

Mountain Wild

A Historical Romance

by Judith Bronte

Josiah Brown is a half-breed Blackfoot mountain man, trapping the Rocky Mountain streams for beaver and fur. In the process of saving the daughter of an immigrant from raiding Blackfoot Indians, Josiah decides to take the white woman as his wife. Hardened by the wilderness and his own past, the trapper wrestles against change and the gentle ways of a woman who threatens to tame his heart.

Through circumstances beyond her control, Emma Perkins suddenly finds herself the wife of a wild and leathery mountain man. His rough and tumble temperament go against her upbringing, and Emma struggles to keep her faith and survive in a land where the animals, and the people, are mountain wild.

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Introduction

In the year "Mountain Wild" begins, the American frontier was still in its infancy. The exploits of Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett were fresh in the hearts and minds of Americans, for their legends were still relatively new. These famous frontiersmen led the way for a nation expanding ever westward, and those who followed in their footsteps were eager to prove themselves equal to the challenge.

A certain breed of men picked up where America's early frontiersmen left off. They were the mountain men. Rocky Mountain trappers hunted the streams in search of beaver, and explored lands that had never before seen white men.

From about 1824 to 1840, mountain men hired by fur companies formed brigades that trekked deep into the wilderness in pursuit of pelts. The furs they caught were later shipped back to "polite society" and turned into hats and all manner of goods.

The few who did not work for fur companies were called free trappers. These mountain men answered to none but themselves, and like their company counterparts, often became as wild and untamed as the Rocky Mountain wilderness in which they lived and died.

This story begins with a free trapper.

Chapter One
Into the Wild

1836, near Jackson Hole, in what would later become the State of Wyoming.

That the generation to come, "might not be as their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation; a generation that set not their heart aright, and whose spirit was not stedfast with God."

~ Psalm 78:8~

"He will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him."

~ Genesis 16:12 ~

The day was looking to be a bust, even though beaver signs were evident along the banks of the stream. Beaver were getting scarce in most places, but Josiah Brown knew this small area of the stream was not well-known to trappers, and still had beaver to be found. Even so, this knowledge would do him little good, if he couldn't catch his elusive quarry.

Josiah sighed as the last of his traps came up empty. "They ain't coming to medicine," he muttered dully. Josiah's bait usually proved successful, but today the furry animals were staying away, and it only added to the trapper's consternation. Nothing seemed to be going right, and by the way things were transpiring, the rest of his day would probably be filled with the same bad luck.

The surface of the water broke nearby and Josiah's eye caught sight of a brown animal quickly diving back to the underwater entrance of its lodge.

"I'll git you yet," he promised the beaver, as he waded out of the water and headed for his pants. Pulling on the last of his buckskins, the unexpected sound of a gunshot cracked through the air, jerking Josiah's head up in attention. Instinctively, he grabbed his Hawken rifle, and scanned the line of timber on both sides of the stream.

Josiah frowned. The wildlife had gone quiet, and he had been too busy with the beaver to even notice it until now. It was dangerous for a man to be caught off guard, and Josiah silently scolded himself for being taken by surprise. The gunshot had been nearby, and the sound of it carried easily against the Rocky Mountains flanking him on either side. Lightly tensing his muscles in readiness, Josiah placed his rifle in the crook of his arm and gathered the last of his gear. Even though he was expecting his companions any day now, until Josiah knew who had fired the shot, he would not rest easy.

As Josiah cautiously picked his way through the trees and peered onto the open stretch of plain before him, he spotted a man sprawled on the ground beside a wagon. The man wasn't moving, and even from this distance, Josiah saw the bloody scalp where someone had ripped his hair away as a trophy.

Josiah lowered his Hawken rifle. The man's attackers were already gone, and there was little to do but dig a hole and put what was left of the unfortunate man beneath the ground. As he moved toward the carnage, Josiah mused to himself. It was odd to find immigrants so far North, and he was almost glad the man had been stopped. Josiah hoped the frontier would never be tamed, and a part of him laughed for even thinking it might. If everyone was as crazy as this here immigrant, he didn't have anything to worry about! Fool man. Trying to cross the Rockies where there wasn't passage, and getting himself killed by the first Indian he come across. This was a wild land, and you couldn't survive unless you had some hardness in you. Josiah nudged the bloody form with his moccasin. Like this here immigrant. He didn't have what it took to be a mountain man, and likely never would, even if he had survived his attackers.

"Poor old fool," muttered Josiah in a fit of pity. His assailants had cut away a circle of his scalp, exposing his white skull to the sun. Josiah bent down to see if the pockets of his shirt held anything valuable, when the immigrant's face twitched to life, and two startled eyes locked with Josiah's.

"Please," the man rasped, "my daughter! They took my daughter!" He caught hold of Josiah's buckskin shirt and held him fast with a blood covered hand. "Save her!"

This sudden coming to life had startled Josiah, though his face betrayed little emotion. Instead, he raised his eyes to the plain, as if trying to see what he had been unable to before. "Which way did they head?" he asked.

When the man could find no breath to speak, his eyes pointed North.

If a body kept going in that direction, he would find himself in Blackfoot country. Though they were out of their usual territory, it made sense to Josiah that this immigrant had been attacked by Blackfoot Indians. Their hatred of the white man had only grown since trappers discovered beaver was more plentiful in their lands; Blackfoot gave no quarter to neighboring Indians nor white man, and almost always killed any trespassers they found.

"Headed North, was they?" muttered Josiah.

The immigrant's eyesight was dimmed by his fast approaching death, and he couldn't see the man dressed in skins before him. If he had, he would've had reason to fear that his daughter might be exchanging one trouble for another.

"I'm afeared you're done in," Josiah informed the dying man.

"I realize it," he gasped. "Leave me... save her!" The hand turned Josiah's shirt loose, and it clutched his own bloodstained chest before it finally dropped to the ground in one last fit of agony.

Josiah straightened himself, and looked down at the lifeless form at his feet. "They was in a hurry, Mister. You would've been cut up something turrible, if they hadn't." With a sigh, Josiah strode back to his horse and pack animal. If the immigrant's daughter didn't catch the Blackfoots' fancy, he knew she wouldn't last very long. The Blackfoot had a respectable head start, and it would take some doing if he were to catch up with them before nightfall.

Emma Perkins kept trying to look behind her, struggling to get a glimpse of the father that she was hoping would come and save her. She had seen his torture, but a ragged hope kept tugging at her that maybe he had survived. But no Pa appeared, and as her captors took her farther and farther away from the wagon, she knew that he was dead.

Emma never felt so alone in her entire life, but the will to survive kept her from dwelling on grief for very long. Her leg had been injured during the attack, and it had bled for quite some time before drying to the petticoats beneath her dark blue one-piece dress. With every jolting step of her mount, pain shot through her leg and threatened her consciousness.

Seated behind her on the horse, an Indian kept his arm around her torso, making sure that she couldn't escape. Riding a sorrel, a younger Indian proudly trotted beside them, attracting as much of Emma's attention as he could by displaying his horsemanship with trick riding and loud whooping calls.

Even though she tried to avoid direct eye contact with her captors, Emma observed them whenever she had the chance. She felt a strange fascination for these men with long hair and greasy buckskins, and it mixed with the numb horror of what she had seen them do to her father. What kind of man could do such a thing, as to take the scalp of another human--especially before he was dead? Emma was sure she didn't want to know. These men had ripped apart her world without warning, and now she was helplessly in their hands.

Except for the few Indians Emma had seen from a safe distance back in Indiana, and the ones who had stared at her at trading posts along the way, these were the first she had ever closely encountered. Emma didn't know what to do, but here she caught herself. She could pray. She could always pray, and with every pang of grief she felt for her father, she also offered a prayer to Heaven for herself.

As the shadows started growing longer, Emma's thoughts turned to what nightfall might bring. The Indians were keeping her alive for a reason, and Emma didn't like to think what that reason might be.

His mount was getting tired, but Josiah pressed on. Light was fading fast, and if he didn't find the immigrant's daughter soon, he would have to stop and make camp until morning. As nightfall swallowed the Rocky Mountains, it occurred to Josiah that a campfire would show up well against the vast darkness. The Blackfoot would only light a night fire if they didn't think they were being pursued, and Josiah was pretty certain they didn't know about him yet. These Indians were in a hurry to get back to their tribe, and Josiah figured that meant they were also a little careless. If only they could be so careless as to leave a fire burning, long enough for him to get a bead on their location.

Since he was having a string of bad luck that day, Josiah figured he wouldn't find hide nor hair of the Blackfoot, and would be forced to make camp until morning. Then he saw it. Flickering in the distance, a small campfire burning against the night sky. A faint grin flashed across Josiah's face. Maybe his luck was turning for the better after all.

Her two captors had eaten, and now they sat around the campfire intently talking with each other and repeatedly nodding in Emma's direction. They had left her tied to a nearby tree, and placed her on a bed of pine needles covered with a buffalo robe. Huddled against the tree, Emma sat on the robe and struggled to keep her eyes open. She was exhausted, but didn't dare fall asleep. As their talk turned to argument, Emma had a suspicion they were debating who would get her first.

"Please, God," she prayed into the night wind, "take my life first, and let me die!" Emma tried to remember the word from a certain Bible verse, but couldn't recall the words, so she added, "They will be done."

Suddenly, a cold wind came up from the plain behind them and rushed over the campsite, stirring grass and leaves, and nearly putting out their fire. As one Indian reached out to throw

more wood onto the flame, his arm stopped in midair. Alarmed, he nodded to his companion, and both scrambled for their rifles.

A man emerged from the darkness and approached the ring of light surrounding their fire.

From her vantage, Emma strained her eyes to see who this newcomer was. Even though she realized how foolish the hope was, for a fleeting moment, she thought it was her father. As the fire cast its light on the tall set of buckskins approaching the fire, Emma's hopes of rescue quickly evaporated and her heart sank. It was another Indian.

Josiah held his rifle in a casual manner to show the Blackfoot that he was friendly. He spoke Blackfoot fluently, though the two Indians saw that he was dressed more in the style of a mountain man, than a Blackfoot warrior. The two alert Indians eyed Josiah warily.

"I've come far," Josiah spoke to them in Blackfoot, "from the land to the South." He motioned to his stomach. "No buffalo for many moons. Much hunger."

One Indian motioned for him to come closer to the fire.

Cautiously peering from around her tree, Emma squinted her eyes to see what was going on. A while back, her spectacles had been lost when she and her father had crossed a fast moving river in their wagon. Though the water had also swept away most of her belongings, she had missed her spectacles and their family Bible the most.

After trading a few handfuls of coffee beans for some freshly killed elk meat, the two Blackfoot allowed Josiah to join them at the fire. While Josiah cooked his meat and turned it every now and then, he told them of his miserable luck. "No beaver," he sighed. "Traps all empty."

The two Indians laughed. "White man's medicine is no good."

Josiah pulled at the small wooden bottle hanging from his belt and tossed it to the nearest Indian. "Blackfoot medicine," he pointed to the bottle.

The Blackfoot opened it and took a quick sniff of the rank odor. "Traps bad," he concluded, and tossed it back to Josiah.

"Traps good," Josiah insisted. "Luck bad." His gaze returned to the meat cooking near the fire. Out of the corner of his eye, he could dimly make out a woman's form crouched beside a tree a little ways from the campfire. Her arms were wrapped around a portion of the tree's wide trunk, while rope finished the distance between her bound hands, making it impossible for her to move

or even lay down. "Luck very bad," he repeated to himself slowly, knowing that the two Blackfoot were still listening. "Need to get drunk."

At this, the two Indians sat alert and at attention. "Whiskey?" asked one. "You have whiskey?"

"I have whiskey," nodded Josiah.

"You give whiskey," the older Indian demanded.

Calmly, Josiah regarded the cooking meat. "Can't get drunk," he shook his head gravely. "Just half a jug."

"You give," insisted the Indian once more.

Josiah thought it over, and slowly shook his head. "Last jug is worth much."

The Blackfoot waited for Josiah to name his price.

"Much bad luck," Josiah sighed. "Need woman to make happy again. Need wife."

The older of the two Blackfoot suspiciously narrowed his eyes at Josiah. Then he looked at Emma and then back at Josiah again. "You come to free white woman," he deduced, his hand gripping the rifle that remained in his lap. Hearing this, the younger Indian suddenly lifted his weapon and pointed it at Josiah.

Josiah's face remained undisturbed. He turned the cooking meat over and shook his head. "Need wife," he repeated sadly. "Need woman more than whiskey."

At this, the younger Indian laughed, but kept his rifle aimed at Josiah's belly.

"We have woman," the older Indian informed Josiah, pointing to Emma's tree. "You take her for whiskey?"

"That depends," Josiah hesitated. "Take woman for good, or for one night?"

"One night," the Indian gruffly replied.

"Need wife," insisted Josiah. "One night not good. Must keep."

"You come to save white woman," the Indian once again concluded. "You not want wife. You take woman and maybe kill us."

Josiah let out a small laugh, as if the thought amused him. "You give woman as wife, I give jug of whiskey."

The young Indian seemed somewhat agreeable, but the older was still suspicious. "You take to wife," he said, pointing to Emma's tree, "and we take whiskey. You not take her to wife, we kill you." The Indian pointed his rifle at Josiah as if to make his point.

So they were going to test him. Josiah looked at the woman still trying to hide behind the tree. "Take to wife there?" he asked.

"There."

"For one jug of whiskey?"

"Whiskey," the Blackfoot nodded.

"Wife must be virgin," Josiah continued to bargain.

The Indian laughed grimly. "If she not bleed, you take back whiskey."

The two leveled their eyes at each other, letting the silence finish their communication. Josiah finally nodded in agreement.

The younger Indian let out a whoop and jumped to his feet to follow Josiah back to his horse for the half a jug of whiskey. When they returned to the campfire, Josiah handed over the jug to the older of the two Blackfoot, for he clearly seemed to be the leader.

The Indian accepted the jug, sloshing its contents about to determine if there was anything left. When he was satisfied that there was indeed some whiskey still left, he waited to see if Josiah would fulfill their deal, for he still suspicioned Josiah had come to save the white woman. As Josiah started off for the tree, he called after him, "You take white woman to wife. I come see."

Emma filled with dread as one of the Indians started heading toward her tree. As he came closer, she was able to distinguish his dress, and noted that he wore buckskins like a white man, and not the loincloth and leather leggings of her captors.

Crouching as far away from him as her bound arms would let her, Emma kept to the shadows as the man sat down on the buffalo robe. He looked at her for a moment, and then unsheathed a long knife. Emma gasped in fear, thinking he meant to kill her. Instead of putting the knife to her scalp, however, the man leaned forward and cut the rope binding her hands about the tree. Emma rubbed her sore wrists, and shrank even further into the shadows behind her.

"You sure got yourself in a mighty tight fix, Ma'am," he declared, returning the knife to his belt and letting his arms drape over the rifle across his lap.

Emma was startled when she heard his voice. He spoke English like a white man!

Josiah looked at the campfire, allowing the woman to get a glimpse of his face in the dim light. He had no beard, and an eagle feather dangled from long dark hair that went past his shoulders. Emma could see the strong cheekbones of her captors in his face, but also something more. He didn't quite look like the other Indians.

"I'm half Indian, Ma'am," he finally answered her unspoken question. "Half Blackfoot, half white-- but all mountain man." At this, he grinned proudly. "Name's Josiah Brown." The woman was crouched in the shadow of the tree, so Josiah was unable to see her face or to tell whether she was happy if he was there. When he heard the rapid intake of her frightened breath, Josiah understood she was still afraid.

"Have you come to save me, Mr. Brown?"

"That depends," he hesitated, "on what you're meaning by 'saved.' Saved from them there Blackfoot... or from me?"

"Both." Her answer was quick and decisive, and it made Josiah shake his head apologetically.

"I'm afraid you can't have it both ways, Ma'am." Sensing she was about to bolt, Josiah quickly reached into the darkness and took hold of her by the ankle. "Them Blackfoot will kill us both if I don't take you to wife," he informed her bluntly.

At the feel of his grip, Emma struggled to free her ankle. "I don't believe you!" she cried. "You're one of them!"

Just then, the leader of the two Indians stood up from the campfire and looked in their direction.

Every muscle in Josiah's being tensed as he waited to see if the Indian was going to come and check him now, or not. "You'd best be believing me," Josiah growled in a low rumble, his eyes remaining glued to the campfire. His left hand gripped his Hawken rifle. The Indian was staring hard in their direction, as if trying to make up his mind. "Not now," Josiah's breath came out in a barely audible whisper. "Not yit. I ain't ready fer you yit." When the Indian sat back down with his jug of whiskey, Emma felt the hand on her ankle loosen its grip by just a little. "I'd better git started afore he comes," muttered Josiah, pinning Emma to the buffalo robe with one strong leg to free his hand from her ankle. "You got kin, Ma'am?"

"No," she whimpered.

"What about a man? You got a man?"

"No."

"You're gonna have one now," he declared, "so you'd better start getting used to me, Ma'am."

"Please, let me go, Mr. Brown!" begged Emma.

Josiah pulled off his buckskin hunting shirt and looked back at the campfire one more time. "Wisht I had me more whiskey. They ain't gonna git drunk off'a what's left in that jug."

Behind the deep shadow of the wide tree, Josiah crawled to Emma and lay down beside her on the buffalo robe. "I ain't had a woman in quite a spell," he breathed quietly, "but I'll try not to bother you too much."

Emma whimpered helplessly as Josiah's mouth found hers. When she wouldn't return his kiss, the mountain man left off kissing and continued on with his business.

What else happened behind the tree, I won't say, but when the Blackfoot Indian came to see if Josiah was true to his word, the Indian left, content that Josiah really had wanted a wife.

As the sky overhead began to change hue with the coming of morning, Josiah propped himself up on one elbow and peered down at the sleeping woman beside him.

"Yeller hair," he wondered in amazement. Josiah had once seen a woman with yellow hair, but she had been the wife of a prominent white man, and had been decidedly off limits to her many admirers. Josiah took a loose strand of the long blonde hair and rubbed it between his fingers. It flowed behind the woman's head and cascaded in a gentle wave of captured sunlight.

The soft light of day finally revealed Emma's face to the man, and he saw that she was probably about as old as he was-- most likely coming on thirty years of age. How could a woman who looked like this, still be a virgin? The night before had confirmed this fact to Josiah; he didn't need to check for any blood in her petticoats to know that she had never known a man before him. The graceful curve of her cheek, the long eyelashes, the rose colored lips that had refused to kiss him, all held Josiah's rapt attention.

Feeling someone's breath on her face, Emma's eyes suddenly fluttered open in alarm. A rough hand quickly smothered her cry, and an eagle feather dangled in her face as its owner turned to look back at the cold campfire.

"They've been taking turns all night, and staying up to keep an eye on us. I've an oneasy feeling they ain't done with us," he softly breathed, turning back to look at the woman. Josiah wasn't prepared for the frightened brown eyes that met his, and he had to swallow hard and steady his voice before speaking. "Morning Ma'am."

From beneath the long lashes Josiah had been admiring, Emma gazed at him with curiosity. His chest felt greasy, and he had a rank smell that suggested he hadn't bathed in awhile. Against the light of day, Emma saw that his hair wasn't black after all, but a dark shade of brown that lightened at the tips-- very much like a grizzly bear. There was a slight curl to it that nearly made Emma smile, for she easily guessed he had been curly headed as a boy. Besides his tall stature and solid build, his face was his most prominent feature. It was strong and unyielding, and bespoke a hard life seasoned with experience. Then there were those piercing dark eyes that seemed to bore straight into her. Shifting uncomfortably on the buffalo robe, Emma realized she was staring, and awkwardly tried to look elsewhere.

