new world to explore. And maybe—just maybe—a love to discover.

Night Hawk. The thought of him made her bones melt. A thrilling, shivery feeling rippled through her. How angry he'd made her when she'd thought he was like so many men she'd met—all looking for a wife they could command around like her father did his soldiers.

But she'd been wrong. A woman and a horse should be treated with respect, he'd said in that voice as deep as winter. Oh, he'd been playing with her, all right, and her heart warmed with the memory.

"Miss Lafayette." A polite baritone broke into her thoughts. Major Gerard, hat in hand, strolled down the stone path, watching her with a curious gaze. "You look lovely this evening."

"Thank you, Major." Marie tucked her thoughts of Night Hawk aside for later, when she was alone. Right now she had Major Gerard to deal with. "I know my father is expecting you."

"He was good enough to invite me." The major climbed up the steps and stopped awkwardly, holding his hat, looking uncertain. "My name is Ned. Please, may I call you Marie?"

"Of course." There was a lot to like about the kind officer who seemed boyishly shy as he attempted a nervous smile.

"Please, come in. My father would want you to be comfortable." Marie led the way into the parlor. "What do you drink?"

"Your housekeeper is known to have cold tea on hand for a few of us who don't partake." He hung his hat on the coat tree before she could offer. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm here so often. I report directly to your father. I oversee the training of the enlisted men."

He was proud of his work and proud to work for her father. It was hard not to like him, but she didn't want to give him the wrong impression. Likely as not, her father had already done enough of that. She offered Ned a seat before leaving him alone for the kitchen.

He thanked her and sat awkwardly in the upholstered wing chair near the front window.

Her temper was back, and she fought to stay calm. In the hot kitchen, she grabbed a glass from the hutch shelves. She'd come to change things between her and her father, not to have the same old battle over marrying her off.

"Marie! Leave that to Mrs. Olstad. Honestly." Henry thundered into the kitchen. "I want you to make a good impression tonight. Ned Gerard is just the sort of man I want for you."

"What sort is that?"

"A West Point graduate. Impeccable family name. You know I want only the best for my daughter." Henry snatched a tomato wedge from Mrs. Olstad's drain board. "I don't want you to let this opportunity pass by. Living with your aunt has given you the idea that you can be happy as a spinster for the rest of your life."

"I don't want to be a spinster, Papa. Really." She could be as stubborn as he could be. After all, she was his daughter.

Marie spotted a covered pitcher on the drain board and reached for it.

"Leave that to Mrs. Olstad, Marie. We can't leave our guest waiting."

"You go in alone, you old schemer." Marie couldn't summon up enough resentment to be truly angry. "I'm not going to marry him."

"You don't know that for certain. No one knows where love will take root. Or how it will grow." Henry stole another tomato wedge from the worktable. "Don't be long, Marie. For me."

She began to protest but stopped at the sudden look of sadness in his eyes. It was a kind of sadness that she knew well. They hadn't been close since she was a little girl. Could it be possible that he shared this same loneliness? This hurting ache for the bonds of family?

There was a limp to his step as he marched from the room. The sunlight slanting through the window burnished the gray in his hair.

Yes, it was time for a change between them. As long as he stopped trying to marry her to every West Point graduate he met.

A movement through the window caught her attention. A huge black dog slipped out of her sight on the other side of the picket fence. Night Hawk's dog.

Night Hawk couldn't be far. Her pulse soared. Her sadness drained away. Thinking of him and knowing he could be near sent a thrill through her that was brighter than the sun.

No one knows where love will take root. Or how it will grow, Henry had said. And he was right.

She dashed out the back door. The wind tangled her hair, and she wrestled it out of her eyes so she could see. Breathless with anticipation, she tripped down the steps and raced along the path to the gate.

But the lane was empty. There were no shadows, no dog and no dream man.

He had passed this way. She could feel it in a way she couldn't explain. Seeing him again was only a matter of time.

Where was his will of steel? Night Hawk cursed himself as he drove the sickle through the waist-high grass. For the better part of two weeks, he'd thought of her. Every time he visited the fort to check on Devil's injury. Each time Kammeo caught his gaze in the field. He hadn't started working with the animal yet.

He was afraid that would make him dream of the woman more.

Fragrant stalks dropped to the mowed ground, and he swung again, taking down more grass. Sweat flew off his brow as he cut his way to the edge of the field. Winded, he leaned the blade against the fence and reached for the jug he'd left in the shade.