"Excuse me, Ma'am," Josiah apologized, "but I don't believe you ever told me your name."

Mortified, Emma bit her lip. How could she possibly be married to a perfect stranger, who didn't even know her name? Emma felt the touch of his hand as he stroked her long mane.

"Your name?" he pressed once more.

"Emma. Emma Perkins."

A noise from the campsite momentarily distracted Josiah, and Emma could feel the eagle feather on her neck as he turned to see if both Indians were awake. When he saw just the one, Josiah looked back at Emma. "They ain't gonna let go of a beauty like you, for no half a jug of whiskey. I reckon I'm a dead man, unless I do something about it afore they do."

The young Blackfoot yawned and looked back at the tree. He could still see Josiah's moccasins, and was satisfied that the trapper was still asleep. The Indian eyed the empty whiskey jug on the ground and wished Josiah had had more. That one jug had bought the mountain man a night with the white captive, but now that it was day, he was going to be in for a surprise.

From his hiding spot behind some trees, Josiah was prepared to rush the young Indian from behind. His plan was interrupted, however, when the older Blackfoot unexpectedly roused from his sleep and started talking with the other in guarded whispers.

Josiah was silently scolding himself for getting such a late start on things, when he suddenly heard footsteps close to his hiding spot. Realizing that his presence was about to be discovered, Josiah quickly dropped his pants and started relieving himself. Just then, a face peered at him through the bushes. "Howdy," Josiah nodded to the Blackfoot.

The Indian grunted and went to inform his companion that the mountain man was already awake.

When Josiah had finished, the older of the two Blackfoot approached him with a rifle, while the younger stood at his side, equally armed. "Woman bleed?" he asked.

Josiah hesitated, recognizing the guarded stance of both men. "Woman was virgin," he nodded.

"No want whiskey back?" the older Indian laughed without smiling.

Josiah was sizing them up, and knew he had guessed correctly. They were not going to let him leave this camp alive. "No want whiskey back," he shook his head. "Woman was virgin," then he added in English, "and I aim to keep her." Josiah pointed his rifle in the direction of his horse. "Want more whiskey?" he asked in Blackfoot.

Instead of the eager looks they had given him the night before when the subject of liquor had been broached, the two Blackfoot remained unchanged. By their lack of enthusiasm, Josiah knew he was in for a fight.

"I git whiskey," he nodded to them. With measured even strides, Josiah turned his back to his enemy and started for his horse. As he tightly gripped the sturdy rifle in his hand, Josiah was glad he had double-checked the priming on his Hawken before leaving the buffalo robe that morning. One on his left, and one on his right. Josiah didn't like the odds. He reckoned he could get off one shot before they both unloaded their weapons into him, but he could only take one

man. That still left the other to deal with. If only he could make it to his horse in time to get his pistol.

The small hairs on the back of Josiah's neck suddenly stood on end. Josiah could sense imminent danger hanging in the air, and he braced himself.

A loud crack sounded, and Josiah felt a biting pain in his shoulder. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the telltale puff of smoke that told him which Indian had fired. Grinning broadly, Josiah rapidly spun around and raised his Hawken at the older Indian who had yet to fire his weapon. Without a moment's hesitation, Josiah squeezed the trigger and the man staggered backward, his rifle discharging into the air as he dropped to the ground. Then Josiah unsheathed his Bowie knife and let out a bloodcurdling war cry.

Stunned by the mountain man's nerve and not having enough time to reload his weapon, the young Indian dropped his rifle and grabbed the knife at his side. He didn't have any time, before Josiah was upon him.

Peering from around her tree, Emma timidly checked to see who was winning. One Indian was already dead, while another lay at Josiah's feet, his legs still thrashing about. Emma's blurry vision was unclear, but when she squinted, she could see Josiah's hand take hold of the dying man by his hair, and deftly move something across his scalp.

As Josiah tore away his trophy, he heard the terrified screams of a woman. Alarmed, he checked the empty campsite for an enemy he had missed. When he realized there was no one, Josiah looked back at the tree to Emma. She was standing there, her eyes wide and staring, her face filled with horror.

Josiah took a step toward her and she fled into the trees.

Emma's mind was frantic with the thought of escape! Her eyesight had not been clear, but the little she had seen was more than enough to make her sick with fright. He was just like those two Indians after all, and she had been naive to hope that he wasn't! Branches flailed at her body as she thrust herself heedlessly into the forest, desperately trying to find a hiding place from the monster that she was sure was now pursuing her.

"Ma'am!" a voice called out from behind.

Finding no place to hide, Emma ran as fast as her wounded leg would carry her. When she felt a hand catch hold of her dress, she screamed uncontrollably.

"Have you gone plumb crazy?" shouted Josiah, struggling to get his arms around her to hold her still.

"Don't kill me!" she screamed, gripping the arms holding her around the waist. "Please, don't kill me!"

"Calm down, Ma'am!" Josiah's voice was getting more agitated by the moment, until he finally pushed her to the forest floor and weighted her down with his body.

As she squirmed beneath him, Emma's hand touched the still dripping, gruesome trophy hanging from Josiah's belt; it rapidly sent her into renewed hysterics.

Josiah reached for his belt and tossed aside the offending scalp. Then he pinned Emma's arms to the ground by her wrists.

"I ain't gonna hurt you!" he huffed into her face. The adrenaline from battle was still fresh in his veins, and his heart was pounding so loudly it nearly drowned out her voice.

"You're just like them!" she cried.

"I never said I was no angel, Emma!"

"That man was still alive!"

"They was the enemy!" Josiah argued. "If I hadn't done it to them, they would've gladly done it to me!"

Emma shook her head. "That doesn't make it right!"

It wasn't a surprise to discover that she had religion, for Josiah had figured as much by the way her father had mumbled God's name in prayer before death.

By now, Emma was weeping pitifully beneath him, horrified at this man who had taken her as his wife.

"Now, now," Josiah tried to soothe her, "I ain't all that bad." His conscience smarted a bit from his lie. Not liking what he knew Emma must be thinking about him, Josiah tried to distract her by running his hand down her arm. When Emma's sobs broke off in a gasp of inadvertent pleasure, Josiah saw his chance for a little revenge. "Stop blaming yourself fer having a good time," he chided.

When Emma felt the humiliation of his remark, it filled her with indignation and confused shame. By the look on her face, Josiah knew she was still struggling to reconcile her senses with what her upbringing had taught her was right.

"Are you trying to tell me you didn't enjoy last night?" he laughed at her mockingly.

"I can't be married to you," answered Emma. "You aren't a Christian."

Josiah dropped his head and placed his lips against her ear. He felt Emma shudder at his touch. "If we ain't married, then what does that make you? No, Emma, you're mine now. I was the first to lay with you, and fer as long as I live, you won't lay with anyone else. Do you hear?"

Emma's breathing had slowed and her strength expended by the constant drain of emotion she was presently enduring.

"I wanna hear you say it!" demanded Josiah, his face only inches from hers.

Emma felt the full weight of Josiah bearing down on her body.

"Say it!" he growled.

"I won't lay with anyone else but you," she finally mumbled.

"And who am I?" Josiah squeezed her wrists until her hands tingled.

"You're my husband," whimpered Emma.

"Say it again!"

"You're my husband." Emma's face was getting quite pale now, and Josiah was beginning to think he might have pushed her too far.

"If I let you up, you promise not to run?" he asked.

"I promise."

Josiah climbed off Emma and she struggled to sit up. Her leg was hurting something fierce, and when she touched it, her face lit up with pain.

"I'd better git a look at that," said Josiah, brusquely pushing back her dress and petticoats without even a "May I?"

Emma grimaced, unwilling to look at the wound.

"It's deep," declared Josiah, getting to his feet soberly. "I need to fetch you back to camp."

"I'm too tired," Emma shook off the hand that tried to help her up. "I want to stay here."

"Stop talking nonsense," he scolded.

Her emotions numb, Emma curled up on her side and shut her eyes. Perhaps this was all a bad dream that would go away with sleep.

"That wound needs tending to, Emma." Unwilling to wait any longer for her compliance, Josiah hoisted Emma over his shoulder and started back for camp.

Draped over Josiah's shoulder, Emma was seeing the world entirely upside down and from the vantage of his backside. The leather fringe on the bottom of his buckskin shirt swayed and danced back and forth as he moved, and for awhile the hypnotic movement entertained Emma. Then she noticed that the seat of his leather britches were black, while the rest of his buckskins were mostly dark brown. Why was that? It wasn't easy to think too hard with so much blood rushing to her head, but Emma finally concluded that it was because Josiah sat in the saddle so much of the time.

Just when Emma was certain that her own bottom had been deprived of every drop of blood, having been distributed entirely to her head and feet, Josiah lifted her onto the buffalo robe behind their tree. She noticed he had been careful to take the long way around camp, so she couldn't see the carnage of the slain Blackfoot nearby. Even now, Emma couldn't see anything from the vantage he had placed her.

"Stay put," he commanded before leaving to go restart the campfire.

Emma felt as though she couldn't move, even if she had wanted to, and was quite willing to remain where she was. At least the buffalo hide was softer than the forest floor with all its pine needles coming up to poke her body. Tired, Emma reclined on the makeshift bed and stared at the Autumn canopy of yellow above her. How could something so peaceful as these majestic trees still be possible, when she felt as though her life were over?

"God," Emma prayed once more, "I don't understand."

A gentle breeze picked its way through the trees and caressed Emma's cheek. A prayer Jesus had said in the Garden of Gethsemane came to her mind, and this time Emma could recall every word with perfect clarity, as though she had had an open Bible right before her: "Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but Thine, be done." In the midst of the insanity around her, those words came as a balm to Emma's soul. Hadn't Pa always told her that God had a purpose for everything that happened in their lives? Even the bad things? "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." Romans eight, twenty-eight had been one of Emma's Bible memory verses, for her Pa had promised there would come a time in her life when she would need to remember it. "Emma," he had said, "God has a purpose for your life, and He'll put you where He best sees fit. You just need patience to find where that place is."

Josiah returned and knelt down on the robe beside Emma. He was holding an old knife with a red hot blade, as if he had just drawn it from the fire. "Open yer mouth," he instructed.

Emma's wide eyes fixed on the glowing knife. "Why?" she timidly asked.

Not giving any explanation, Josiah forced a wooden stick between her teeth. "Chomp down," he warned, as he pushed back her dress.

Swallowing a deep gulp of air, Emma braced herself and squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

With the skill of a man who had done this before, Josiah cleaned and cauterized Emma's wound. The second the knife met her skin, Emma clutched in pain and moaned. She would have violently jerked her leg out from under Josiah's knife, but he held her down until his work was finished. When Emma didn't faint as he had expected her to, the mountain man smiled within himself. Brave men had passed out from less, and this woman was showing she had grit.

While Emma's pale face silently watched on, Josiah sat cross-legged on the robe and began tending to his own wounds. He pulled off his buckskin shirt and twisted himself around to get a good look at his shoulder. "I nearly went under with that shot," he remarked, knowing full well that Emma was listening. "That crazy young Blackfoot jumped the gun, and started shooting afore he was supposed to. It plumb took his elder by surprise, and even though his gun were loaded, he hesitated a mite too long." Josiah glanced over to Emma and grinned broadly. "That were all I needed to get him, and get him good! Lookit," he proudly showed off his wound to the woman, "fer all that, the ball only grazed me!" Josiah picked up his buckskin shirt and his face screwed in displeasure. "It sure left a good rip, though."

Josiah got up and went to his packhorse, returning a short while later with an awl and some sinew. He punched the awl into the leather and then forced the sinew through the holes he had made. Then he pulled the leather tight and tied it off.

Examining Emma's wound again, Josiah dressed it and bound it with his red handkerchief. "I'll git us something to eat in awhile," he remarked, lying down beside her. "I'm powerful tired, but we best not sleep fer too long; them bodies will be attracting bears soon." Josiah turned his head and looked at Emma. "You ready to let go of that there stick?" He pried it loose from between her teeth and saw that her face was slowly returning its color. "Too bad there wasn't any whiskey," he yawned, throwing the stick a fair distance away and letting it strike a nearby tree. "Would've come in handy fer yer pain."

Then the man fell asleep, and Emma soon followed.

When Emma awoke, the sun was nearly straight overhead the trees, indicating the center of the day. She could smell something cooking, and when she sat up and leaned past the edge of the tree trunk, she saw Josiah sitting beside the fire, eating strips of elk meat with his Bowie knife. As her eyes drifted toward the mutilated bodies not far from where he sat, Emma forced herself to stop, and quickly lay back down on the robe.

Not long after, Josiah appeared with his Hawken in one hand, and some cooked meat in the other.

"Should've known better than to look," he scolded her, tossing the meat onto her lap.

Sitting up, Emma stared at the meat. Her stomach was empty, but the pain in her leg was throbbing once again and it dulled her hunger.

"You ain't been eating too regular," observed Josiah, squatting down and balancing on the balls of his heels. "When I was feeling you last night, you weren't nothing but skin n' bones." He quietly added to himself that her Pa must not have been a very good shot, for his daughter looked as though she had not had a good meal in a long time.

Emma's stomach rumbled at the sight of food, as if reminding her that even if she didn't feel like it, her stomach did. After saying a quiet prayer to herself, Emma took a small bite. Since there was no salt to be had, the meat was bland. Tasteless or not, once Emma started, she quickly devoured the entire strip of elk Josiah had given her.

"You're with a buffaler hunter now," Josiah told her, "an' you won't be going hungry no more."

While Emma rested awhile longer on the buffalo robe, Josiah readied his horses and then carried Emma out to the sorrel mount the young Blackfoot had been riding.

"You sure don't weigh much," he observed, nearly tossing her onto the horse with hardly any effort. Emma reached out to take her horse's reins, but Josiah firmly kept them in his hand. He mounted his horse, secured the lead rope for his packhorse and the older Indian's pony, and they rode away from the Blackfoots' campsite.

Josiah remained quiet as they rode, his thoughts guardedly kept to himself. He was busy thinking things through, and his decision only seemed to grow more certain the longer they traveled in their present Northerly direction. The mountaineer knew his friends were waiting for him back at Jackson Hole, where they would then move on to winter near their spring trapping grounds to get an early start on next year's hunt. This had been Josiah's plan, that is, up until Emma had changed things.

Even though Emma was timidly accepting his presence, Josiah knew she still had yet to truly accept him as he wanted her to-- as her husband. He also knew that finding a parson to officially marry them was not likely. When white mountain men took Indian wives, the marriage ceremony was often performed by the woman's tribe, and not by a white parson. Josiah's problem was, Emma had no tribe, and no parson would join them in marriage, because the groom was half Indian. Since many decent white folk in this part of the country thought the races should never mix, Josiah figured he was on his own.

With all this, Josiah had another more pressing problem. If Emma ever told any white people of how he had taken her to wife, Josiah guessed he would quickly find himself hanging at the end of a rope. The mountain man tried to convince himself that what he had done was perfectly harmless. So he had suggested to the Blackfoot that he wanted a wife. He had. But Emma owed him as much, after all, he had saved her life.

Josiah glanced back at the horse trailing him, and wondered how Emma was going to treat him when he tussled her that night.

They hadn't been in the saddle for very long, before it was time to find a place to make camp for the night. They had left the Blackfoots' campsite late that same day, and Josiah had been anxious to get some space between them and the slain Indians. Dead humans attracted all the wrong kind of wildlife, especially bears.

"How's yer leg feeling?" asked Josiah, helping Emma down from her horse.

Emma found a large rock nearby and sat down. After being jostled by the horse, it felt good to hold still.

Without asking if he could, Josiah strode toward her and promptly lifted her dress and petticoats to check the handkerchief. Emma flinched as he did this, though it wasn't out of pain; Josiah was like a confident bear that knew he could do whatever he wanted.

"It's doing good," he pronounced, letting down her dress. "Tomorrow morning, we're getting a mite more distance between us and the Blackfoots' camp, and then I'm going hunting."

"You're leaving me?" Emma asked in alarm.

Concealing his pleasure at her distress, Josiah shrugged. "I'll be back by sundown. I wanna hunt buffalo, afore we reach the lodge. Winter's coming on, and I don't hanker chewing hides and tree bark just to keep my belly full."

At this, Emma's ears perked up. "Lodge? What lodge?"

Quietly, Josiah regarded her for a few moments before answering. He could see she was happy with the thought of having something over her head, and realized it had likely been some time since she had had that luxury. "My Pa's cabin is through the Yellowstone, in Blackfoot country," he explained.

"Your Pa?"

"He's dead," shrugged Josiah, as if it mattered little to him. "Unlikely any white men will be bothering us, 'cause they'll be at winter quarters until springtime. Besides, few is crazy enough to go very far into Blackfoot territory, for they hold their scalps too dear."

Upon hearing this, Emma looked extremely hesitant. "I'm fond of mine as well," she confessed.

Josiah laughed. "Your scalp would like mighty fine in some warrior's lodge! Yeller hair ain't common in these parts!"

Instead of shrinking back as Josiah half expected her to, Emma straightened her shoulders and began gathering wood for their campfire. She saw nothing to laugh about, but since she wasn't the one in control, all she could do was follow.

After Emma had gathered enough wood, Josiah took flint and steel and lit themselves a fire. He pulled out the last of the elk meat from the Blackfoot camp and started cooking it on a rock beside the open flame.

It was a cold evening, one that reminded a body that winter was coming. The two ate in silence, and then it came time for Josiah to make their bed. He was about to fetch two blankets from his packhorse, when he hesitated. Josiah looked at Emma sitting beside the fire, enjoying its warmth. She had her hair braided and pinned back in a knot, just the way he had seen women in the settlements do. Absently feeling the blankets, Josiah thought things over for a moment. Instead of two blankets, he only brought back one.

Josiah spread his heavy buffalo robe on the ground, and dropped the blanket onto the robe. "Reckon it's time to turn in now," he said in a voice loud enough for Emma to hear. It was hard not to sneak a look at Emma's face to see her reaction, but Josiah willed himself not to. Instead, he settled onto the robe and lay down with his face to the sky, as if fully expecting her to follow. In silence he waited, but Emma did not come. At last, he couldn't help himself, and raised his head to see where she was. Emma was still beside the campfire, looking very much as though she intended to stay there the entire night.

"Emma?" he called to her. "You coming?"

"I'm perfectly fine where I'm at, thank you," she politely declined.

"That weren't a question, Emma."

When Emma didn't budge, Josiah jumped to his feet and covered the distance between the buffalo robe and the campfire with just a few steps. Without a single word, he swiftly kicked dirt into the fire until the flames died out, and then marched back to his robe and lay back down.

Emma bit her lip. She could feel the threat of tears and struggled to hold them back, for she didn't want to give Josiah the pleasure of knowing he had made her cry.

Beneath the darkening sky, Josiah's voice sounded with a firm unyielding tone. "Who am I, Emma?"

Emma was silent.

"Who am I?" he repeated, this time his voice more forceful than before.

"My husband," at last came her quiet reply.

Josiah waited. He knew she was cold, and wouldn't last the night without a way to keep warm. All he had to do was wait-- though he wasn't willing to wait for very long. She had better come soon, or he was going to fetch her!

Before long, Josiah felt Emma's cold frame crawl under the blanket beside him. When her arm accidentally brushed his, she quickly scooted away from him.

Amused, Josiah folded his arms behind his head and looked up at the vast sky spread above them. It was teeming with stars, so that a body couldn't find so much as a thumbnail of empty space in all the heavens. A large brilliant moon hung above the Rockies, casting its silvery light onto Emma's golden hair, and making her look more ethereal than usual.

Josiah could hardly believe his good fortune! That he could have such a woman as her, was only the day before an impossibility. But here she was, a real flesh and blood reality, and not just the lonely fancy of a half-breed mountain man.

Before finally settling down to sleep, Emma inched away from Josiah just a little more. At least he was civil enough not to force his attentions on her right now. She should at least be grateful for that small measure of kindness. Emma shivered beneath her half of the blanket. It was such a cold night!

Josiah was still watching the stars when he noticed Emma trying to tuck her legs beneath her to keep warm. Smugly, he knew he wouldn't have much longer to wait.

A small while later, Emma cautiously edged back to Josiah's side of the buffalo robe. When she was as close to him as she could get without touching him, Emma tried to warm herself. She could just feel a little of his body heat, but even that made a welcome difference.

To Emma's surprise, Josiah suddenly pushed her away, and she found herself sliding across the robe back to where she had started. Puzzled, Emma returned to her spot beside him, and once more, Josiah shoved her aside.

Fighting back tears, Emma tried to make do by herself. Very quickly, the cold became too much for her to take, and Emma was forced to lay beside Josiah once more. This time, before his strong arm pushed her away, Emma grabbed Josiah's buckskin shirt with both hands and hugged herself against him so he would have a harder time shoving her aside. When Josiah gave Emma one more nudge, she responded by gripping him tighter. To her relief, he let her stay.

In the darkness, a faint smile flickered across Josiah's face. It was enough that she was holding him, and he decided not to tussle her tonight. Even though she was only trying to keep from freezing to death, it was a start. Josiah had all winter to win the immigrant's daughter, before their marriage would be tested by the white man's world come springtime.

He only hoped one winter would be enough.

"Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense."

~ Song of Solomon 4:6 ~

Chapter Two

The Stranger at My Side

1836, in what would later become Yellowstone National Park.

"The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife."

~ 1 Corinthians 7:4 ~

When Josiah awoke the next morning, he found Emma still clinging to his buckskins. Satisfied the one blanket had done its job, he considered tussling Emma. However, since the sun was already so high, Josiah concluded he didn't have time.

"Emma," he nudged her awake, "we gotta git moving."

Groggy with slumber, Emma buried her face deeper into her cozy pillow. As a groan of satisfaction rumbled beneath her head, Emma suddenly remembered where she was and quickly let go of Josiah's hunting shirt.

Amused, Josiah watched Emma awkwardly retreat to her side of the buffalo robe. "Daylight's burning," he informed her. "We need to move on." Automatically reaching for his Hawken, Josiah checked the percussion cap on his rifle. The trapper jumped to his feet, and then went to see to his horses.

Nervously, Emma checked herself beneath the blanket, and breathed a sigh of relief when she found her clothing still intact. She hadn't remembered anything happening during the night, but it had frightened her to find Josiah still in her arms when she awoke.

"I ain't waiting fer you all morning!" Josiah called to her impatiently.

Emma poked her head out from under the blanket and saw that Josiah was staring at her from beside the horses.

"Pack up the bedding," he ordered. "We're clearing out."

"What about breakfast?" she asked hungrily.

"There's no time fer eating," Josiah urged. "Now git up, afore I come over there and pull you off'a that buffalo hide!"

Scrambling to her feet, Emma hurried to roll the heavy robe and pack it away.

Before loading the packhorse with his belongings, Josiah checked the wound on Emma's leg. After declaring that it looked to be healing as it should, he dressed it and bound it with a clean blue handkerchief.

After everything was in readiness, Josiah placed Emma on the sorrel and then mounted his own horse. He maintained tight control of Emma's reins, and never once let them out of his hand without first securing them to his saddle.

For all of that morning, they continued to ride in an ever Northerly direction. The territory around them grew increasingly majestic, and Emma wondered if this was the land of the Yellowstone she had heard Josiah mention the day before. Whatever it was, she knew they were nearing Blackfoot country, and dearly wished they were headed in any direction but North! To her, this was an act of insanity, for even though Josiah was part Blackfoot, he didn't seem to be on very good terms with his own people.

After more than half a day's ride, Josiah stopped the horses and then dropped from his saddle. Shielding the sun from his eyes, he gazed at the broad valley before them. Tree clad mountains surrounded the rolling hills and open meadows, while billowy white clouds sailed past the sun, casting moving shadows onto the wild landscape. Narrowing his eyes, Josiah searched for his prey. Then with a cry of satisfaction, he caught glimpse of it to the West-- a moving ribbon of darkness, spreading across the rolling valley floor.

From this great distance, Emma was unable to see what Josiah was looking at. "What is it?" she asked.

"Buffaler!" exclaimed Josiah, guiding their horses to a nearby shelter of sturdy conifers.

Before Emma had a chance to realize what "Buffaler" meant, Josiah ordered her to dismount. Then he pulled a buffalo robe from his packhorse and hurriedly tossed it at Emma's feet. He grabbed a small remnant of dried meat from his possibles bag and then shoved it into her hand.

"That's all the food I got, so don't eat it too quick," he cautioned. "It should hold you till I git back."

"You'll return by sundown?" she asked nervously.

Josiah remounted his horse. "That's what I told you yesterday, ain't it? When you're cold, hunker under the buffalo hide." Reaching for the pommel holster on his saddle, Josiah drew out a pistol. "This weapon is only if some animal comes too close," he explained warily. "If I hand it over, I don't want it used against me when I git back!" He glared at Emma and waited for some assurances that it wouldn't. When Emma remained silent, Josiah groaned impatiently. "Say it woman, or I'm leaving you here without a weapon!"

"I won't use it against you," Emma finally responded.

Josiah scowled at her knowingly. "The thought crossed yer mind, though." He flung the small pistol a good piece from Emma, planning to be well out of range before she had time to reach it. As Josiah turned his mount toward the valley, Emma suddenly realized he was taking all the ponies with him.

"You're not leaving me with a horse?"

"Why?" Josiah grinned. "You ain't going nowhere." He spat at the ground and eyed Emma one last time before leaving. "If you see anyone, keep out of sight."

"Even if they aren't Indians?" she asked in surprise.

With a fearsome growl, Josiah barred his teeth at Emma. "White skin or red, you keep out of sight!" With that, he plunged his heels into the sides of his horse and galloped away.

When the last of the trailing ponies disappeared from view, Emma went to retrieve the pistol.

After Josiah picketed his horses, he approached the edge of the buffalo herd on foot. A large bull took notice of Josiah and gave him a warning huff to stay away from his female cows. Taking a small step back, Josiah waited for the bull to return to his grazing.

The mountain man grinned at his good fortune. Buffalo can be skittish creatures, known to stampede at the mere shadow of a man; at other times, hunters could approach them quite close, before the herd would sense danger. These buffalo were grazing and enjoying the autumn sunshine so much, that Josiah figured he could make short work of his hunting.

Josiah raised his rifle at the fattest cow before him. Just as he was ready to fire, he noticed something dark in the distance, swiftly moving along the base of the valley floor. This time, they weren't buffalo. They were riders! Forgetting the buffalo, Josiah quickly went to his horses and

led them out of sight behind some trees. By the dress and gear of the riders, he didn't have any doubt that these were Blackfoot Indians.

The sound of pounding hooves alerted the buffalo to danger, and the entire herd stampeded to the West in one wild rush for survival. The Blackfoot ponies galloped in hot pursuit, and Josiah couldn't help but watch the expert horsemanship the men displayed. Thrusting their mounts into the thick of the panicking herd, hunters singled out their targets with deadly accuracy.

"Ain't none can run buffalo like a Blackfoot," Josiah muttered with a twinge of grudging pride. He cast a wary glance at the sky. Soon the sun would disappear behind the mountains, and there wouldn't be any light to hunt by. Trapped without any way of leaving that wouldn't betray his presence to the Blackfoot, Josiah carefully concealed himself behind the trees. There was nothing for him to do but wait.

As evening neared, Emma ventured from under the buffalo robe to look for any signs of Josiah's return. He had promised to be back by nightfall, and the sun was fast slipping behind the tall Rocky Mountains. The thought of being alone in this wilderness at night, turned Emma's heart to dread. Shivering, she returned to the buffalo robe to keep warm.

"God," Emma quietly prayed, "if I die, please let it be quick. You know I'm not very brave, but I'm trying to be. Please, make me strong!" Emma gripped the pistol and took a steadying breath. "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me," she reminded herself. It was one of her favorite Bible memory verses, and it helped to fortify her nerves. "Oh, Pa!" she cried in a heartrending sob. "I wish God had taken me as well, so I could be with you and Ma in Heaven! I don't want to be on this earth without the *both* of you! How am I to bear it?" Silently promising herself not to melt into tears again, Emma dried the moisture that stung her eyes. She had spent most of the afternoon weeping, and was determined to summon more courage than that.

Emma's grief was soon cut short, by a sound coming from behind the buffalo robe. Not wanting to see what it was, and yet knowing that she had to, Emma turned her head and came face to face with a large gray wolf!

The animal stared at her with glowing yellow eyes that glinted in the setting sun.

With trembling hands, Emma slowly raised the pistol. "Please go," she whispered, closing her eyes so she wouldn't have to see the carnage of what was about to happen. She pulled the trigger, and Emma heard a loud yelp! Her eyes popped open, and she saw the tail end of the wolf disappear behind the trees. "I hit him!" she gasped in surprise. Then Emma noticed the strike mark on a nearby conifer and realized she had missed the animal entirely.

The sun was now completely behind the mountains, and the sky dimmed more and more as the bright orb retreated beyond horizons that Emma knew she would never live to see. She had had only one shot, and now the pistol was empty. A tear slid down Emma's cheek as darkness blanketed the wilderness.

By the time the Blackfoot had finished their buffalo hunt, there was very little light left in the sky. Josiah figured this meant they would camp nearby, and then return to their territory the next morning.

With the careful stealth of a man who didn't want to lose his scalp, Josiah grabbed the reins of his horses and picked his way through the trees. His stomach growling with hunger, Josiah was a little ashamed when he recalled telling Emma that she wouldn't have to go hungry anymore, because she was now with a buffalo hunter.

"Some hunter!" he harrumphed, jerking at the reins to urge his horses forward. He hadn't had a bite to eat all day, having given Emma the last of the food with the expectation of buffalo meat later on.

Just then, a small rabbit bounded across Josiah's path and suddenly froze, as rabbits usually do when they suspect detection. Deftly moving to his packhorse, Josiah brought out his bow, for he didn't want to risk the sound of a gunshot carrying to where the Blackfoot were camped nearby. Taking an arrow from his quiver, Josiah drew it against the tight sinew of his bow. He let the arrow fly, and the rabbit was soon dangling from Josiah's saddle. At least he wouldn't have to return to Emma empty handed.

Stars were visible by the time Josiah reached the spot where he reckoned he had left Emma. The moonlight was dim, so he crouched low to probe the darkness with his ears. Just to the left, Josiah detected the faint cry of a woman. He crept closer until his buffalo robe came into view. Emma was nowhere in sight, but when he heard the cry once more, he realized she was beneath the robe and had no idea that he was there.

Thoughtfully, Josiah scratched his chin. Had Emma spent her ammunition, or did she have a loaded pistol waiting for him? Not wanting to chance getting shot at, Josiah stalked closer until he could hear the sounds of Emma's smothered breathing beneath the buffalo robe. Without warning, the trapper pounced on the robe and clamped a strong hand over Emma's mouth to keep her from screaming.

Terrified, Emma thrashed under the weight of her assailant while her hand frantically searched for the pistol. Josiah, however, was ready for just that, and he quickly located the weapon before she did. Keeping Emma pinned with one arm, Josiah examined the pistol and found it wasn't loaded.

"Emma, stop moaning!" he scolded, and let the woman go so she could collect her senses. "Thought to shoot me, did you?"

Gasping for breath, Emma looked up at him with a tear streaked face.

"Thought you said you wouldn't use this against me," he mused, waving the pistol before her accusingly.

"I-- I didn't know it was you!" stammered Emma.

Josiah looked at her skeptically but made no reply. "I got us a rabbit for supper." He sat cross-legged on the ground and pulled out his Bowie knife. "Did you see anyone while I was gone?"

"No," mumbled Emma, still trying to calm her nerves after Josiah's surprise attack.

"What'd you shoot at, then?" he inquired, running the blade of his knife down the length of the rabbit.

"I scared away a wolf," replied Emma. "You only gave me enough shot and gunpowder to fire the pistol once."

"I don't trust you with more ammunition," came Josiah's ready response. "I don't favor getting a belly full of lead from no woman." He cleaned the Bowie knife against the knee of his buckskins and then returned it to his belt. "Even if that woman happens to be my wife." Josiah looked at her with a steady warning in his dark eyes. "You get my drift, Emma?"

"I didn't know it was you," she protested.

Josiah grunted and then peeled back the skin of the rabbit lying in his lap.

Not knowing what to make of his grunt, Emma dried her tears and wearily folded the warm robe around her body. It was then that she noticed the horses were picketed unusually close to camp and ventured to say as much to Josiah.

"There's Blackfoot about," he shook his head cautiously. "I saw a passel of them back yonder, hunting and skinning as much buffaler as they could carry."

"Did they see you?" she asked nervously.

Flashing a grin at Emma, Josiah tossed a portion of the rabbit meat onto the robe beside her. "I'm only seen when I want to be."

Emma looked at the hunk of raw meat, and was about to ask Josiah if he wanted her to collect wood for a fire, when she looked up to see him eating!

"Aren't you going to cook it first?" she cried in horror.

"Nope," Josiah replied with a mouthful of rabbit. "An open flame will carry far in all this darkness, and I don't want them Blackfoot knowing we're here."

The very idea of what Josiah was doing, turned Emma's stomach and she tried not to watch.

"Why ain't you eating?" prodded Josiah. "Ain't you ever had raw meat?"

Emma promptly shook her head in disgust.

Frowning, Josiah tore off another mouthful and then chewed as loudly as he could so Emma could hear. "Looks as though you'll just have to go without," he concluded.

Timidly, Emma slowly pulled something from her dress and Josiah recognized the dried meat he had left her earlier that day. "I saved it, in case you weren't coming back," she explained.

"There weren't no chance of that happening," declared Josiah, taking another bite of food. "Good women are scare in these mountains, especially ones as purty as you." Josiah watched her closely until her brown eyes flashed in the moonlight, and he knew she was looking directly at him. "I never had a wife afore," continued Josiah. He set down his rabbit to wipe a hand against his buckskins before resuming his feast. "Some men tire fast of their women, but from the looks of you, I won't be getting weary anytime soon!"

"What if you do?" wondered Emma, her voice sounding as though it could easily happen at any moment. "What if you no longer want a wife?"

"Then I'll give you back to the Blackfoot," grinned Josiah. When she remained deathly silent, he chuckled. "I was just teasing, Emma."

"What if this doesn't work?" she repeated. "What will happen to me?"

"I ain't letting you go," Josiah informed her outright, "so you might as well make the best of it."

"If you ever change your mind and let me go," wondered Emma, "will you leave me at a trading post?"

Josiah stopped eating long enough to look at the woman seated on the buffalo robe. "Why?" he asked. "No white man will want you, when they find out you've been the wife of a half-breed."

The truth of Josiah's remark hit Emma hard, and she struggled not to start crying again. "I know," she finally managed, "but I'm not speaking of remarriage. I'm only requesting that you spare my life, instead of leaving me to fend for myself when you no longer want me."

"What makes you think I don't want you?" scowled Josiah.

"You only left me one shot," pointed out Emma. "I'm just wondering how hard you're trying to keep me alive!"

Josiah harrumphed. "Worrying about yer skin, are you?"

"Do you want me for your wife?"

"I do."

"Then I'll need a few measures of gunpowder from that horn slung around your neck, and at least three lead shots for the pistol. I believe that should do."

"You think I'll just hand it over to you like that?" asked Josiah.

After a moment of reflection, Emma nodded. "Yes, I do."

Josiah grunted and returned to his raw meal. "You'll make do with whatever I give you."

Emma would have gladly pushed the point further, but Josiah was a formidable man, and she didn't want to risk further displeasure.

After washing down supper with cold water from a nearby stream, Josiah crawled onto the buffalo robe beside Emma.

"I been looking forward to this all day long," he declared unabashedly. "Lay back Emma, 'an let's get started."

Emma did as she was told, and Josiah occupied himself with her far into the night.

The sounds of a happily chirping bird awoke Josiah, and he pulled the blanket over his head to keep the sunlight from his eyes. When the bird continued to sing, Josiah reached for a stone and hurled it at the feathered creature.

"Shut yer mouth!" he grumbled.

The bird chirped one more time, and then flew off to find its morning breakfast.

From the other side of the buffalo robe, Emma stirred from her slumber. Even after a little sleep, she still felt tired and exhausted, for Josiah hadn't let her get much rest. With slightly trembling fingers, Emma refastened her one-piece dress and smoothed her skirt.

"Where are you going?" mumbled Josiah, as Emma started crawling from the buffalo robe.

"I just need to find a tree," she tried to explain modestly. "I'll only be a moment."

There was urgency in her voice, and Josiah understood that Emma needed to empty her bladder.

"Keep within sight of camp," he told her.

After Emma left the buffalo robe, Josiah rolled onto his back and faced the blue sky overhead. All of nature seemed in better spirits than him, and he begrudged the sky for its brilliancy, and the bird for its happy song.

Emma's soft footfalls signaled her return, and Josiah sat up to search for the hunting shirt he had discarded the night before.

"Emma, when are you going to start tussling me back?" he muttered. "I can git more pleasure from a whore, than I can from you."

The comparison was an unflattering one, and it was all Emma could do to keep from crying. She folded their blanket in silence, while Josiah checked his rifle.

"You won't kiss, and you won't tussle," he grumbled. "Fer someone's who's afraid of being left out here by yourself, you sure haven't been very obliging!" He got to his feet so Emma could roll up the buffalo robe. "How's yer leg feeling? Did I hurt the wound any?"

Gulping back a sob, Emma shook her head "no."

"Would have served you right if I had," murmured Josiah. Still grumbling, he went to see to the horses.

The hungry animals nickered and tossed their heads, impatient to stretch their legs and hopefully graze in the meadow, for they could smell the grass from here.

"Easy, easy," Josiah calmed his ponies. "If them Blackfoot are gone, you'll have the valley to yourselves."

The last of the bedding packed away, Emma prayed there would be a breakfast. She was so hungry, that even the grass Josiah had promised the horses sounded good.

After saddling his pony, Josiah lifted Emma into the saddle and then swung up behind her. "I want to scout ahead, and see where the Blackfoot and buffalo are at," he explained, leading their horse away from camp. Josiah put an arm about Emma's small waist, and turned his face to the horizon. There wasn't a buffalo in sight. "I'm thinking them Blackfoot ran the herd North."

A cold wind blew down into the valley as they rode, and Josiah kept a guarded watch for Blackfoot or buffalo. His Hawken rifle was ready for trouble, but all they found were a few prowling wolves and some rabbits.

The hard saddle worsened Emma's soreness, and she almost wished Josiah had left her at the camp. However, it only took one look at the wolves, to remind her that she was grateful for the arm about her waist.

The valley floor swelled in front of them, like one solid wave of earth. Josiah grinned triumphantly when they reached the top and beheld the view this vantage presented. A moving sea of black followed the contours of the valley, as buffalo grazed and wallowed in the bare patches of dry dirt.

"There they are," Josiah breathed contentedly. "And not a Blackfoot in sight! That means I can use my rifle, and we can have a hot breakfast!"

Since Emma was seated in front of Josiah on the horse, he couldn't see the smile that adorned her pretty face.