Cool water poured down his throat and he swallowed until it was gone. More sweat ran down his face and chest. He'd been up since three this morning making hay while the good weather held.

Meka's low bark cut through the afternoon's serenity. Night Hawk squinted into the sun and saw a figure crowning a low rise where earth and sun made illusion. There was a suggestion of a woman's dark wavy hair and soft curves—Marie Lafayette.

Night Hawk cursed. Not even twelve straight hours of hard work could drive the colonel's daughter from his mind. He grabbed his shirt off the fence's top rail and slung it over his shoulder.

When he looked up, the illusion remained, with her long hair rippling, her green skirts swirling around her soft woman's body—a body made for a man's pleasure.

Want drummed in his blood.

Then Marie moved, dream became reality. She was breezing closer, bringing the sunlight with her. Meka barked again, and only a sharp command kept the dog from bounding over to greet their unwelcome guest.

Night Hawk hardened his heart. He had to send her back to the fort. It was the right thing to do—no, it was the only thing to do.

"I came to see Kammeo." She stepped out of the sunbeams and offered him a shy smile. "Would you let me watch while you train her sometime?"

Night Hawk pulled on his shirt and drew it down over his sun-bronzed chest. "What are you doing out here on your own? It's dangerous."

"The bear was caught this morning. I'm perfectly safe." She held out her hand to let the dog scent her. "I didn't mean to interrupt your work."

"You didn't." He snared the empty jug and then whistled to his dog, ordering Meka to heel. "Come, we'll take you home."

"I came to visit my mare. I didn't see her in the pasture." She lifted her skirts and breezed after him, her dainty feet hardly touching the ground. "I came through the woods along the lakeshore. I've never taken such a beautiful walk."

Every step she took beat through him. Why? Why was his physical reaction to this woman so turbulent?

"The sunlight sparkled on the lake," she continued, "and the woods were enchanting, like something out of a fairy tale. I've never been in such a wild place."

She was beauty, the finest he'd ever seen and far more enchanting than this tiny piece of the world. "You're not afraid of the wilderness?"

"Afraid? It's amazing. Except for the meadows and the lake, and the farmers' fields of course, the trees go on forever. I've never been serenaded to sleep by wolves."

"Wait until you hear the cougars."

"They're musical, too?"

"Let's just say the sound might make you miss the quiet back home." Merriment twinkled a little in his dark eyes.

"Between the birds that hunt at night, the bugs that chirp and sound like they're the size of bears in the dark and the wolves braying, I'm sleeping blissfully."

"I bet you are." Night Hawk unlatched the wooden gate and stood there, laugh lines crinkling around his eyes. "It's quieter in the city."

"Astonishingly."

He held the gate open for her. Her skin tingled as she swept past him. Maybe it was because she remembered seeing his bronzed chest, bare and glistening at the sun's touch. Or maybe it was the man.

While he latched the gate, the big black dog bounded toward her, tongue lolling and sharp teeth bared in a doggy smile.

"Meka! Sit," Night Hawk ordered.

The dog launched into the air and placed his front paws on Marie's shoulders. His tongue swiped across her chin in a friendly greeting, and delight filled her. She couldn't resist hugging him. "I never had a dog when I was growing up."

"Down, Meka." Night Hawk snapped his fingers and strode close enough to cast her in his shadow.

The dog swiped his tongue across her knuckles and then obeyed. "He's a ferocious one, I can tell."

"And he doesn't like strangers." Night Hawk quirked one dark brow and his mouth narrowed as if he were trying not to laugh. "Especially women."

"I can tell. He's also the smallest dog I've ever seen."

"If you compare him to a bear. Meka, sit." Night Hawk snapped his fingers and the huge dog sank to his haunches, tongue hanging out, a sparkle in his eye, imploring to be stroked.

Marie couldn't resist running her fingers across his broad head. His fur was warm from the sun and bristly soft. A bronzed hand much bigger than her own settled on the dog's head and stroked only a hairbreadth from her fingers.

Marie burned as if she'd touched the sun.

Night Hawk moved away, as if he were upset. "Come, Kammeo will be glad to see you."

As though his words had brought her, a whinny carried across the windswept meadow where a horse skidded to a stop at the split-rail fence, her red mane flying in the wind.

But what drew Marie's attention, and kept it, was the way Night Hawk's blue cotton shirt was unbuttoned, showing a wide strip of golden skin and hard, delineated muscle.