Halfway back to camp, Josiah suddenly spotted an elk. Promptly firing his Hawken, the animal collapsed in a heap of antlers and brown fur. With a war whoop that stung Emma's ears, Josiah dropped from his saddle and proceeded to reload his rifle.

"Dismount!" he shouted to Emma over his shoulder. The mountain man pulled out his Bowie knife and expertly carved away the choicest parts of the fresh meat for their food.

After arriving at camp, Emma gathered firewood while Josiah hobbled the horses in a meadow so they could graze to their hearts' content without straying too far.

The elk smelled delicious as the aroma of cooking meat wafted past Emma's nose. When it was sufficiently cooked, Josiah cut off a rather large portion of it for Emma.

"I can hear yer belly growling," he grinned. "You should have eaten the rabbit last night!"

Emma closed her eyes and quietly thanked God for her breakfast. Then she devoured the food until she could eat no more.

After their meal was over, Josiah got to his feet. "I'm going buffalo hunting," he announced. The man grabbed his rifle and went to one of the horses grazing nearby.

Emma wanted to ask what he was going to do with her while he was hunting, but she remained silent. He knew her concerns about ammunition and remaining by herself, and she guessed he had already decided her fate.

Josiah saddled the fresh mount and led it back to camp. "Emma," he called to her, "let's go."

"You're taking me with you?" Emma immediately brightened.

"Why?" asked Josiah in feigned shock. "Did you want to stay here? I can leave you with some of the leftover meat--" he stopped short, as Emma eagerly mounted his pony. "Then I reckon you're coming," he muttered with half a smile.

As their horse trotted to the hunting grounds, Josiah slipped his arm about Emma's waist.

The buffalo were where they had left them earlier, grazing in the warm sunshine and unaware of the cold wind that chilled Emma to the bone. The animals seemed ignorant of their presence as

Josiah wheeled his horse around to the back of the herd. He studied the direction of the wind, made note of the terrain, and then deposited Emma beside some nearby trees so she could watch.

"If the buffalo start running," he cautioned, "make sure you don't git in their way, and stay right where I put you. Hide behind that yonder tree. Them dumb animals will trample anything in their path."

"I'll be careful," Emma assured him.

Josiah checked his rifle one last time and then turned his horse toward the outside edge of the grazing herd. Upon finding a fat cow, Josiah reined in his horse and surveyed the land. The ground here was fairly flat, and if he had to run the herd, this was a good place to give chase.

Slowly dropping from his saddle, Josiah bellied against the ground until he felt the unmistakable spines of the prickly pear cactus piercing through his buckskins. Ignoring the discomfort, the hunter kept his attention on the female cow before him. The cow's mate was grazing beside her, and for a moment, Josiah's mind wandered back to Emma. He cast a quick glance at the trees and grinned when he saw her intently watching with squinted eyes.

The cow moved, calling Josiah's attention back to the hunt. He fired at the area behind the cow's neck, and her bull huffed in surprise as she dropped to the ground. The bull snorted, and raised his great head to eye Josiah.

Josiah ignored the stunned bull and immediately reloaded his Hawken. He carefully selected another cow, and slowly formed into a crouch. Steadily raising the barrel, Josiah braced the stock against his shoulder. With careful timing, he squeezed the trigger. The cow staggered, and a nearby bull lowered his massive head to charge Josiah!

Leaping onto the back of his horse, Josiah dodged the bull with a taunting laugh.

Alarm quickly spread through the herd, and the air filled with the thunder of stampeding hooves!

Dust rose from the ground, as Josiah poured a measure of powder down the muzzle of his gun. A lead ball, followed by a hard strike of the butt on the pommel of his saddle, and he again took aim. A puff of smoke and another large cow dropped, ploughing into the earth.

Emma gasped as Josiah reloaded his rifle and then thrust his pony into the rushing wave of buffalo!

Heedless of the risk he was taking, Josiah's breath came in quick gulps and his face flushed with the thrill of the chase! In the heat of the moment, he saw neither danger nor common sense. His entire being was trained on his gun and the cow before him. With another crack of his rifle, the animal went down!

By now, the herd was running wildly to escape the hunter still in pursuit! A nearby bull lunged at Josiah's horse, but the experienced pony leaped aside, and its rider remained unscathed. Loading his rifle on the back of the horse, Josiah was unrelenting in his determination.

Another bull dropped its head and charged Josiah, its tongue hanging out in exhaustion. They were becoming desperate, and so were their attempts to rid themselves of this man.

Dust billowed around Josiah, and he gritted his teeth in wild delight. Another cow presented herself before his rifle, and he fired without hesitation.

After Josiah reloaded his Hawken for the fifth time, he reined in his tired horse. He had enough meat. The mountain man let the herd run on until they disappeared from sight, leaving torn ground, moist dung, and their fallen comrades behind them.

Wiping his face of muddy perspiration, Josiah trotted his horse back to the buffalo he had just shot. He counted five dead cows, and grinned with satisfaction.

Going to the first cow, Josiah carved her open to harvest the best portions suited for food. He tied the meat to his saddle, and then went to the next cow. On and on he went, until his horse was laden with fresh buffalo meat.

By the time Josiah returned to Emma, it was the center of the day.

"The difficult part comes next," he told her with a hardy grin.

Emma followed behind Josiah on foot, as he led the horse back to camp. She had seen men hunt buffalo before, but there was a calculated recklessness about Josiah that made her wonder at him.

After turning his tired horse into the field with the other ponies, Josiah strung sinew ropes between several trees and secured the ends around the trunks. Then he hunched over the piles of fresh buffalo meat and slowly cut them into thin strips. While he worked, Emma took the strips and then hung them over the sinew to dry. It was a long and tedious process, and the sunlight gave out just as Josiah came to the very last of the meat.

"If you want to give your back a rest," Emma offered after they had finished, "I can prepare the last of the elk meat for supper."

Giving her an assenting nod, Josiah went to the buffalo robe to stretch his stiff limbs. It was hard work cutting meat so thinly, but the thinner he could make the jerky, the quicker it would dry. The rope strung about their camp was crowded with drying strips of buffalo meat, and Josiah surveyed the scene with a degree of accomplishment.

Then he leaned back to watch Emma as she tended the fire. Josiah blinked hard to keep his eyes open, but sleep was beckoning and he found it hard to resist. Telling himself that he had enough time for a short nap before supper, the tired man went to sleep.

The camp was dark by the time Josiah stirred from his nap. He was dimly aware of something sharp jabbing at his chest, arms, and legs, and he couldn't tell why. Rolling onto his back to escape the discomfort, Josiah sleepily touched his chest and felt the spines of the prickly pear cactus still embedded in the front of his buckskins. Groaning wearily, he closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

Light spilled across Josiah's face, and he awakened to find Emma bent over his chest. She was intently picking the cactus spines from his buckskins, and by the way she squinted, Josiah guessed she was having difficulty.

"You can't see too good," he observed.

With a startled cry, Emma quickly scooted back to her side of the bedding.

Chuckling, Josiah sat up to look at his hunting shirt. "Where's supper?" he asked, easily removing the remaining spines.

"There isn't any," stammered Emma. "You fell asleep, so I only made enough for myself."

"Then git the fire started, woman!" Josiah swatted at Emma as she quickly scrambled from the buffalo robe. "It's a fine thing when a man can't take a short nap, without his wife eating his supper!"

Emma was about to protest that she hadn't done anything of the sort, when she realized Josiah was only teasing.

After his meal was cooked, Josiah ate while he checked on the buffalo jerky drying on the sinew ropes. Content that everything was as it should be, he returned to the fire while Emma folded the buffalo robe.

"How long will it take for the meat to dry?" she wondered.

"I reckon four days ought to do it," he replied. Finishing the last of his meal, Josiah wiped his hands on his britches. "I've a mind to see if there's any beaver signs by the river, but I'll stay within sight of camp to keep an eye on the jerky." He looked at Emma. "You can come if you want."

Rifle in hand, Josiah set out to explore the stream with Emma following at his heels. The wind was cold, and Emma shivered as she hurried to keep up with Josiah's long strides.

When they came to the stream, Josiah squatted down to get a better look at the tracks along the edge of the banks. "Did you ever have a beau?" he wondered, reaching down and touching a small track before glancing up at Emma curiously.

The question caught Emma a little off guard, and for a moment she couldn't find her tongue. "I've had a few," she finally replied.

"Thought as much," muttered Josiah, turning his dark eyes back to the tracks. "This here's a raccoon and this one's a skunk. I don't see no signs of beaver though. Looks like them critters are all trapped out, even in the Yellowstone!" Frustrated, Josiah clapped his rifle with a strong hand and looked out over the moving stream. "Why wouldn't any of them marry you?" he suddenly wondered.

The wording of his question irked Emma, and she decided not to reply.

"You got some ailment I should know about?" he pressed.

"Mr. Brown," sighed Emma, "this is hardly any of your business!"

The trapper stepped toward Emma, until she backed from him like a tree giving way to the prevailing wind. Josiah showed Emma his rifle. "This Hawken is mine," he declared evenly, "and so is this knife, my furs, my horses, and my woman. You're just another of my possessions." Josiah leveled his eyes with Emma's. "If you ever tell me what's my business again, you'll wish I never took you from the Blackfoot. You hear me?"

Frightened, Emma could only nod.

Seeing she was sufficiently reprimanded, Josiah looked back at the moving water. "The beaver are further upstream," he deduced. "They can't *all* be gone!"

After they reached camp, Emma was grateful to find an excuse to get away from Josiah. She slowly checked the ropes of jerky drying in the sun between the trees, and lingered there for as long as she dared.

By the fire, Josiah was seated on the ground cleaning his rifle. Every so often, he raised his head to see Emma still standing with the meat.

"It ain't gonna dry any faster with you staring at it!" he finally called to her.

That was enough to send Emma back to camp. She located the tree furthest from Josiah, and sat down at its base.

Josiah glanced up from his polished Hawken. "You're looking better," he remarked. "For awhile there, you were mighty pale-- even fer a white woman."

Emma wearily closed her eyes.

When Josiah realized Emma wasn't planning to respond, he resumed his task in silence. He refused to acknowledge the regret tugging at him somewhere within his breast; Emma was completely and entirely his, and the sooner she accepted it, the better off they would be.

Over by the tree, Emma was silently petitioning God for a promise of deliverance. "Please, God," she prayed, "remind me of a promise for escape, so I have something to hope for!" Emma didn't have a Bible to turn to, but a Scripture passage dimly sifted its way to the front of her mind. "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife..." that was all Emma could recall. Even though it wasn't the promise of deliverance she had been hoping for, she knew within her spirit that God had brought it to her remembrance.

Josiah had finished cleaning his rifle and was about to call Emma to start supper, when she appeared by the fire and began cooking a few cuts of buffalo meat.

"You feeling all right?" he asked. "The color in yer cheeks is fading again."

Josiah was obviously trying to show some goodwill, but instead of turning it away, Emma politely acknowledged his concern. "Thank you, I'm feeling better." A small sigh escaped her lips, and Josiah had a feeling she was trying to bring herself to say something.

"If you have a piece to say," he prompted, "then spit it out."

"I think..." Emma hesitated, "no, I'm sure. I should have answered your question, Mr. Brown. You're perfectly within your rights to ask why I'm still unmarried."

"Then why are you?" he asked.

"No one ever proposed," Emma explained with some embarrassment. "Two came courting, but one died, and the other married my friend."

Josiah scowled. "The men back East must be blind as posts! Why, I ain't ever seen anything as purty as you!"

Smiling sadly, Emma turned the buffalo meat over the fire. "Mr. Brown, you're the only one to think so in a very long time."

With a harrumph, Josiah leaned back on his elbows to stare into the flames. "I'm not believing you, Emma. You've been admired, even if they never said a word about it to you. The prettier the woman, the more courage it takes fer a man to loosen his tongue."

Josiah's explanation for why she had been unmarried for so long, greatly embarrassed Emma, for she felt it wasn't true. After all, her "beauty" hadn't seemed to quiet *his* tongue any. However, if Josiah refused to acknowledge out loud that he had a very plain woman for his wife, then it was *his* business; she had done her best to be honest about the matter. Thankfully, Josiah soon dropped the subject, his attention having been diverted by her announcement that supper was ready.

After they ate, Josiah prepared for bedtime by spreading two blankets on the buffalo robe. The added blanket meant Emma wouldn't have to keep close to him during the night, and Josiah wondered what she would do. He didn't let his disappointment show as Emma quickly went to her side of the bed. "It'll be cold tonight," he cautioned, as if the previous nights had been any warmer. "If you need to share my heat, I won't shove you away if you want to nestle with me."

When Emma remained where she was, Josiah restrained himself and didn't pursue her beneath the blankets.

The next morning, Emma was awakened by the smell of breakfast cooking beside the campfire. Hungrily, she crawled from the buffalo robe to get her share of the food.

"I'm going trapping today," announced Josiah, pulling out his Bowie knife to slice off some meat for Emma. "I'll leave you with one of my rifles and some ammunition, so I reckon you'll be all right while I'm gone."

Curiously, Emma ventured a quick glance at the mountain man.

"That's right," he growled, "you heard me! I'm leaving you a rifle!" Josiah bit off another chunk of meat before continuing. "It ain't safe being without a rifle, with all that meat still drying. I reckon griz will be getting fat for winter, and that jerky will be looking mighty good to 'em right about now."

"Griz?" puzzled Emma.

Josiah frowned. "Grizzly bears! Ain't you ever heard of griz?"

"When we first came to the Rockies," recalled Emma, "Pa shot at a grizzly bear to keep it from attacking our horses after we made camp."

"They can snap the back of a buffalo," Josiah bragged with a knowing grin. He raised a large hand and extended his fingers as though they were claws. "With just one blow."

Emma shuddered. Josiah looked much like a grizzly bear himself, with his dark brown hair and broad shoulders, and from the look on his face just now, he knew it.

"Be here when I git back," he ordered, putting down his paw to continue with his breakfast.

When Emma bowed her head to silently thank God for her meal, Josiah stopped chewing and didn't swallow until she began to eat.

"I won't be back until the day after tomorrow," Josiah informed Emma. "I'm going upstream to trap beaver." He saw Emma struggle to swallow her buffalo meat.

"You'll be away for so long?" she whimpered a little fearfully.

"I'm giving you a rifle!" retorted Josiah, not caring for the guilty feeling she was causing with those wide brown eyes of hers. "The meat should be dry by then, and we can move on to my pa's lodge up North."

"It seems to me as though everything is up North," lamented Emma. "The beaver, your cabin, and the Blackfoot Indians."

"That's about the size of it," grinned Josiah. He tossed the last bite of his buffalo meat into the fire and then climbed to his feet. If he stayed any longer, he was afraid Emma might be able to talk him out of leaving.

Going to his packhorse, Josiah pulled a rifle from a leather bag. "You can shoot with a flintlock, can't you?" he asked, tossing Emma a glance over his shoulder.

"I can," she assured him.

As Josiah turned to give her the weapon, Emma cried in shock! "Pa's rifle!" she exclaimed, running to Josiah and eagerly taking the heavy double barrel shotgun into her small hands. "Where did you get it?"

"The Blackfoot left it by the wagon, after they were finished with yer pa," he answered.

Stunned, Emma looked at Josiah with renewed fear in her eyes. The rifle raised, and Josiah suddenly found its barrel leveling with his belly!

"What are you doing that fer?" he protested. "I didn't kill yer pa!"

"You're a Blackfoot, aren't you?" Emma cocked the rifle in readiness to shoot.

"Kill me, and you'll be out here by yourself," he reminded her.

"I don't care!" she shouted. "You killed Pa!" The rifle trembled as Emma raised the weapon to Josiah's chest.

"Your pa was scalped and left fer dead when I found him, Emma! He told me them Blackfoot had taken you and sent me after you!"

"Then take me back to him," Emma declared resolutely. "I want to go back!"

"Back to what?" Josiah tried to reason with the frightened woman. "To a corpse that's been got to by wild animals?"

Horrified, Emma wasn't aware of her hand tightening around both triggers of the shotgun. "You didn't *bury* him?" she screamed. "What kind of savage are you?"

Before Emma knew what hit her, Josiah had rushed her and pinned her against the ground.

"I'm the savage who saved yer life!" he bellowed. "If you ever point a weapon at me again, I swear--" Josiah stopped short with a groan. "Emma, stop yer crying! I ain't going to hurt you!" He rolled off of Emma and then helped her to her feet. She was weeping uncontrollably, and for once in his life, Josiah felt helpless.

"I didn't hurt yer pa," he assured her. "You believe me, don't you?"

Unable to speak, Emma's head bobbed up and down. She believed him. Then she turned and ran to the buffalo robe to shed her tears in private.

Unsure what to do with himself, Josiah retrieved the unloaded rifle still laying on the ground. He had forgotten the weapon had belonged to her pa.

While Emma wept, Josiah saddled his horse and then prepared his packhorse for the days he would be away trapping beaver. He was about to retrieve a small ax he had left by a tree, when he sensed Emma behind him.

"Did my pa suffer very much?"

"He died soon after I found him," replied Josiah, tightening the packhorse's cinch with a pat to its belly.

"Couldn't we return to bury him properly?" she begged.

"I ain't fighting with bears over bones already picked clean." Josiah made sure of the sinew ropes securing his beaver traps by testing the strength of the knots. "Besides, someone has to stay here and guard the jerky."

"I'll stay!" Emma immediately offered. "*Please*, Mr. Brown! Bury my father! He was a good man! If you have any decency, you'd go back and do him justice!"

Josiah suddenly stopped what he was doing and turned to face Emma. "I'm as decent as you!" he spat bitterly. "I won't take such talk from my wife!"

"*Please!*" breathed Emma. "I'll do anything!"

Josiah's face brightened. "Anything?"

"Well," she hesitated, "almost anything."

He was about to name a price, but caught himself. Here he was, bargaining with a grieving woman over burying her father. Josiah hated himself for the picture it painted of his own character. "I'll be back sometime tomorrow," he muttered, mounting his pony. "I'm leaving the other horses here, but if you ride off..." Josiah slapped his knee in frustration. "Don't leave," he finally requested. With that, he reined his horse South and then rode away.

Smiling through her tears, Emma thanked God for causing Josiah to return to her pa.

Since the trapper didn't have Emma and the string of ponies along, he was able to cover more ground in a shorter amount of time. Even so, it was nearly dark when he arrived back at the wagon.

In the fading daylight, Josiah tethered his horse to a wagon wheel to have a look around. The wagon had been hurriedly plundered by the two Blackfoot, and the remainder of its contents shredded by wild animals.

Stepping over an open trunk, Josiah rounded the wagon. He had left Emma's father lying on the other side, but wasn't very surprised when he didn't find him there. Animal tracks were everywhere, and Josiah figured they had dragged the body away to feed on it elsewhere.

The sun was fading fast, so Josiah made camp near the abandoned wagon. As he ate his cold supper of dried buffalo meat, Josiah curiously checked the open trunk laying nearby. To his surprise, a carved wooden box was still inside, having escaped attention from the plunderers. Easily guessing it belonged to Emma, Josiah packed the ornamented box away, intending to surprise her with it later.

After the sun rose in the morning, Josiah examined the tracks around the wagon. By the look of things, several wolves and a grizzly bear had come through here. Holding his Hawken tightly, Josiah followed a few of the tracks into the nearby trees. It was there that he found the first of

the immigrant's remains. For a long while Josiah scoured the woods, but was unable to find any more of Emma's father.

After returning to his horse for a shovel, Josiah dug a hole beside the wagon. He laid the unfortunate man in his grave and then covered him with rocks and dirt.