"I've been getting her used to a bridle. She doesn't like it." Night Hawk stroked one big hand down the horse's cheek. "I'm having a small problem training her. I don't know anything about a lady's sidesaddle."

"Neither do I."

"That must be how you ride in Ohio."

"I've never ridden a horse before."

"Now I understand why your father 'forgot' to buy you a mare." Night Hawk climbed over the rails and then held out his hand.

Marie looked at his wide palm, callused from hard work, and laid her hand on his. Heat seared through her like lightning across a dark sky. Light burst within her so bright it hurt.

Night Hawk's eyes went black. His strong fingers curled around the side of her hand. Had he experienced this, too?

She concentrated on fitting her shoe on the lower rung and climbing. Her skirts caught the wind and twisted tight around her ankles, but Night Hawk held her steady.

Her feet touched the ground, but she couldn't feel it.

A warm velvet horse's nose bumped against her shoulder in greeting. Dazed, Marie stroked the mare's neck and tried to marvel at the heated coat that stretched tautly over the steely muscles beneath. Night Hawk moved close, tying a rope he'd lifted from one of the fence posts, and slipped the makeshift halter over Kammeo's nose.

"She is your first horse, and you will be her first rider." Night Hawk shouldered close to slip the pliant hemp over the mare's ears. "You'll learn together."

Excitement thrilled through her. He nodded once in understanding, as if he could read her secret wishes and dreams.

"Hold the rope tight, right here." He placed her hand firmly in front of his.

At once she felt the quivering life force of the mare and the steady steel of the man. Like a dream, he led the way deeper into the field, walking beside Marie as if he belonged there. As if he were a part of her.

He spoke low, and Kammeo moved. The rope pulled taut, and Marie felt a connection to the man that she couldn't explain. Night Hawk halted behind her, with only the wind between them. Her body tingled and burned as if they were touching, chest to back, thigh to thigh.

"Don't be afraid," he murmured.

She blushed. He'd noticed she was trembling, but she wasn't afraid.

"Keep her going in a circle."

His words breezed against the back of her neck, sending arrows of pure sensation down her spine.

"Hold on tight."

She needed to hold on to her senses, that's what she needed. But Night Hawk stepped away, leaving her alone with the rope. Kammeo didn't miss a beat and when Night Hawk spoke, the mare broke into a disciplined trot, leaving Marie to rotate in a smaller circle of her own, faster against the wind and the sun.

He leaned against the fence. "Are you getting dizzy?"

"Not yet, but if she goes any faster..."

"Turn and walk backward. I can come help."

"No." Simply looking at him, with his hair bound at his nape and his shirt snapping open to let the sun worship his bronze chest, pleased her immensely. She wanted to feel his touch more than anything in the world.

Embarrassed by her thoughts, she turned, leading with her back shoulder, and the world stopped spinning so fast. Kammeo broke into a blinding gallop. The land became a swirl of green grass and golden sun.

Then Night Hawk's hand covered hers and brought the mare to a stop. Disappointed, Marie swayed into a steely chest. Lean, muscled arms enfolded her and kept her steady. How wonderful it was when wishes came true. He smelled like summer wind and mowed grass, and he felt hotter than the sun.

"Are you all right?"

"I will be." If she could catch her breath and find the good sense that had obviously taken leave of her. Marie stumbled away, not sure if she was dizzy from twirling or light-headed from being in his arms.

Kammeo stood obediently and waited while Marie approached, and the mare nickered in friendship. The horse offered her cheek to be rubbed.

Grateful for something to do, something that would keep her from thinking about the man two paces behind her, Marie stroked her fingers along the horse's sleek coat.

Kammeo leaned into the touch with an appreciative-sounding groan.

"You two are a good match." Night Hawk's shadow fell across Marie as he untied the makeshift halter. "I will have her saddle-trained by the end of the month."

Marie watched, captivated, as he rubbed his big, gentle hand down the mare's satin neck, talking low and kind to the animal. Full of spirit, Kammeo took off at a hard gallop, tail and mane streaming like fire in the wind.

"That's what I want to do. I want to race her with the wind." Longing filled her as she watched the red mare fly across the meadow.

He laughed loud and true, as if from the depths of his soul. "Your father is going to ban me from the fort for selling you that horse. I'll train her for you, but that's it. Ride her fast or not, I refuse to be responsible."

"Being banned from the fort wouldn't be that much of a hardship."

"Joke all you want. I am not angering the colonel." Night Hawk couldn't believe it. The sedate, upstanding English teacher the colonel had been promising the area settlers was nothing short of a lie. Or maybe the colonel and his love of discipline and command was too blind to see the spirited filly he'd sired.

Spirited fillies were hard to handle, that was for sure.

"Teach me to ride like you do." Her skirts whispered behind him. "Please. I won't tell my father if you don't."

"He'll know, believe me." Night Hawk tossed the coiled rope over the fence post, fighting with himself. No one had made him laugh in a long time. Maybe it wouldn't hurt....

No, he shouldn't do it. He wouldn't do it. "Let me grab my musket and I'll see you home."

"I can find my way back." Marie's chin lifted.

Her bonnet ties and long wavy curls framed her face, and he couldn't look away.

It was as if he'd seen her face a thousand times in his thoughts since he'd saved her from the runaway horse. Turning his back and walking away from her hurt as if a knife were slicing him.

Maybe walking with her wasn't such a good idea.

"I'll wait on the path near the lake, then," he said without looking at her again. "I can keep an eye on you for most of the way to the settlement. Meka will stay with you. He'll scare off any wild animals."

"Thank you." She placed her woman-soft hand in his as she climbed over the fence.

Fire seared through his veins for the brief moment it took her to reach the ground.

“Can I come back and watch you train her?” An innocent longing gleamed in her eyes. Her face was flushed from the excitement and pleasure of working with Kammeo.

“Can I stop you?”

“No.” She was passion and beauty, and far out of his reach.

He couldn't keep from noticing the sway of her body beneath that dress. He couldn't halt the pounding desire for her in his blood.

She'll never be yours. He knew it. But that truth didn't stop him from wanting her long after she'd disappeared from his sight or deep into the night where he lay alone in his bed.

Always alone.

Chapter Five

A dog's welcoming bark shattered the serene lakeside meadow. Loons and warblers rose from the tall grasses with squawks of protest. Butterflies feeding on the fragrant wildflowers scattered on the wind. On the sun-bright water, a pair of ducks and their half-grown chicks glided farther into the lake.

The huge black dog bounded down the grassy path, his tongue lolling. He leaped at her, his face friendly. Not knowing how to stop him, Marie accepted his big paws on her shoulders and rubbed his ears until Night Hawk's voice thundered across the shoreline.

"Meka. Down."

Marie laughed when the dog lunged at her basket. "You'll have to wait like a gentleman," she told him.

"If you're looking for gentlemen, you're in the wrong territory." Night Hawk halted on the path in front of her, winded from running. His chest rose and fell, attracting her gaze. He wore dark trousers and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows. She noticed his shirt was unbuttoned again and showed a wedge of bronze chest.

He'd been working in his fields, shirtless, and she'd missed it. Longing swept through her. "You said I could come back. I brought baked goods so you'd let me stay longer this time."

"Baked goods?" The stony look on his face softened. "Give me that basket."

"You must have a sweet tooth."

"A great big one." When he took the basket from her, he was careful to keep his fingers well away from hers. As they walked, he kept a respectful distance between them.

"Were you cutting more hay?" she asked.

"Oats this time. The cut grass is still drying." He didn't look at her but strode with leashed power that made her think of a wolf stalking prey.

She'd thought of him many times in the passing days, but she realized her remembered images of him paled when compared to the reality. He seemed taller, imposing, and so essentially masculine that she felt small next to him.

"My niece Morning Star said she met you." Night Hawk held aside a low fir branch that hung over the path so Marie could easily pass. "She said you came in your buggy with the sergeant."

"Morning Star is your niece?" Marie hadn't considered that the native family she'd visited yesterday morning could be related to Night Hawk. "I bet she'll be one of my best students."

"She was first in her class last year when the school was first opened." Pride expanded his shoulders even wider. "She rode over this morning on her pony and told me all about you."

"Is she excited for school to start?"

"She can't wait. I'm told she likes reading best."

"I'll remember that." Marie thought of all the children she'd met so far. "Some parents are hesitant to send their children to learn from the fort teacher. I'm hoping my visits will make a difference."

As they crested the small rise and Night Hawk's land spread out around them in gentle rolling hills of green and gold, of grazing horses and thriving crops, Marie couldn't imagine being lucky enough to live in a cozy log cabin like he did. Or gaze through the window to see foals romping in the pastures while their mothers watched.