"Guess I should say something," Josiah awkwardly stood over the man's grave. "I don't know any Christian words to say over you, but seeing how you raised your daughter, I figure you were a good, decent man. I reckon Emma was right about that. If there's a Heaven, you're probably there, looking down on what's happening to your daughter." Josiah sighed and shook his head soberly. "I bet when you sent me after Emma, you never figured I'd take her for my wife. You probably never counted on that and probably didn't want that for Emma. I can't say I blame you, but I ain't giving her back to the white folks! Emma said she had no kin, so I reckon I'm the only family she has left. Well, that's all I got to say, 'cept rest in peace."

Josiah strode back to his horse. If good people could die so easily, then he reckoned God didn't care what happened to Emma. Even with all her religion, she was no better off than him.

It was noon of the following day, when Emma heard a rider approaching their camp. Her ears were better than her eyes, and she strained to see the blurry horizon. When the horse rode into camp, Emma finally recognized Josiah and lowered her shotgun.

"Did you find my pa?" she asked hopefully.

"I did," replied Josiah. "I buried him beside the wagon."

"Thank you, Mr. Brown. I appreciate it."

Josiah grunted, and went to the fire to warm his hands.

Timidly, Emma bit her lip. "Did you stop to bury the two Blackfoot?" she wondered. She expected Josiah to snap at her, but to her surprise, he didn't.

"What was left of them," he replied. "I figured you'd ask."

"Thank you," mumbled Emma. She opened her mouth to say something nice about him for doing such a thing but closed it again with a sigh.

Sensing her futility, Josiah laughed grimly. "Emma, I know you don't think much of me, but I'm still yer husband."

"I know," she numbly replied. Emma went back to the buffalo robe to sit for awhile. She was weary and the hard strain of the last few days showed plainly on her lovely face.

Josiah gazed at her for a moment before returning to his horse. "I'm going beaver trapping," he told her. "I'll be back tomorrow."

Sadly, Emma lay down on the robe, clutching her father's rifle as though she were hugging him with all her might. She said nothing, but watched as Josiah rode off with his packhorse and traps.

That night, the fire crackled as Josiah tossed another dry branch on the flames to cook his supper. The wind was coming in even stronger now, so he pulled his buffalo robe up around his neck to keep warm.

A modest collection of skinned beaver pelts lay drying at his feet, and Josiah was pleased by his success. The beaver were far from plentiful, but it was still more than the slim pickings he had been getting near Jackson Hole.

The flames popped, and Josiah could almost taste the roasting grouse he had snared earlier that afternoon. He bit into the tasty fowl as soon as it was cool enough to touch, and then settled back to enjoy a full belly and a warm fire. All that was missing was a woman to share his robe.

Emma. She had been on Josiah's mind for much of the day, and now that night had descended over the land, he found it harder to not think of her incessantly. He could close his eyes and feel her beside him, and a grin would spread across his chiseled face.

Hugging his rifle close, Josiah shut his eyes and soon fell asleep. His dreams were of the woman with long golden hair and soft white skin that he would be returning to tomorrow.

The next morning, Emma found herself shivering beneath the blankets on the buffalo robe. She had been so exhausted the night before, that she had accidentally let the fire burn out while she slept. Emma knew she was in trouble, for now that the fire was out, she had no way of re-lighting it again.

"God," she pleaded, "I don't know what to do, but my eyes are upon Thee!" As soon as the words left her mouth, God answered by reminding her of how Josiah lit their campfires. Smiling, Emma looked at the rifle lying beside her.

Unlike Josiah, she had no dedicated flint for building a fire, but she *did* have the flintlock on her pa's old shotgun! Instead of gunpowder, Emma carefully placed a little dry tinder in the rifle's pan. Quietly saying a prayer, she cocked back the hammer and then pulled the trigger. The flint sent a few sparks into the pan, causing her tinder to momentarily glow with an ember or two. Emma's joy was short-lived, however, for the tiny embers were rapidly extinguished by the wind.

Undaunted, Emma went to the cold campfire and dug about the ashes for any bits of wood that might have turned to charcoal. She was rewarded with a tiny fragment buried at the bottom of the fire, where oxygen had not gotten to the wood. It was not very good charcoal, but it was all Emma had so she placed it in the rifle's pan and tried again. The crude charcoal caught spark, but it was all Emma could do to keep it from going out. She shielded the embers with her hand and was able to coax a flame from her smoldering bit of charcoal and dry tinder. Lighting one end of a twig, Emma carried her precious flame to the lifeless campfire and she soon had a proper fire going!

Triumphantly, Emma sat beside the fire and warmed herself against the chilly air. "Thank you, God!" she exclaimed in great relief. "Thank you."

When Emma finally ventured from the fire, the cold wind caused her to quickly retrieve one of the warm blankets from the buffalo robe. She wrapped it about her shoulders as she would a shawl and then set about gathering more wood for the fire. When she had collected more wood than she could possibly use, Emma took her pa's shotgun to the buffalo robe to keep guard. There was little left to do but pray, wait for Josiah's return, and keep a careful watch for animals who might want the now dried meat.

Josiah cast a watchful eye to the clouding sky, as his horse headed back to the camp where he had left Emma. There was a sharp bite in the air that told Josiah snow was on its way. Maybe he wouldn't see white today, but it wouldn't be long now until he did.

Urgently, Josiah drove his horse onward, until he at last saw the small spiral of Emma's campfire in the distance. Something in his chest began to pound hopefully. At the thought of tussling Emma again, he quickened his pace.

This time, there was no relief on Emma's face as he rode into camp. She was calm, even cool at his return and showed very little emotion.

"See anyone while I was gone?" he asked, sliding from his saddle.

"No," answered Emma, "no one."

After turning his two ponies into the meadow to graze with the others, Josiah went to the warm campfire.

"I see you're well stocked on firewood," he chuckled, pointing his chin to the ample pile Emma had gathered.

"I know it's a lot," she admitted, failing to hide her embarrassment from Josiah. "I slept so soundly last night, I let the campfire go out. I suppose this morning, I got a little carried away and gathered more firewood than we needed."

"The fire went out?" Josiah looked at her curiously and then at the fire burning brightly before him. "You got it started again."

"Yes, I did." Emma awkwardly adjusted the blanket around her shoulders. "Did you find your beaver?"

"I did," nodded Josiah, his wandering gaze feeling Emma until she could no longer look him in the eye. "What'd you use?"

"Use?" asked Emma.

"To light the campfire," replied Josiah. "How'd you manage it?"

"I used the flintlock on Pa's shotgun."

The mountain man grinned proudly. "You did, huh?" His eyes continued to roam, so that Emma finally retreated to the strings of dried buffalo meat.

"Shouldn't we pack the jerky away?" she wondered.

"I reckon so," admitted Josiah, reluctantly tearing his attention away from Emma.

Retrieving an old buffalo hide from his things, Josiah unfurled it on the ground and instructed Emma to pack the meat in the skin. As she did this task, Josiah began packing his beaver skins, traps, and other belongings into burdens that could easily be loaded onto his packhorse. Josiah

didn't have many earthly possessions, but much of what he did have, was carefully wrapped in waterproof hides and bound with sinew. There were a few bundles that Emma would have liked to explore, but she kept her curiosity in check. After all, those things weren't hers. They were Josiah's.

When the jerky was finally bundled and placed with the rest of Josiah's belongings, Emma noticed that he had yet to put away the buffalo robe and remaining blanket.

"I want to have a look at yer leg afore we leave," Josiah directed Emma. "Go sit on the robe and wait fer me. I'll be along as soon as I get the last of this ready for travel."

Silently, Emma did as she was told. Josiah soon joined her, carrying a small familiar box in his hands.

"I found this back at the wagon," he explained, placing the object in Emma's lap.

"My sewing box!" she cried in delight. Emma opened the carved wooden container and was overjoyed to find her sewing book still safely housing two slender needles. Her scissors were still there, as were three spools of thread, some pins, and her mother's thimble. "I thought I'd never see these again!" exclaimed Emma. She turned to thank Josiah and saw that he was busy pulling off his hunting shirt.

"Has yer leg been hurting any?" he asked, pushing back her dress to examine the blue handkerchief tied around her leg.

"Not as much as before," she replied. "Mr. Brown, are you intending to... to..." Emma stopped before finishing her thought out loud.

"I'm untying the handkerchief," Josiah informed her. "The wound is healing nicely, and it doesn't need a dressing no more." His dark eyes flashed at Emma. "After we're done," he breathed, "we'll head North to my pa's lodge. Hopefully, we can make it there afore the first winter snow."

"Then we should leave *now*," reasoned Emma.

"I think you already know I'm not gonna leave you alone this morning," Josiah told her frankly. "I've been wanting us to lay on the buffalo robe, and I ain't waiting any longer."

Emma swallowed hard and looked down at the unexpected treasure in her lap.

"You like what I brung you?" he grinned expectantly.

"Yes, thank you," mumbled Emma. "This sewing box will be helpful."

"Then how about showing me your gratitude?" he coaxed, taking the container from Emma's hands. He reclined her against the robe and then tried to kiss her, but Emma couldn't bring herself to return his advances. Disappointed, Josiah continued without Emma's encouragement.

It was late morning by the time Josiah broke camp. The clouds had parted, revealing the blue sky, but the cold wind was ever present.

Emma felt a sense of foreboding as her husband guided his string of horses toward the Northern horizon, straight for Blackfoot country. Clinging to her faith, she prayed God would give her courage to face whatever lay ahead.

Then Emma turned her thoughts to the stranger riding his horse up front and observed the eagle feather that dangled from his long hair. He had taken her, and now she belonged to him. Even so, Emma acknowledged the danger of giving her heart to such a man as Josiah Brown.

Unbeknownst to Josiah, Emma purposed within herself to never love him.

"Can two walk together, except they be agreed?"

~ Amos 3:3 ~

Chapter Three

A Shelter in the Wilderness

1836, Southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"Thy [God's] righteousness is like the great mountains; Thy judgments are a great deep: O LORD, Thou preservest man and beast."

~ Psalm 36:6 ~

Leaving the Yellowstone behind, Josiah took Emma deeper into the wild territory of the Northern foothills and mountains of Blackfoot country. By instinct, the trapper said very little, and made no efforts at conversation with Emma. His eyes were focused on his surroundings, his ears trained for signs of Indians, and his mind busy with thoughts of beaver and the approaching winter.

Josiah's cautious silence had a very quieting effect on Emma. As they made camp before nightfall, he realized she hadn't said a single word all day.

"You've bin mighty silent," remarked Josiah, as Emma unpacked some dried meat for their supper.

"No more than you," she replied.

Josiah grunted. He took a bite of his meal and watched as the sun slipped behind the Rocky Mountains.

The sky was almost dark when Josiah unrolled his buffalo robe and then settled down for some rest. Emma huddled against him, for he had decided against a night fire that might betray their presence to any Indians still nearby.

Before long, Josiah heard the soft breathing of the sleeping woman beside him. With a yawn, he checked his rifle and then shut his eyes to let sleep overtake him.

It was only the snapping of a twig, but Josiah's left eye popped open as though he had only been resting and not sleeping at all. He quickly surveyed the campsite, saw it was a raccoon, and then promptly went back to sleep. Josiah was used to being his own night watch when he trapped by himself in the mountains, and felt more than capable of keeping guard while he slept.

The next several days showed little change, with Josiah and Emma barely exchanging a single word between them. The nights were no different, for Josiah slept in the small snatches of rest he was able to find between awakenings to check the camp.

Emma could no longer count the number of days she had been with Josiah, for one day seemed to blend with another. Her back was sore from sitting in the saddle, and her eyes ached from squinting at mountains, straining to distinguish the blurs to see if they were Indians. They kept no fire at night, and fed on tough buffalo jerky and cold mountain water for supper. Sleep was Emma's one escape, and she looked forward to it with eager weariness.

Then one day, as the sun began to set on the Western horizon, Josiah halted his horses at a creek to make camp. "Look up yonder," he told Emma, pointing to a large mountain with a flattened peak that towered above the others. "That's Ole' Hollowtop," he grinned. "We'll be at the lodge soon."

Emma's face spoke of relief, even if her mouth did not. Soon, she would be enjoying a roof over her head!

The next day, Josiah led his horses around the bend of a mountain and then up a gentle slope, following the creek upstream.

Emma marveled at the vistas spread before her. This was an untamed country with strong mountains and green rolling valleys, and all of it abundant with wildlife. It was no wonder the Blackfoot were jealous to keep these hunting grounds for themselves!

When Josiah turned left, Emma saw the dim outline of a trail weaving through the thick trees. She waited for the first sight of his lodge, and was surprised when Josiah unexpectedly stopped the horses.

"Are we resting before we go on to the cabin?" she asked.

"It's right there," frowned Josiah, pointing with his rifle at the wooded area before them. "I know it ain't much, but it'll do."

Emma could hear resentment creep into Josiah's voice, but she still couldn't see the cabin.

Dropping from his saddle, Josiah ordered her to dismount.

Wordlessly, Emma followed him to a pile of strewn logs, where several trees had toppled over each other in right angles upon the ground. The sting of disappointment was great, when Emma realized THIS was Josiah's lodge!

"The roof's caved in, but that's easy enough to fix," Josiah mused out loud. He knew Emma was listening, although by the brave look on her face just now, he realized she had been expecting something vastly different.

Helplessly, Emma sank down on a tree stump while Josiah picked through the jumbled logs.

"I ain't bin here fer several seasons, but this old trapper's cabin is a good place to winter." Josiah glanced at Emma, and then let out a sigh of disgust. "You ain't gonna start crying again, are you?"

"I don't think so," Emma answered quietly. Josiah half expected her to burst into tears, but she surprised him by instead going to the pack horse to make camp.

Grumbling under his breath, Josiah looked back at the shambles he had called a lodge. If he had shown this to an Indian woman, she would have thought big of him for having such a place to winter in-- at least, that's what he reasoned to himself as he went about setting the logs in their proper place. The trouble with white women was they expected too much!

In spite of Emma's concerns that a campfire might betray their presence to the Indians, Josiah started one anyway.

"This area of the mountains hides smoke well," he explained. "It's one of the reasons why Pa liked it here."

Josiah spent the remainder of the day hard at work on the cabin, before quitting for his evening supper. As he quietly ate his buffalo jerky, Emma took out a needle and thread to mend the hem of her topmost petticoat. By the light of the campfire, her delicate fingers worked the fabric, while the sky darkened with stars that seemed more numerous as the hours flew by.

Bedtime came, and since the fire was still going, Emma went to sleep without huddling beside Josiah on the buffalo robe.

As Josiah slept that night, he felt something cold melting on his face. His eyes opened, and he saw that it was snowing. So winter was here at last. It had been late in coming, and Josiah had been glad for the reprieve. Somewhere in his heart he knew God had held back the snow so they could make it to the lodge in time, but he refused to acknowledge the kindness and instead congratulated himself on his good luck.

As the snow continued to fall, Josiah got to his feet and made sure the horses were picketed by some trees for shelter. Then he returned to the buffalo robe, only to find Emma shivering in her sleep. After throwing more wood on the fire, Josiah lay down and pulled one end of the buffalo robe over his body and Emma's to shield themselves from the snow.

Emma was so tired she didn't notice when Josiah drew her close to his chest, nestling her in his arms until he fell asleep.

When morning came, Emma was surprised to find Josiah's arms around her. She wriggled from his embrace and then crawled from the buffalo robe only to find a world powdered in white.

"Snow!" she breathed in surprise.

Suddenly feeling his arms strangely deprived, Josiah's eyes opened and he found Emma was no longer with him. He lifted the robe and saw her wrapping herself in one of the blankets.

"It snowed," she informed him, her cheeks turning a bright pink as the cold air kissed her face.

"Put more wood on the fire, Emma." Josiah climbed from the robe and then packed it away.

After a quick bite of jerky, Josiah continued repairing the cabin. With an ax swung over his shoulder and a rifle in his free hand, Josiah went out from the thickly wooded area that hid the cabin, and trod through the light layer of snow to some likely looking trees. After selecting a tree that would suit his purpose, Josiah placed his rifle nearby so it would be handy, and set about felling the tree. It was hard work, but soon Emma heard the loud swoosh of crashing branches and breaking limbs as a tree fell to the ground.

Curious, Emma ventured from the campsite with her father's shotgun to watch Josiah as he chopped the tree into logs for the roof.

Josiah's ax swung high, and when it came down, chips of wood flew as its sharp edge bit into the wood. Resting a moment, Josiah looked up at the clouded sky. It was starting to snow again, though it wasn't very heavy. Still, he knew he had to keep going, if the lodge was to be ready before the heavy snows came. Catching a second wind, Josiah resumed his task with renewed determination. Even if he didn't have to work to beat the snows, he had to keep going, for Emma was watching.

After finishing with the first tree, Josiah went on to another, until he had an impressive collection of great logs chopped and ready.

Contented that it was a good day's work, Josiah swung his ax over his shoulder and then grabbed his rifle to start back for camp. He heard the scramble of Emma up ahead, thinking she had kept hidden from him all that time, and now rushing to beat him back to camp.

When Josiah sauntered into camp, he put down his ax and then went to the fire to get warm. Emma was there, preparing supper and saying not a word.

With a tired groan, Josiah sat down by the fire, placing his rifle across his lap.

"Hungry?" asked Emma, taking out some jerky and handing it to Josiah.

He smiled wryly, the growling of his stomach answering her question. Tearing off some meat with his teeth, Josiah rubbed his sore hands while he chewed.

"What've you bin doing while I was felling trees?" he asked, wondering if he could catch Emma in a lie.

Emma looked a bit trapped. "I'm afraid I haven't been doing anything at all," she confessed.

"Nothing?" asked Josiah. "Nothing at all?"

"I've been watching," she mumbled.

"Watching *what*?" Josiah prodded with a knowing grin.

"You." Emma looked discomfited to admit it, but she was obviously trying not to tell a falsehood.

"Did you like what you saw?" he asked, his chest filling with pride.

Emma looked at him thoughtfully. "You're very handy with an ax," she finally replied.

Not the answer he had wanted, Josiah harrumphed and tore off another mouthful of buffalo meat.

When bedtime came, Josiah went to the buffalo robe and Emma soon followed. As Josiah was covering the robe with blankets, Emma looked at him in concern.

"May I see your hands?" she requested.

"What fer?" asked Josiah. When he held out a strong hand, she felt the rough skin that she had expected to blister from swinging the ax. "My hands ain't soft like yers, Emma. I reckon I'll hold together long enough to finish the cabin fer you."

"I wasn't thinking of the cabin," she replied, pulling the blankets up under her chin to keep warm.

Yawning, Josiah covered himself and Emma with one end of the buffalo robe. "It'll probably snow again tonight," he predicted.

In the morning, Josiah and Emma awoke to another inch of freshly fallen snow. After breakfast, the trapper harnessed a team of horses to drag the logs back to the cabin, one by one.

Without getting in Josiah's way, Emma tried to be helpful wherever she could. She carried armfuls of dead tree branches, pine needles, and other rubbish from inside the cabin, until the dirt floor was clear and one could move about without having to climb over anything just to cross the one room dwelling.

Now that the log walls had been lifted back into place, they still needed work plastering the cracks between them. While Josiah hauled logs for the roof, Emma mixed a mud plaster to begin repair work of her own on the walls.

Remembering his horses, Josiah chopped a few limbs from a cottonwood tree and then stripped the limbs of their bark. His hungry ponies eagerly feasted on the sweet meal, nickering gratefully as their master went back to work on the cabin.

Now it was time to make the clapboards, long boards that would lay on top of the logs, overlapping each other until the entire roof could turn water. It was not an easy task, and Josiah set about felling more trees. The snow was coming down heavier now, and Josiah didn't stop for lunch when it came.