He held out his hand to help her over the fence.

Fire consumed her in hot, bright sparkles that made it impossible to ignore. She was thoroughly attracted to the man.

Kammeo broke over the crest of the hill, mane and tail flying, strong legs churning the ground as she galloped. The sight of her stole Marie's breath.

She's mine, all mine. Happiness wrapped her up like a thick down quilt, and with Night Hawk at her side, Marie imagined just for a moment what it would be like to stay like this forever.

Another foolish daydream, but even as she tried to force the wish from her mind, it remained.

Kammeo charged down the hill like a warhorse and skidded to a stop dangerously near. But Night Hawk didn't move a muscle, so Marie wasn't afraid. She reached into her skirt pocket.

Kammeo nickered in approval and, as if she'd read Marie's mind, had her teeth around the treat in Marie's hand the instant she'd taken it from her pocket.

"Spoiling her already?"

"I'm trying my best." Marie laughed as the sugar cookie disappeared in one quick bite. "Lucky I have more. Have you worked with her already today?"

"No, I train the horses in the afternoon." He said nothing more as he turned, leaving her alone with Kammeo.

The horse nudged Marie's pocket, wise to its contents, and made an affectionate nickering sound. How could Marie resist? She withdrew another cookie and loved the feel of Kammeo's soft lips on her palm.

Was she really here and not dreaming? Marie marveled at this exceptional moment in time. The warm sun kissed her with a welcome heat, and the shivering grasses and wildflowers sent dazzling fragrances into the clean air. Birds chirped and butterflies glided. Kammeo leaned her nose against Marie, pressing from her breastbone to her stomach, and contentment filled her, warm and sweet.

She knew the instant Night Hawk returned. The sun felt brighter and the wind sweeter. Harmony flooded her, like a melody finding harmony. All the pieces of her life fell into place. A beautiful sense of rightness filled her as Night Hawk shouldered past her, the bridle in hand.

She resisted the urge to lay her hand against the high plane of his cheek. But she knew.

Everything in her life had happened for a reason—and it was to bring her here—to this meadow, to this man.

"She's still afraid of my weight." The colonel's daughter spun toward him in the shaded circle of the corral. "I'm doing this wrong."

"No, she needs time to learn to trust you." Night Hawk fought to keep his feelings for the woman neutral. "She's getting tired, aren't you, girl? Don't worry, Marie. She'll let you know when she's ready."

"I'll trust you on that."

"You seem to like working with her."

"Sure, but I remember you saying that you would train her."

He laughed because he saw the teasing sparkles in her eyes. "You said you wanted to ride like I do. That is something only you and Kammeo can do together."

"I knew you were going to say that." Marie laid one slender hand against the fence. Exhaustion marked her delicate skin, but her face was flushed with pleasure.

He ought to send her home. Every instinct he had roared at him to keep his distance. But his heart overruled. He told himself he had a fondness for a fellow horse lover, that was all. But he was only lying to himself and he knew it.

"I'm out of cookies." The gentle trill of her laughter drew him. Kammeo was nosing at Marie's skirt pocket again, determined to find the treat she deserved for putting up with that scary experience of having a little weight on her back. "Night Hawk, what do I do?"

"I'll get some grain." He liked rescuing Marie, if only from her overly affectionate mare.

When he returned with a small pail of grain and a currycomb, he found Kammeo chewing contentedly and Marie rubbing her nose. The picnic basket was in the grass just outside the fence, evidence that Marie hadn't waited for the grain.

"Gave in, did you?" He set the pail on the ground in front of the mare as she stole another cookie from Marie's hand.

"I couldn't resist."

"How do you keep discipline in a classroom with that soft heart of yours?"

"I use the same method I do with Kammeo. I win them over with cookies."

"The children in this settlement are lucky that you came to teach them. Is that what you brought me in your basket? Cookies?"

"Yes. You should have seen the outrage on Mrs. Olstad's face when she came in from shopping to find me making a mess in her kitchen. She must think I'm some sort of pampered, spoiled little girl. She didn't believe me when I promised I wouldn't set the kitchen afire and I'd clean up afterward."

"I bet she wasn't happy when you proved her wrong."

"She forbade me to step foot in her kitchen again, but I'm planning on winning her over. I'm not sure cookies will work."

How Marie charmed him. Like stars drawing the moon across the sky, Night Hawk felt a potent, undeniable attraction. Intense desire turned his blood to liquid fire. Never had he wanted anything as much as the right to draw Marie into his arms and claim her as his.

A dangerous need. One he refused to give in to.

Hands trembling, he pulled a currycomb out of the second pail and concentrated on grooming the horse. Long, gliding strokes along the mare's flank that kept him from thinking about Marie.

But he heard the tap of her shoe on the earth and a clatter of steel against the small bucket. Marie wasn't so easy to ignore. She gently assured Kammeo there were no more cookies in her pocket.

He should send Marie home now, while he still could. He'd finish training the horse himself and there would be no more visits. No more temptation.

That's what he should do.

"I brought something besides the cookies," Marie said as she watched him across the span of the mare's withers. "It's not for you, I'm afraid. I brought some books Morning Star might like to read. You said she rides her pony over to visit you. I don't think I'll get a chance to see her before school starts."

"What kind of books?"

"A few children's stories about horses. I hope that will keep her excited about going to school."

As the wind caressed her hair and the sun graced her with fire, Marie wasn't just beauty, but spirit too.

One that touched his.

Night Hawk felt his steel will melt like a candle beneath a hot flame.

How was he going to resist her now?

The excitement of preparing the schoolhouse was a shadow when compared to the brightness Marie felt from being with Night Hawk. She loved teaching but it wasn't the reason she hummed as she tottered on the low stool to hang the curtains she'd made.

"Miss Lafayette?" a woman's modest voice broke the silence.

The curtain rod fell from Marie's fingers. "Goodness, you surprised me. I didn't hear you on the steps. Please, come in."

Spring Rain, Morning Star's mother, studied the desks lined in neat rows. "The children will learn well here."

"I sure hope so." Marie hopped off the stool and rescued the fallen curtains. "I hope all your children will be attending?"

"We shall see. My husband is not sure. He doesn't see the use in his sons knowing letters and numbers." Spring Rain hesitated in the center of the room. "Morning Star is my first husband's daughter, Night Hawk's brother, and so Running Deer will allow her to attend school. Night Hawk brought your books this morning. I came to thank you."

"I hope she enjoys them." Marie fit the wood rod over the wooden pins, and the green gingham curtains cascaded into place. "Would you like some tea? I have cookies, too."

“My sweet tooth is my weakness.” She accepted with warm laughter. “Your father has done great things in this settlement. It has been hard with my people leaving. Only a few of us remain.”

This was about Night Hawk, Marie realized as she poured two cups of tea.

“I know that Night Hawk is training a horse for you.” Spring Rain accepted the cup and cradled it in her hands.

“Yes. She’s a beautiful mare.” Marie set the plate of cookies on the desk between them.

“Night Hawk is an attractive man,” Spring Rain said quietly. “He has magic with horses. His father was a great horseman.”

Marie heard what Spring Rain was afraid to say. All of it. How Father had made things better for her people and the settlers, bringing teachers and trying to make a community where everyone belonged—whether they spoke German, Swedish, English or Sauk.

“I won’t hurt him, I promise.” Marie spoke the words sincerely, meaning them with her entire heart. “I’m only buying a horse from him.”

“But there is more.” Spring Rain set down her cup, the cookies forgotten. “He has known many heartaches and losses. He is alone and that is not good for a man capable of great tenderness. You may not see what I do, but you can hurt him. I came to ask that you think on what I’ve said.”

Genuine concern filled the woman’s eyes. She nodded once and left with the whisper of deerskin and the pad of moccasins.

Marie stood and pulled the edge of the curtain back. Four boys and a girl stood quietly in the shade of a sugar maple just outside the schoolyard. Spring Rain hurried to them, head down as if she still struggled with her emotion. The little girl with twin black braids looked up at the schoolhouse and waved.

Marie waved back, her heart heavy. She hadn’t realized all that was at stake in this settlement where so many different people had come to make a better life.

This surely was a place where a woman like her could fall in love with a man like Night Hawk. Without consequences. Without prejudices. Without causing harm.

Still, the memory of Spring Rain’s concern remained in Marie’s thoughts the rest of the morning.

“That’s right, Kammeo,” Night Hawk praised as he tightened the cinch. “Marie, hold her tighter.”

“She’s starting to shy.”

“Just speak calmly to her.” Night Hawk remained at Kammeo’s side, close enough to reach the leather reins in case Marie had any trouble.

She uttered soft, soothing words that reassured the mare, who wasn’t sure about the leather thing resting on her back.

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