"I've got to git this roof finished," he explained, turning away Emma and her dried meat.

"The roof won't mean very much, if you won't be alive to use it," Emma replied, shoving his meal into his hand.

"What's the matter?" he scoffed. "Afeared you'll be stuck out here by yerself?"

Emma stiffened with indignation, but she held her tongue.

The trapper harrumphed, and then started in on his lunch. Since she had already brought the food, he might as well eat it.

The next day or two Josiah spent splitting logs to make clapboards for the roof. Then on the third day, he constructed his hurriedly made roof and weighted the clapboards in place with properly placed logs.

While the roof was being finished, Emma was inside the cabin arranging everything where she wanted. Unpacking the buffalo robe, she spread it by the fireplace, close enough to keep warm, but far enough to not be scorched by the heat. Though Josiah's skin wrapped packages were heavy, Emma managed to stack them safely inside the cabin.

During her trips in and out of the lodge, Emma noticed holes augured on the inside walls. Getting an idea, she went to find some sticks thick enough to poke into the holes to use as pegs. From the positioning of the pegs, Emma suspicioned they had been used for this purpose in the past. Here Emma planned to hang Josiah's powder horn when he wasn't wearing it, any spare clothing, and things that needed to be kept handy.

By the time Josiah went to the doorway to tell Emma that the roof was finished, he was surprised to find she had already moved in. Her progress pleased Josiah, but when he saw the buffalo robe laying on the dirt floor, just as though it were beside the campfire, he frowned disapprovingly.

The mountain man moved to his things stacked in the corner of the room, quickly locating what he was looking for. Emma watched as he unfolded three more buffalo robes of varying thicknesses, and then stacked them on top of each other to form a cushioned bed.

"I'm used to sleeping on the hard ground," Josiah informed Emma, "but I reckon you'll be a mite more comfortable with some padding beneath you." He cast her a quick glance before finishing the bed. "I'll be working on a corral next. I usually don't go to so much trouble fer my horses, but seeing as we're setting up house fer the winter, I might as well do it up proper." Josiah stepped back from the buffalo robes with satisfaction. "I'm thinking that'll be good, tonight. Maybe if you're comfortable, you won't whimper so much."

"I don't whimper!" Emma exclaimed indignantly.

"When I'm handling you, you whimper," Josiah insisted.

With a sigh, Emma looked away from her husband. "I'll have supper waiting for you, when you're hungry."

Giving an assenting grunt, Josiah grabbed his ax and his Hawken, and then headed outside to the horses.

Shutting the newly made door behind Josiah, Emma was glad for some peace and solitude in her new home. She set about laying a fire in the fireplace, and then arranging a small nook for herself in the far corner of the cabin. Emma took a few logs of split firewood and stacked them to make a small shelf that rested on the ground. On this she set her sewing box, the only earthly possession she had besides her father's shotgun. This was close to the window, so she could have good light to sew by during the day; Emma hoped Josiah would let her have this spot as her own.

When Josiah returned that evening, he entered the warm cabin, shutting the door noisily behind him.

"Supper ready?" he asked.

Emma handed him his ration of jerky and the man stared at it with a dull sigh.

"I'm going hunting tomorrow," Josiah shook his head. "This here jerky is getting mighty tiresome."

"It's better than an empty belly," reminded Emma. "Even so, I will be glad for something else. This buffalo meat only gets tougher as it ages."

"People are the same way," chuckled Josiah, sitting down cross-legged by the fireplace to eat. He looked about the cabin, noticing for the first time how different everything felt. He had lived here before, but it had never felt like *this*. "You've bin busy," he muttered.

"I only started a fire, and tidied a few things," replied Emma.

Wondering what "things" she could have meant, Josiah anxiously looked over at his pile of belongings. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw she hadn't opened anything without his permission. "I've got valuable pelts and trading goods in them skins."

"I haven't touched anything," she assured him.

"Good. See you don't." Josiah leaned back on his elbow to relax and finish his supper. He still couldn't shake the feeling that the cabin was somehow different than he remembered it. Whatever it was, he liked it.

Having already eaten, Emma went to bed while Josiah enjoyed the fire. It felt good to have four thick walls between her and the wilderness outside, and she cozied into the comfortable buffalo robes with relish.

"Thank you, God," she prayed in a hushed whisper.

Josiah turned his head to hear what Emma was saying. The man stewed in resentment when he understood Emma was thanking God for what he, Josiah Brown, had done. Who had brought her to this lodge, put a roof over her, and killed the buffalo she had just eaten?

"Mr. Brown?" Emma interrupted his brooding.

"What?" he barked tersely.

"Thank you for bringing me here."

Josiah noticed he was grinning.

Emma sighed happily. "It's lovely to have a home again."

"We're only here for the winter," he reminded her.

Emma was quiet.

"Don't be wishing fer things you can't have," warned Josiah. He stood up, stretching out with a loud yawn. "Reckon I'm coming to bed now."

After placing his Hawken on some pegs on the cabin wall, Josiah proceeded to take off his hunting shirt and kick off his moccasins.

Closing her eyes, Emma rolled onto her other side so her back was facing Josiah. Perhaps if she could hurry and go to sleep, he might leave her alone tonight.

The robes moved as Josiah lay down and then covered himself. A few minutes later, Emma heard him loudly snoring.

Morning came, and light peeked through the cracks of the split log shutters covering the single window.

Emma stirred as she felt Josiah's breath hot on her neck.

"I was too tired last night," he breathed quietly. "I ain't had you in quite a spell, Emma." His lips brushed her unresponsive mouth. "Ain't you going to do anything?"

Emma turned her head away from him, trying to still her heart. "I can't," she whispered.

"Why not?" demanded Josiah. "I'm yer husband, ain't I?"

"It's not that," Emma tried to free his hand from her shoulder, and whimpered when his fingers only dug deeper.

"Then what?" he pressed.

"You aren't a Christian."

Emma's words grated on Josiah's ears. "What's that got to do with anything?" he reasoned, frustration resonating in his voice.

"I can't give my heart to you," Emma emphatically shook her head. "I won't. I refuse to."

"I ain't asking you to love me," Josiah argued, "just to tussle me."

"I can't," Emma was sounding frustrated, herself. "Not without feeling more for you than I want to. I was taught never to even look twice at a man like you, let alone to--"

"But I'm yer *husband!*" shouted Josiah.

"I never chose you," Emma tried to work through the inconsistencies of her rationale as honestly as she could with only the verses of Scripture she could remember. "I never chose you for my husband, and if I willingly give myself to you, then it's like I'm disobeying God by loving a nonbeliever. When you took me, I never had a choice! But I have a choice in what I do."

"You're taking this too seriously, Emma. I'm only asking fer a wife, not a lover."

Emma looked at him with startled brown eyes. "What's the difference?"

"You can't love a wife, cause yer stuck with her until she dies," Josiah answered simply.

"Then why did you take me?"

"A man gits weary of sharing whores with everyone else," he shrugged. "I didn't want to share. Besides, I kind of like having the same woman at my side every night. Makes me feel special. Now, how about tussling me?"

"I've already told you I can't," resisted Emma, "not without love."

"What do you think I've been doing, every time I lay with you?" chuckled Josiah. "There ain't nothing to it but convenience. Lovers can afford fancy sentiments, but we've got to be more practical." He touched Emma's cheek until it blushed beneath his fingertips. "You might as well git yer fill of pleasure, Emma."

Even though Emma didn't act upon Josiah's advice, he spent as much time with her as he wanted that morning. As she always did, Emma accepted her husband's presence and let him do with her as he pleased.

After Josiah was finished, he went to check on his horses and strip more cottonwood bark. He was gone for about an hour, and upon returning, found Emma weeping on the buffalo robe.

"What've you got to cry about?" he scolded his wife.

Unable to speak, Emma buried her face in the robe and continued to weep.

Josiah was fast losing his patience. "Emma!"

The woman turned to look at him, her cheeks wet with tears.

"Git breakfast stirring," he ordered. "I'm going hunting after I eat, and then you can cry all you want."

With a sniff, Emma dressed herself and then went to the waterproof skin where the dried jerky was stored.

Josiah sat down with a weary groan. She had whimpered at his touch that morning, even though he had piled the buffalo robes high for her comfort.

"Sometimes, I think I'll never understand you, Emma. For all those tears, I know you enjoyed having me." Josiah accepted the dried meat from Emma's hand, but when she turned to go, he caught her by the wrist. "Won't you sit with me fer awhile?"

"Please," sniffed Emma, struggling not to cry again, "I just want to be by myself."

With a sigh, Josiah let her go. "You ain't being very friendly!" he called after her.

Emma crawled into bed and then closed her eyes to hold back the tears that threatened to come. She hadn't thought Josiah felt anything for her but convenient lust, and the words he had spoken confirmed it. As this stark reality sank into Emma's heart, it only strengthened her resolve to never love her husband.

Tossing the remainder of his breakfast into the fire, Josiah checked his Hawken.

"Bar the door after I'm gone," he instructed. "An keep yer shotgun close by. Emma, are you hearing me? Open yer eyes so I know you're listening!"

Emma sat up in bed. "I'm listening."

"I'll be back fer supper, so don't start fretting when I don't show up by midday."

"I won't fret," she promised.

Scowling, Josiah looked at his wife. "You don't have to sound so cold-blooded about it. Now that you got a lodge fer the winter, I reckon you're thinking you don't need me as much."

"I never said that," refuted Emma.

"You didn't have to," harrumphed Josiah. "I'll be seeing you before sundown." Then he left, leaving Emma to lift the bar back over the door.

Josiah's moccasin sank into the soft snow, compacting until it reached the ground. It was only a few inches deep, so he had no need for snowshoes this early in the winter. Squinting as his eyes traveled across the patches of white that reflected the sun's glare, Josiah searched for signs of game. The corral needed to be finished, but his last few mealtimes had caused dissatisfaction with the buffalo jerky and his stomach urged him to go hunting.

Descending down the slope of the mountain, Josiah entered the valley below. Game was more plentiful here, and he was more likely to find deer. Josiah's mind wandered back to Emma, and he had to force himself not to break concentration and expose himself to carelessness, simply because of a woman's tears.

Back at the cabin, however, Emma was no longer crying. After Josiah had left, she found a measure of peace in her solitude and was now sitting beside her small sewing shelf by the window and mending yet another petticoat. She was ashamed that Josiah's words could have induced such tears, for she had no illusions that he loved her. Still, it had jarred her to hear him say it in such plain, uncaring terms.

Emma thought back to her girlish hopes of what married life would be like, and then compared it to what she was presently enduring. Resentment welled in Emma's heart, and she could feel the bitter tears sting her eyes. It was a great disappointment for which she could find no expression but tears.

"Lord," she whispered, "have I waited so long for a husband, only to become the wife of this wild man? Is *this* what I have been waiting so patiently for?" When Emma realized she was toying with resentment toward God, she quickly put her emotions in check. She reminded herself that she was God's to do with however He best saw fit. If He wanted her here, then she had to believe there was a purpose to all this heartache. To believe otherwise, would be to call God a liar, for His word had said, "All things work together for good." It was difficult for Emma to see any good coming from this marriage, but she held fast to her faith and pressed on with her sewing.

The day wore on, and Emma ate her jerky alone in the cabin. She was too cautious of leaving the safety of those four walls, and was content to remain where she was. As confining as the small lodge was, it was far better than being exposed to every animal that approached their campfire back in the Yellowstone. Emma's one liberty, however, was to keep the window shutters wide open. She enjoyed looking at the wilderness surrounding her, all the while remaining safely indoors. If trouble arose, she could quickly close the shutters and go for her pa's shotgun. Emma prayed that would never be necessary.

The sun settled momentarily on the distant horizon, casting pink and orange hues onto the glittering snow. Then, all too soon, the last of the warm rays slipped behind the Rockies, leaving Josiah to tramp back to the cabin in the moonlight.

The tired hunter paused long enough to adjust the bundle of wet buckskins and fresh deer meat slung over his shoulder. Perhaps he should have camped for the night, and returned the next day? However, the thought of Emma fretting over his absence was enough to push Josiah

onward. He knew she had promised not to worry, and even though he guessed she worried about him less now that she had shelter, he was loath to risk more tears if he didn't have to.

Josiah trudged on, until the cabin came into view. He could smell the chimney and knew Emma had a warm fire blazing inside.

"Woman!" he shouted to the lodge. "Unbar the door!"

One of the shutters peeked open as Emma cautiously determined who it was.

"It's me!" Josiah demanded impatiently.

The shutter quickly closed, and Josiah waited as he heard the sound of the bar being lifted. A wedge of light cut through the night as the door opened.

For a moment, Josiah forgot his impatience and hesitated to step inside. The cabin was inviting, with its brightly burning fireplace and a strong cozy feeling he could sense standing out there in the snow.

"Aren't you coming inside?" asked Emma.

Josiah shook his senses back to reality. "I shot two deer just afore sundown," he announced, stomping inside and then shaking the snow from his moccasins. He dropped the wet carcasses to the floor, opening them to reveal choice cuts of venison.

"I want this fer my supper," Josiah hungrily told Emma. He glanced at the fireplace. "You eaten yit?"

"No, not yet," replied Emma. Famished herself, she selected some cuts of deer meat and then carried them to the fire to start cooking. "It's late, and I was beginning to worry about you."

"I'll just bet," muttered Josiah. Her words sounded sincere though, and he secretly wondered if she was telling the truth.

With a tired groan, Josiah sat beside the fire to warm himself. He took off his buffalo hide coat, and then removed his moccasins. Unwrapping the strips of cloth about his feet, (for he had no socks), Josiah rubbed his skin until both feet felt warm again.

"This venison would taste good with some herbs," Emma sighed wistfully. "Next spring, I need to lay in a supply."

Upon hearing this, Josiah went to his belongings to locate a small leather pouch. "Here, use this," he told Emma.

Reluctantly, Emma opened the bag and took a cautious whiff. Josiah had many such pouches, filled with concoctions that smelled horrid, even though he insisted they all had a purpose. However, this aroma was very different.

"Sage!" Emma exclaimed in delight. She poured some of the dried flakes into her hand and then quickly returned them to the bag. Two eyes beamed up at Josiah. "Thank you, Mr. Brown!"

Grunting a little harsher than he intended, Josiah settled back on the dirt floor to rub his feet.

The cabin filled with the smell of savory venison, as Emma cooked their supper with her newly acquired sage.

"Emma," beckoned Josiah, "come sit with me if that meat doesn't need yer attention right now."

Obediently, Emma went to Josiah's seat on the floor. Once beside him, she stared at the fire as though her thoughts were far, far away from this tiny cabin in the mountains.

Without asking, Josiah possessively wrapped his hand about the back of Emma's neck. "Did you really worry about me?" he wondered.

"Some," replied Emma.

Josiah's hand slid to her shoulder as he moved her closer to him. He pressed her head to his chest and then settled back to enjoy the fire with his arm around Emma. She made no effort to move, and tolerated his presence with something akin to indifference.

"At least yer not crying," mused Josiah. "If I tussled you right now, you wouldn't shed a tear, would you?" There was no question in his voice, for he had his answer quietly resting her head against his chest.

"I'll be your wife, Mr. Brown, but I won't be your lover."

"Meaning, you still won't return my kisses?"

"No."

"All right, Emma, if that's the way you want it," sighed the man. "Only," he peered down at her, "if you could be a little more friendly when we're not on the buffalo robe, I'd count it a favor. These mountains are big, but this cabin ain't."

"That sounds fair," agreed Emma. She sat up and expectantly looked at Josiah. "Supper should be ready by now. Do you still want to bed me before we eat?"

Taken aback, Josiah studied Emma a moment before answering. "You've done some hardening since I was away," he observed. "You can ask me that without blushing?"

"As you said, we've got to be more practical." The resolve in Emma's face was unmistakable, and Josiah understood for the first time just how deep it went.

"I'm too tired for anything but food and sleep," he finally answered her question. "That venison smells mighty good, though. I should've given you that sage sooner."

Emma practiced a smile for her husband. "Pa always said I was a decent cook, though I think he was just being kind for my sake."

Going to the fireplace, Emma took the venison from the kettle hanging from a hook above the flames and then placed the meat on the single tin plate in Josiah's possession. She had used the sage sparingly, wanting to make it last for as many meals as possible.

Carrying the plate to where Josiah was waiting on the floor, Emma sat down and placed the food between them.

"Tomorrow, I'll make you something to eat on," Josiah grinned as they shared the venison on his battered tin plate. "I reckon you'll be wanting a table and chairs too."

"And a bucket to carry water from the creek," Emma brightened. "That way, we can wash before mealtime."

"Washing ain't necessary," he informed her. "A little dirt won't do a body no harm."

"I've been needing to bathe for quite some time," sighed Emma, not even attempting to argue with his reasoning.

"Bathe?" Josiah looked at her in horror. "Why would you want to wet yerself all over?"

Emma sighed patiently. He was obviously too backward to understand why bathing was necessary.

"Some of my mountain friends practice *bathing*," grinned Josiah, "but not me. Blackfoot don't git dirty!"

Suddenly struggling not to choke on her food, Emma couldn't help but laugh.

Seeing she understood his joke, Josiah grinned broadly. "I'll bathe if you want me to, Emma. Maybe, it'll stop yer whimpering at night."

Emma's smile slowly faded. "I don't whimper," she protested.

Choosing to disagree in silence, Josiah resumed his meal.

The next morning, Josiah set about chopping logs to make a table for their cabin. After cutting the logs down to the right length, he then split them in half, giving one side a flat surface for the tabletop. After assembling the roughly hewn table, Josiah made two split-bottomed chairs, and then carried his new furniture into the lodge.

Letting Emma decide where she wanted the table, Josiah returned to his ax to make a wooden plate and a water bucket. The plate was simply made by splitting a log down both sides, and then chopping it down to a square and carving out a center for food.

The bucket, however, took him a little more time to make. Josiah hollowed the center of a log by burning out its interior, creating a large cup-like container. Then he added a rope handle to carry it by. It was crudely fashioned, but it was watertight and would suit Emma's needs just fine.

When Josiah presented the bucket to Emma the next day, she put a blanket about her shoulders, and then walked through the snow to draw water from the creek.

As Emma carried the full bucket back to the cabin, Josiah was readying to split railing for the horse corral.

"You going to bathe?" he called to her curiously.

"If you call a wet cloth, bathing!" she exclaimed with a laugh.

Hopeful that Josiah's curiosity would not cause him to follow, Emma went into the cabin, closing the door firmly behind her.

Setting down her bucket, Emma looked at the reflection staring back at her from the surface of the water. Could that dirty woman possibly be *her*? Her hair was filthy, her face smudged, and for all Emma knew, she probably smelled. With a groan of dismay, Emma shut her eyes and turned away from the terrible reflection. "I'm glad no one back home can see me like this!" she sighed in disgust.

Just then, the cabin door opened as Josiah entered with an armful of firewood.

"That water's going to be mighty cold," he explained, stoking the fire. "You'd best heat some in the kettle, before you bathe."

"Thank you," nodded Emma.

"What's the matter?" frowned Josiah. "Thought you was eager to get clean."

"Do I... smell?" wondered Emma.

Josiah took a step toward her and sniffed. "I don't smell nothing strange. If anything, your aroma's like mine."

"I was afraid of that," sighed Emma. "You could do with some cleaning, yourself," she remarked, filling the kettle with water.

"If you survive yer bath," grinned Josiah, "then I suppose I'll risk one after supper." With a chuckle, Josiah strode out the door to work on the unfinished corral.

After the cold creek water had been warmed, Emma wet one of Josiah's clean handkerchiefs and then rubbed it against a block of soap. From the looks of Josiah, she wouldn't have guessed he owned any soap, but she had gratefully accepted it and thanked him for it.

Removing her one-piece dress, Emma looked down at her three soiled petticoats. Her corset was dirty, and even the chemise beneath her undergarments looked as though it had fared no better.

After Josiah finished the corral later that day, he turned his Indian ponies into the area and watched as they trotted about, happy to no longer be picketed in one place.

Having watered and fed the horses, Josiah swung his ax over one shoulder and looked up at the sky. His stomach told him Emma should have supper going by now, and he decided to follow his instincts. Grabbing his Hawken, Josiah wearily lumbered back to the cabin.

"Emma, I'm hungry!" came Josiah's call, as he swung open the door. He heard a surprised cry, and saw a blanket flying to cover its occupant. "You still bathing?" he asked in surprise.

"I made the mistake of cleaning my clothes, before myself," Emma explained, trying to fight back frustration. "The water is dirty, and I can't go down to the creek because my dress is still wet!"

"Gimme the bucket," Josiah grinned with a shake of his head. "When's supper?"

Emma sighed patiently. "Would you mind terribly if we just had jerky tonight?"

"But, we still have venison!" he protested. "You mean you haven't started supper yet?"

"I've been busy."

"So have I!" he exclaimed.

"I'm sorry, but I forgot all about supper," apologized Emma. "If you'll fetch me clean water, I'll start the last of the venison."

As Josiah trudged out the door with her bucket, Emma heard him swear beneath his breath. It was the first time she had ever heard him take God's name in vain.

When Josiah returned, venison was cooking over the fire.

"Here's yer water," he grumbled, letting the bucket slosh as he carelessly dropped it at Emma's feet.

"Thank you," she sighed.

Shrugging off his coat, Josiah hung his powder horn on a peg on the wall. "I ain't asking a lot from you," he muttered. "I reckon I'm as yielding as a man can git!" He glared at Emma as she quietly rinsed her hair in the frigid water.

"I'm sorry I forgot about supper," she apologized once more.

Josiah wanted to continue his grumbling, but he was noticing Emma's long wet hair. It was unusual to see it hanging down her back, instead of her usual pinned up braids.

"You haven't let down yer hair like that since our wedding night," he reflected quietly.

"I wasn't the one who let it down," recalled Emma, "it was done *for* me. Those two Blackfoot braves yanked out my hairpins."

Captivated by Emma's tresses, Josiah reached out to stroke the long golden mane. "Yer mighty purty, Emma."

"If I am, it's because I'm clean," she tried to lightly shrug. "The bucket is yours, so you can bathe before supper if you want. I'm afraid the venison will be a little late."

"I'll bathe," Josiah nodded, picking up the bucket to fetch more water from the creek.

Hugging her blanket to remain modest, Emma tended the venison until Josiah returned with his water. He didn't bother heating it, but promptly set about taking off his buckskins.

Keeping her eyes from Josiah, Emma dried her hair by the fire and then returned to the venison.

"I finished the corral," informed Josiah, splashing water onto his arms in a haphazard manner.

"Don't forget to use the soap!" exclaimed Emma, afraid his greasy self would shed water and he would remain smelling as he did before he started.

"I was thinking I'd like to take you up the mountain tomorrow," he offered, "an show you a good view of the valley below us."

"I'll come," she consented.

At the call for supper, Josiah quickly climbed back into his smelly buckskins, ready to eat.

Now able to freely look about, Emma was dismayed to find a large muddy puddle on the dirt floor where Josiah had bathed. "At least you remembered to use the soap," she sighed.

As Emma had expected him to, Josiah took her to the buffalo robe when supper was over. He didn't try to kiss her, but squeezed her shoulder, instead.

It was then that Emma whimpered.

"I even bathed!" Josiah exclaimed reproachfully. "Thought you said you didn't whimper, Emma."

"I didn't know I did," she winced in pain. "Mr. Brown, it hurts when you handle me that hard!"

"Why didn't you speak up sooner?" he demanded.

Emma sighed. "I didn't want to make you angry."

"You have a peculiar way of deciding what'll anger me," Josiah chuckled morosely. "So it wasn't the buffalo robe being too hard, nor me being too smelly." Grinning, he held Emma close and whispered in her ear. "It ain't in my nature to be tender, but I'll try."

The next morning, Emma was glad to find her clothing completely dry. She dressed herself while Josiah slept, and then started breakfast. By the time he awakened, she had hot broth with reconstituted jerky waiting for him.

Emma watched as Josiah took a sip. She wasn't surprised when he frowned.

"We're out of venison, so I fixed buffalo for breakfast," she explained.

"It's good broth," muttered Josiah, tossing back his blanket. "You still aiming to be friendly, Emma?" He slanted her a sideways glance.

"I said I would," she reminded him, "when I'm not being tussled."

"I were just checking," he grinned. "You're like a wooden doll when yer in my arms. How about a smile to let me know we're still friends?"

Emma smiled, and Josiah thought he saw her blush a little as well.

Sipping down the last of his broth, Josiah handed the cup back to Emma. "I'll fetch you after I tend the horses. If you don't have nothing heavier than that dress to keep warm, use my blanket capote [pronounced cup-oat']. It's in the large leather bag in the corner." Josiah stood up, and then looked back at Emma. "You didn't whimper last night."

"You were tender," she smiled gratefully.

Picking up his Hawken, Josiah checked its priming, and then stepped outside.

Now that Josiah was up, Emma straightened the buffalo robes and smoothed out their blankets. She washed the tin cup, tidying the mess she had made preparing breakfast.

Then Emma went to locate Josiah's capote-- a coat made from a blanket-- in his large bag, for her woolen dress was not adequate to keep out the cold. Easily finding the hooded capote, Emma put it on just as Josiah walked through the door.

Grinning, he looked her over. "I ain't sure if you're wearing that capote, or that capote is wearing you!" he chuckled.

"You're a very large man," she observed, noticing how his capote came down to her ankles. The long sleeves went well beyond her hands, and the broad shoulders hung heavy on her frame.

Though Emma was not a small woman, she felt like one beside Josiah. The top of her head only came to his shoulder, and when he stood near, Emma was constantly looking up when he spoke.

"This'll keep you warm," Josiah grinned, tying the capote's sash about her waist to keep the garment closed. He pulled the hood over her head and laughed when it hid much of her face.

"Should I take Pa's shotgun?" wondered Emma.

"What fer?" he asked. "You can't find yer hands in those sleeves to hold a weapon. Besides, I got my Hawken."

Josiah swung open the log door, and Emma followed him outside into the icy air. It had snowed a little the night before, only adding to the white layer that already covered much of the ground.

Heading up the mountain, Josiah led the way while Emma kept behind him. The hood continually fell over her eyes, and Emma found herself constantly pushing it back to see where she was going.

With some consternation, Emma watched as Josiah ascended the rocky slope with the ease of a mountain goat. Her footing wasn't as sure, and more than once she grasped for Josiah's hand whenever the terrain became too steep.

As Emma continued, she noticed her ears pop with the high altitude. The wind became colder, the snow deeper, and the air thinner.

"Emma, keep up," Josiah ordered. "Yer falling behind."

"I'm coming as fast as I can," she panted.

With a sigh of impatience, Josiah turned to watch as Emma struggled in her long skirts and oversized capote. "This snow ain't even deep enough to bother with snowshoes!" he chided.

Gasping for breath, Emma came to a halt. "Please, couldn't we stop for a rest?"

"I reckon, but only fer a moment or two," he reluctantly conceded. "Don't sit in the snow, Emma! You'll git yer clothes wet!"

"How much further to the summit?" she panted, leaning against a tree for support.

"We ain't even halfway," Josiah wryly grinned. "It ain't like you to tire out so quick."

"You were snoring last night," smiled Emma, "so I had trouble sleeping!"

"Now that you've found yer second wind," mocked Josiah, "set yer feet to moving!"

The rock-strewn slopes grew more difficult the higher they climbed, so that Josiah had to stop more than once for Emma to find her breath.

"We're almost there," he encouraged his tired wife.

Hanging to Josiah's strong hand, Emma finally reached the mountain's summit. The gusts at the top were fierce, causing the hood on her capote to wildly flap at her back.

"Ain't it a view?" Josiah grinned, his face full to the wind.

Emma could barely hear him, for the blast howled so loudly she could scarcely hear herself think. Squinting, Emma looked down from their high precipice. Far below them, she could see the valley floor, covered in white and looking as rugged and as wild as anything she had ever seen. Her eyesight couldn't see trees or rocks from this distance, but she was very aware of the sheer size of the mountains.

Josiah tapped Emma's shoulder and then pointed upward to something behind her. "Hollowtop!" he shouted above the wind.

Turning, Emma gasped at the tall peak of Hollowtop Mountain soaring above them. It dwarfed the summit beneath her feet, giving her a feeling of vertigo as she looked upward.

An eagle's cry brought a grin to Josiah, and he watched the bird soar above the mountains as it searched for its prey.

"I grew up in these here mountains, 'an in wilds like these," Josiah told Emma, his eyes fixed on the eagle. "It's a grand life, living as you please 'an going where you want. Look, Emma," he swept his hand across the view, "there ain't none to tell us what to do, or where to go. We can do whatever we want, whenever we want. There ain't a man, woman, nor child as fer as the eye can see." Josiah turned to Emma. "You don't have to keep to the white man's ways, cause there's none here to see but me."

"What do you mean?" asked Emma, struggling to be heard over the wind.

"You can tussle me, 'an hold me, and no one will look down on you fer giving yourself to a half-breed," reasoned Josiah.

"That's not the reason why," Emma shook her head resolutely. "I won't love a man who isn't a Christian!"

"Bah!" Josiah dismissed her argument with a disbelieving wave of his hand. "I'm knowing yer kind better than that! Even white whores don't want it known that they've tumbled with me, 'cause it'd be bad fer business!"

Emma's face paled, and she took a step back from the mountain man. "I'm not a whore," she finally managed to speak. Her words were lost in the wind, but Josiah didn't have to hear to understand what she had said.

Resting his Hawken in the crook of his arm, Josiah looked out over the valley. "Yer a hard one, Emma."

Emma moved forward until she was sure he could hear her over the howling wind. "I beg you not to push me beyond what I can do in good conscience," she pleaded. "Isn't it enough that I share your bed and cook your food?"

"I reckon it'll have to be," groaned Josiah. "I had to try, though."

Breathing a small sigh of relief, Emma shuddered beneath Josiah's capote. She could barely feel her ice cold feet.

"I'm ready to go down now!" she called to Josiah.

Nodding his willingness, Josiah led the way back down. He wasn't sorry he had brought Emma to these mountains, instead of wintering with his white trapper friends. If Emma was this determined while they were truly alone, then he would never had had a chance with her amongst her own people.

Gravity helped Emma descend the steep mountainside, but since her feet were numb, it didn't take long for her to trip over her skirts.

Handing his Hawken to Emma, Josiah lifted Emma into his arms. Without a word, he carried her down the mountain, negotiating the way easier than Emma thought possible for someone with a woman in his arms. Holding onto to his neck with one hand, and the heavy Hawken rifle with her other, Emma waited for the terrain to get easier so she could walk on her own power.

"Can you feel yer feet?" huffed Josiah, his warm breath creating a long trail of vapor in the arctic air.

"Just barely," she answered. "Mr. Brown, put me down. I think I can manage the rest of the way on my own."

"I should've checked yer shoes to make sure they were sturdy," he scolded himself. "A good friend of mine lost half of both feet to frostbite last winter. He walks about on his heels now."

Startled, Emma looked at Josiah as though he had just told a very poor joke.

"I was the one who done the cutting, and I ain't too eager to do it again." Josiah paused a moment to fill his lungs with air. "Wiggle yer toes, Emma."

"They're wiggling," she soberly affirmed.

"Good, then you ain't in a bad way," he sighed in relief.

When they reached the cabin, Josiah put Emma in front of the fire and then carefully took off her shoes.

"These are full of holes," he looked at Emma's footwear. "No wonder yer feet are blue!" Josiah went to his large bag and pulled out a spare set of moccasins. He compared them to Emma's small feet and then laughed at himself for even checking. Tossing aside his giant sized shoes, Josiah took her small feet between his rough hands and rubbed them until her skin glowed a healthy pink.

"Until I fashion some moccasins," sighed Josiah, "you'll need to keep out of the snow."

"My shoes will serve me just fine," insisted Emma.

Josiah frowned. "You reckon moccasins ain't fitting for a white woman?"

"It's not that," Emma stammered awkwardly. "They're simply not necessary. I can get along just fine without them."

Discouraged, Josiah let her foot drop from his hands.

"Thank you for the thought though, Mr. Brown."

Josiah leveled his gaze at Emma. "You'll wear whatever I tell you to wear." He jumped to his feet and then grabbed his rifle. "I'm going hunting. Stay inside and keep the bar over the door while I'm gone."

"When will you be back?"

"When I feel like it," came his short reply. Putting on his buffalo hide coat and then filling a small pouch with jerky, Josiah left the cabin to head for some destination known only to himself.

Alone once again, Emma put the bar over the door and then went to the window to do some sewing. Her trembling needle refused to work, however, and Emma spent the remainder of the day staring out the window deep in thought.

Instead of returning to the cabin that night, Josiah decided to camp beside the mountain. His frustrations cooled in the winter wind, while his body enjoyed the night fire.

One question kept sounding over and over in his brain: "Do you want her?" The reply was always the same: "Yes!" In fact, Josiah didn't know of anything else he wanted more than Emma. The longer he was with her, the more he wanted her to treat him as her husband.

"If only she'd give in," he sighed glumly. "That woman is more stubborn than I am!" Josiah quickly checked himself. "*Almost* as stubborn," for he would never admit a mere woman could have a will stronger than his own.

The next morning, Josiah headed back to the cabin, eager to see Emma again. He pounded on the door until she let him inside, and then produced the grouse he had shot.

"It'll be good eating," he told Emma, placing it in her hands and then going to the fire to warm himself.

Quietly, Emma went to the table to set about dressing the bird while Josiah stood beside the fireplace. He wanted to say something to her-- anything, to break this silence between them.

"Do you know what day of the week this is?" asked Emma.

"No, I don't," shrugged Josiah, glad that he didn't have to be the first to speak up.

"I think today will be Sunday," she decided. "Starting now, every seven days will be the Sabbath."

"Why do you want to go and do that fer?" asked Josiah. "You ain't knowing what day this is!"

"I haven't had much time to keep track of months, let alone days," explained Emma, "because I've been too busy staying alive. Even though I think God understands, it's time I put the Sabbath back in its rightful place."

"This means you ain't fixing lunch?" Josiah asked in alarm.

"No, I'll cook lunch," answered Emma, "but if any chore can wait until the next day, I'd like to put it off so I can rest on the Sabbath."

"The Sabbath!" he grumbled. Deciding to change the subject to something more agreeable, Josiah pointed to the grouse Emma was plucking on her lap. "That's a big'un, ain't it?"

Emma forced a smile and nodded that it was.

Coming to Emma's chair, Josiah crouched down to look into her face. "I don't want to be yer enemy," he sighed, touching her cheek with a large hand. "Don't fight me unless you have to, Emma."

His gentle touch created a warm feeling in Emma that she couldn't escape. "I'll try not to," she breathed quietly. "I don't want to be your enemy, either."

Smiling, Josiah kissed Emma's cheek and then went to the buffalo robe to stretch out while she fixed his meal. "Wake me when the food's ready," he yawned. If this was Sunday, he decided to make the best of it and take a good long nap.

With a yearning heart, Emma looked across the cabin to where Josiah was lying. "God," she whispered into the silence, "if You could turn King Nebuchadnezzar's heart to righteousness, then you can turn *his*."

Still awake, the mountain man's sharp ears caught every word of Emma's hushed prayer. The "him" she had referred to obviously meant him. Josiah thought it a futile prayer, for he knew he would never change.

Not even for Emma.

"The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever He will."

~ Proverbs 21:1 ~

"I [King] Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and His ways judgment: and those that walk in pride He [God] is able to abase."

~ Daniel 4:37 ~

Chapter Four
An Honest Heart

1836, Southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"And herein do I [Emma] exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men."

~ Acts 24:16 ~

Hearing Emma's call to lunch, Josiah climbed from the buffalo robe and scratched himself as he strode to the table. He swung his leg over a split bottom chair, planting himself at the table while Emma's lips silently moved in prayer over the food. Her eyes were barely open when he hungrily tore off a wing of the grouse and nosily began eating.

Today was Emma's first Sunday since coming to these mountains, and she wondered how much of a church service Josiah was going to let her get away with. "Will you be staying here all day?" she wondered.

"Why?" asked Josiah, morsels of food spilling from his mouth as he spoke. "You trying to git rid of me?"

"No," Emma invited, "I was hoping you'd stay for church."

"Church!" Josiah laughed mockingly. "Emma, you can play at religion all you want, but don't expect nothing from me. I've had all I can stomach from the white man's God."

"Then you share the same beliefs as the Blackfoot?" inquired Emma.

Josiah harrumphed. "I don't have any beliefs."

"Then you must hold nothing sacred," she concluded thoughtfully.

"I hold my word sacred." Josiah chomped down on the other wing of the cooked bird. "A man who don't keep his word, ain't worth the skin that holds him together."

Soberly Emma ate the rest of her lunch in silence. This man had no religion whatsoever.

"Reckon I'll go trapping after lunch," Josiah chewed freely. "The creek ain't froze over yet, so maybe there's a chance at some beaver."

Emma excused herself from the table. "I might as well start my service now. Would you mind terribly if I sang out loud?"

Looking up from his meal, Josiah eyed her hesitantly. "I'll allow it," he slowly consented.

"Thank you, Mr. Brown," Emma tried to smile as pleasantly as she could. She was doing good that he waited for her to finish praying at mealtime, before he started eating.

Feeling a little self-conscious as she went to sit beside her sewing table by the window, Emma tried to gather her courage. She felt awkward singing hymns when they weren't wanted by the other half of the cabin's occupants, but since Josiah had said he would allow it, Emma began: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!"

At the table, Josiah listened to Emma's sweet voice as it filled the cabin. The melody was pleasant enough, but he wasn't sure he liked the words.

"I once was lost, but now am found," she continued, "was blind, but now I see."

"Emma," he finally stopped her, "I won't have my wife singing against me."

"But, I wasn't," she replied in surprise.

Scowling disbelievingly, Josiah shook his head. "You ain't fooling me with all them words about lost wretches. You was talking about *me*."

"You aren't the only wretch in this cabin," Emma informed him. "My faith in God is my only redeeming quality, and even that, I can't take credit for. Without Him, I can't do anything good."

"Bah!" Josiah dismissed her words with a wave of his hand. "You Christians and yer false piety!"

For some reason Emma couldn't explain, Josiah's comment hurt more than she thought it would. She blinked back the tears, and was surprised when he crossed the room to drop down on the dirt floor beside her.

The mountain man leaned forward, looking into her face. "Yer crying," he observed.

Emma was about to deny it, when she felt something wet splash onto her cheek. "It's just one tear," she dismissed it with a quick brush of her hand. "May I finish the hymn?"

With a soft chuckle, Josiah leaned back against the log wall and waited for her to continue.

It wasn't easy, but Emma wanted Josiah to hear the rest of the hymn so she cleared her voice and pressed on: "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved," she sang, her voice faltering a little under Josiah's watchful gaze. "How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed!"

After Emma had finished the hymn, Josiah got to his feet and then went to his belongings to put on his trapping pants. Trapping pants consisted of buckskin trousers that came to the knees, while the bottom portion was made of detachable blanket leggings. With pants like these, Josiah wouldn't freeze while wading in frigid water and getting his buckskins wet when he set beaver traps.

Retrieving his rifle from some pegs on the wall, Josiah turned to look at Emma. "I like yer singing voice."

"Thank you for staying for the hymn," she smiled gratefully. "It's one of my favorites."

"You Christians--" Josiah stopped short of finishing his thought out loud, for he wasn't ready for Emma to start crying again. "I'll be back fer supper," he changed the subject. "Keep the bar over the door while I'm gone." With that, he left the cabin, slamming the door behind him with a loud thud.

The snow crunched beneath Josiah's moccasins as he tramped toward the creek. The sun warmed his back, and he inhaled a deep breath of pure mountain air. Mornings like this, when the air was cold, but the sun warm, made him feel good clear down to his toes.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound--" Josiah caught himself humming Emma's hymn. "That woman," he breathed with a shake of his head.

As Josiah finished staking out the last of his beaver traps along the banks of the creek, he heard the laughter of a small child echo against the mountains. At once, Josiah waded out of the frigid water to get his Hawken and pull on the blanket leggings to his trapping pants.

The sound echoed once more, and this time Josiah heard the unmistakable voice of a man as it called to the laughter of the child.

"That ain't Blackfoot," muttered Josiah, hastily following the direction the sounds were coming from. Cautiously keeping his presence hidden, Josiah stalked to a nearby tree and then carefully peered around its trunk. An Indian man was staking beaver traps in the creek downstream, the

traps most likely appropriated from some inattentive mountain man. The Indian's work was periodically interrupted by a small boy, who kept wandering too far from where his father was standing in the creek.

"Them's Crows," Josiah breathed with a grin. Straightening himself, he stepped around the tree, calling to the man in his native tongue.

Startled, the man went for his rifle, quickly bringing it to bear on the approaching stranger.

"I am friend," Josiah called to him in Crow. He held up his rifle harmlessly, but saw the man was still distrustful.

"You Blackfoot," the man cocked his rifle. Josiah's features were prominently Blackfoot, and the Crow had no difficulty identifying his origins.

"I am white," Josiah slowed his pace. "Mother was Blackfoot, but I am white." He spat at the ground to show he held no affection for his mother's people. "Want to trade," Josiah motioned with his hand. "You have beaver?"

The rifle lowered, showing the man was interested. "What you have to trade?" he asked curiously.

"I have Blackfoot pony," Josiah grinned.

The man nodded, beckoning over his shoulder at the valley below. "Meet there," he pointed to a clearing where a small spiral of smoke ascended into the clouded sky.

Emma had just finished reciting the last of her Bible memory verses when she heard Josiah pounding on the cabin door to be let in. She hurried to obey, for he didn't sound in the mood to be kept waiting.

"Get yerself into my capote," ordered Josiah, hurriedly going to the corner where his things were kept.

"Why?" asked Emma, as he thrust the heavy coat into her arms.

"I've got some trading to do, 'an yer coming with me," huffed Josiah. He rolled up two buffalo robes and two blankets, and then bound them to one of his leather wrapped packages.

Emma was about to pick up her shotgun, when Josiah stopped her.

"There's no need," he assured her. "My Hawken is enough."

She wanted to ask who Josiah was going to trade with, for surely he didn't intend to approach the Blackfoot. There was no time for questions though, for Josiah hurried her out of the cabin and then tossed her onto the back of one of his ponies. Taking its bridle in hand, Josiah led the animal down the mountain.

The thought momentarily crossed Emma's mind that perhaps Josiah was going to trade her to the Blackfoot because she was too much trouble. Maybe she shouldn't have sung the hymn? One look at the possessive hand leading the horse, however, and she knew he wasn't about to trade her away.

The smell of smoke told Emma they were nearing people, and before long she could hear the sound of children playing and shouting to one another in a tongue she couldn't understand. The poles of a large cone-shaped dwelling rose against the sky, and Emma shuddered as she saw two Indian men approach Josiah. Was Josiah crazy? Why weren't they hiding from these Indians, instead of boldly entering their camp?

"Here to trade," Josiah said to them in Crow. After lifting Emma down from the horse, Josiah invited the men to look the pony over.

They showed no emotion, and neither did Josiah. To Emma, all three men looked like wooden Indians as they muttered and nodded to each other.

After they had exchanged a few more words, Josiah turned to Emma. "We're staying to eat."

"We are?" Emma asked timidly. She didn't want to be there, and dearly wished Josiah would take her back to the cabin.

Upon seeing Emma's eyes grow wide with shock, the two Crow men laughed, showing the first signs of any emotion since their guests had arrived. They looked at Emma with great curiosity, and at Josiah with something akin to admiration.

Knowing the source of their awe, Josiah put an arm around Emma to prove she wasn't being held against her will. He grinned proudly as the braves shook their heads in disbelief. Then they motioned for Josiah to enter the lodge with them.

"Stay here," Josiah told Emma, leaving her outside to be the gazing stock of two Crow woman and their children.

Not wanting to betray fear, Emma put back her shoulders and poked her chin into the air. She gave the airs of a decent white woman who didn't want to be bothered by anyone like them. She suddenly realized what she was doing, when the two women poked their chins into the air and started mocking her.

Ashamed, Emma hung her head and asked God to help her act the way a Christian should. She had been raised to believe that all people were the same, no matter the color of their skin, but that part of her upbringing had never been put to the test. Before she had been kidnapped by the Blackfoot, or rescued by Josiah, she had never come into contact with Indians. Emma knew this was a poor excuse to act prideful, and she bit her lip and looked apologetically at the two women. "I'm sorry," she tried to tell them, but the women didn't understand, and kept on laughing.

"Woman!" Josiah's voice shouted from inside the lodge. "Git in here!"

Glad to escape the women, Emma gratefully ducked inside. The animal skin dwelling was surprisingly inviting, and its warmth quickly made Emma overheat in Josiah's heavy capote.

"Come here, Emma."

Obediently, Emma made her way around the fire in the center of the dwelling, to where Josiah was sitting cross-legged with the two men.

The men smoked a pipe which they passed to each other, and eyed Emma curiously as she took off the capote before sitting beside her husband.

"What are them women laughing at?" questioned Josiah. "You ain't hurt, are you?"

"No," Emma shook her head shamefully. "I was prideful, and they were rightfully punishing me."

At this admission of her own guilt, Josiah raised his eyebrows in mild surprise. "Stay by me, 'an they won't bother you anymore." Josiah turned his attention back to the men, smoking the pipe when it was passed to him.

After the mens' conversation had died down, Emma tugged at Josiah's sleeve. "Are they Blackfoot?" she whispered.

"No, them's Crow Indians," he chuckled at her ignorance.

"But, I thought this was Blackfoot country," puzzled Emma.

"It *is*," grinned Josiah. "That don't stop other tribes from saying it's theirs, though. You don't want to be around if the Blackfoot finds out Crows are using their hunting grounds."

"Then why are we here?" Emma whispered in horror.

"You're needing a skin dress and moccasins, and these Crows are willing to trade," explained Josiah, seeing no need to whisper since they were the only ones there who understood English.

"I can't wear Indian clothing!" protested Emma, momentarily forgetting to lower her voice. "I'm not a..."

"A savage?" Josiah finished her sentence with a grim smile.

Suddenly, Emma's face became pale with self-conviction.

Josiah laughed in weary triumph. "I *thought* that's why you didn't want moccasins."

"They're simply not necessary," Emma quietly repeated her previous argument.

"Yer feet will become frostbitten in the snow if you don't have some moccasins and snowshoes," Josiah handed the pipe to one of the men watching, "an you need something warmer than that woolen dress to keep out the cold."

Emma was stone quiet. Had that been the real reason she hadn't wanted to wear moccasins? Had she thought it beneath her? Disturbed, Emma remained silent while Josiah talked with the men.

Before long, the two Crow women entered the lodge to begin fixing food over the fire. Children chased each other around the crowded lodge until one of the men grabbed a laughing child and dandled it upon his knee so they could talk without interruption.

Emma gazed at the small boy staring at her with brilliant eyes and a curious expression. She smiled at the boy and he smiled in return, tugging at his father's arms to let him go. The man released his child, and the boy toddled over to Emma. He felt the material of her dress and then examined the golden braids she had pinned back in a knot. The boy couldn't have been older

than two years, so when he gave a fistful of Emma's hair a sharp tug, she didn't have the heart to scold him.

The boy giggled when Emma made a silly face to show that it hurt, and then climbed onto her lap while his mother prepared food.

Stroking the boy's long black hair, Emma smiled whenever he looked up at her. So this was an Indian child. He didn't look like the savages she had heard them described to be, and felt a pang of guilt for letting others have as much influence over her as they had had.

"Emma," Josiah interrupted her thoughts, "the boy's mother wants to know if you're with child yit."

Emma noticed one of the women was now looking at her kindly for admiring one of her children. Smiling gratefully, Emma shook her head. "No, I'm not with child."

The woman slapped Josiah's shoulder, as if berating him for not doing his duty. Josiah shrugged it off, but Emma could tell he was embarrassed. She guessed he would have been even more so, if the Crows had known she was withholding marital favors from her own husband.

"We'll git around to it, one of these days," Josiah chuckled awkwardly. He gazed at Emma sitting beside him, while she held the child and clapped his small hands together in play. "It ain't been fer lack of trying," he breathed to himself.

The boy soon wanted to be released from Emma's lap, choosing to clamor around his mother as she and the other woman set out food for the men.

Silently praying before eating, Emma accepted the food Josiah gave her. The Crow women waited until the men had eaten, before they and their children had a chance to fill their bellies. Emma, alone, ate beside her husband.

As the evening wore on, the Crows became more animated, until Emma saw them laughing with Josiah as though he were one of their own.

After everyone had eaten, a woman took out a long dress made of animal skins and showed it to Josiah. It was time to get down to trading, and the genial atmosphere quickly became sober. Josiah fingered the garment with a lack of emotion, not giving any indication as to what he was thinking. The woman pointed to Emma, and Josiah directed his wife to stand up.

Obeying, Emma did as she was told, though her head bumped against the hide skin walls as she stood. The Crow woman held the dress up to Emma and then talked some more to Josiah. Another woman brought out a pair of moccasins, and placed them beside Emma's feet to show they were close in size.

Josiah didn't consult Emma before finally nodding his head that it would do. Then the men brought out beaver pelts, and the trading began in earnest. Josiah's horse was worth a lot, so after several prime pelts were counted out, the deerskin dress and winter footwear were suddenly Emma's.

Now that the important things had been taken care of, Josiah opened his parcel bound in animal skins, and the women and men began looking over what else he had to offer.

Emma was amazed by the bounty Josiah produced. He had material-- actual cloth-- and knives and beads and coffee beans! She knew he had more bundles back at the cabin, and she wondered what else he possessed.

The Crow women brought out things of their own, showing them to Josiah in the hopes of another trade. Amongst their goods, Emma was shocked to see a solitary book they had kept as a curiosity from a deceased trapper's personal belongings. Emma's gaze immediately locked onto the object, and Josiah recognized the longing in her eyes.

"What is it?" he asked Emma.

"A Bible!" she cried in hushed ecstasy.

"Oh." Josiah went about his business, but he had difficulty ignoring Emma as she sat there, quietly pining for the Bible. She was helpless to get the one thing she wanted more than anything else in the world, and Josiah knew it.

After Josiah was done trading, and the women had had enough cloth to their liking, he turned his attention to the thick book still lying on the blanket before them. Several handfuls of coffee beans and four strands of colored beads later, Josiah picked up the Bible, grinning as he placed it into Emma's hands.

"For me?" she gasped in wonderment.

"It's all yers," nodded Josiah. "It would've cost me less, except them women saw you hankering after it, and knew they could ask fer more."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Brown!" Emma glowed with gratitude. "I'll never forget this kindness!"

Josiah grinned broadly, but quickly went sober when the two Crow men began laughing at him.

"Woman must treat you well, for you to pay so much to make happy," one of the men concluded approvingly.

Awkwardly, Josiah rubbed the back of his neck. Emma wasn't exactly treating him well, but he was working on it.

The trading put away, one of the women began telling old stories of their ancestors and their ways. Josiah was too tired to translate what was being said, so Emma quietly sat beside her dozing husband. She clutched the prized Bible, happy to just sit there, knowing she was holding God's Word in her hands.

As the evening grew late, the children began nodding off, until even the Crow men yawned and reclined on the skins for some sleep.

"Lay back," Josiah whispered to Emma, as he adjusted some of the buffalo skins they were sitting on.

"We're staying?" she whispered in surprise.

Josiah yawned. "We'll go back in the morning." He put an arm about Emma, until she finally cozied beside him on the warm furs.

The lodge had a close, intimate feel, so that Emma wasn't surprised when she peeked over Josiah's strong arm to find one of the couples nuzzling each other. Their children lay beside them, and elsewhere in the dwelling, wherever they happened to fall asleep during the storytelling.

Josiah pulled Emma even closer. She hoped he wasn't going to nuzzle her like the other couple were doing, for she found such intimacies a little horrifying, when so many could open their eyes and watch. When Josiah's snores told her he was asleep, Emma felt she could relax. The warm atmosphere gradually lulled her to sleep, until even the howls of distant wolves were not able to awaken her.

The next morning, Emma felt something heavy sitting on her chest, making it difficult to breath. When she opened her eyes, the small boy from yesterday peered down at her until their noses

nearly touched. Emma tickled the boy until he climbed off her chest and ran back to his mother with giggles and playful childish banter.

With a sleepy groan, Josiah stretched out on the warm animal skins as the smell of food stirred the lodge. "I'm so hungry," he yawned, "I could eat a four legged animal, and not bother to take off its hide."

After they had eaten, Josiah collected his things and laden Emma with as much as she could carry, for he had to keep one hand free for his Hawken. Without much ceremony, they left the Crows' camp, until Emma could no longer hear the laughter of the children as they played.

Josiah took the long way back to the cabin in case one of the Crows should follow to steal his remaining horses. Emma thought it unnecessary to take such a precaution, for the Crows had been friendly and she didn't think they deserved such distrust.

"When a man thinks he can steal," muttered Josiah, "he'll do just that." Dropping his things, Josiah told Emma to wait as he backtracked a distance to see if they were being followed.

"No one's coming," he announced a little while later.

They resumed their walk, as snow floated down from the clouded heavens. Josiah put his face into the prevailing winds. "Storm's coming," he predicted. "At least I have one less horse to feed this winter. I reckon three will do just fine, come spring."

The weather was turning icy when Emma finally saw the cabin up ahead. Snow was coming down heavily now, and she was eager to warm herself by the fireplace and rest her tired arms.

The cabin and corral were just as Josiah had left them, and he quickly went to see to the horses, so they would have water and feed for the coming storm.

When Josiah returned to the cabin, he groaned to see Emma settled before the fireplace with her Bible. "You aren't going to make me sorry I gave you that, are you?" He dropped the bar over the door and then placed his rifle on the pegs on the wall. "I hope you won't be reading, when you should be working."

"It's like meeting an old friend," Emma beamed at him with delight. "I no longer have my parents, but having this Bible, is a little like having them right here with me!"

With a harrumph, Josiah went to his things to examine the beaver skins he had just acquired. They were prime pelts, and he congratulated himself on such a fortunate trade. "Emma, put on yer new dress," he suddenly remembered.

"Now?" Emma didn't want to put down her Bible.

"Let's see it on you," he coaxed with authority. "Put it on."

With a sigh, Emma got to her feet. She pulled out the deerskin dress, looking it over closely for the first time. It was decorated with beads and a tasseled fringe, and the seams were expertly bound together with sinew. Warily glancing at Josiah, Emma proceeded to take off her dark blue one-piece dress. She was still modest with three petticoats, her corset and chemise, and was about to put on the skin dress when Josiah stopped her.

"What are you doing?" he chuckled.

"I'm putting on the dress," replied Emma, unsure why he was nearly laughing.

"Not over all them petticoats!" Josiah shook his head in amusement. "You've got to take everything off."

"I certainly will *not*!" exclaimed Emma. "Surely, you don't expect me to wear this without the proper undergarments!"

"What do you think the Crow women are wearing?" prodded Josiah.

"I'm sure they dress in the best way they know how," reasoned Emma, "and that's fine for them. But I'm not an Indian, and I have my own views on what's decent."

"Take off them petticoats, Emma."

"Absolutely not."

Josiah folded his arms. "Emma, don't try my patience."

Feeling the full effects of Josiah's intimidation, Emma swallowed hard. She had no choice but obey, and ducked beneath a blanket to take off her undergarments. Pulling her arms through the openings of the dress, Emma smoothed down the deerskins as though she were wearing her woolen gown.

When Emma emerged from under the blanket, Josiah grinned in ready approval.

"It's soft," she had to admit, touching the long one-piece dress and then running her hand over the beaded decorations. "It feels good against my skin."

Josiah stepped close, drawing Emma into his arms. "This is more like it," he grinned, letting his arms wrap around her waist. "I like my women soft."

Hearing this, Emma struggled to pull away from Josiah. "Why do you have to say those awful things?"

"It's the truth," he shrugged, unwilling to let her go just yet.

"Please," begged Emma.

Groaning, Josiah relinquished his hold on his wife. "That dress will keep you good and warm this winter. Put on the leggings and moccasins, or yer feet will git mighty cold on this dirt floor."

Quietly, Emma pulled on the short leather leggings and then slipped her feet into the moccasins. She was covered from the neck down in animal skins, but she still felt immodest.

"Couldn't I at least put on my corset?" she pleaded. "I feel undressed without it!"

"Stop talking like a white woman," Josiah chided. "I'm leaving to check my traps afore the storm gits bad." Picking up his Hawken, Josiah left the cabin to Emma.

Emma was unused to wearing so little, and yet she knew that if she resembled anything like the Crow women, she was perfectly modest. A lifetime of convention was difficult to overcome, so Emma satisfied her modesty by draping a blanket about her shoulders, and then retreated back to the fireplace to read her Bible.

The weathered Bible was old, and looked as though it had been neglected for quite some time. The pages were mildewed and water damaged, and some small animal had nibbled at one of the corners before moving on to something more edible. Still, the words were readable, and just the feel of a Bible in her hands made Emma smile. Here in these cold mountains, the printed words on the tattered pages gave sunshine to Emma's soul.

"For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning," Emma read in a hushed whisper, "that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope."

Hope. Emma's lips parted in a pained smile. That word meant a lot to her now-- more than it ever had in her entire life.

The door opened and a blast of cold air whipped around Josiah as he hurried inside. He dropped a lifeless beaver onto the floor and then lifted the bar back over the door before pulling off his coat. "Back to reading, are you?" he gruffly observed. "As soon as I skin this here beaver, I want the meat cooked up for lunch."

To Emma, the creature looked more like a large drowned rat, rather than a viable source of food.

While the trapper set about skinning, Emma thumbed through her Bible to a passage she had been wanting to reread ever since that first night with Josiah.

"Wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the Word, they also may without the Word be won by the conversation of the wives; while they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear." It was from First Peter chapter three, and those two verses gave Emma hope. Hope for a future with a God-fearing husband. Emma turned to First Corinthians, and read, "For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband?"

"Set this to cooking," Josiah interrupted Emma's thoughts. He glanced at the Bible and frowned; he was liking that book less and less by the moment.

"I really appreciate your giving me the Bible," Emma thanked him.

"You won't be thanking me when you start wishing fer coffee," he griped, planting his leather bottom on the dirt floor before the fire.

"I never even knew you *had* coffee," replied Emma, putting the beaver meat into the kettle to begin cooking. She apprehensively watched as Josiah picked up the open book and roughly flipped through its pages. "You may read it whenever you wish," she offered, hoping that he wouldn't mistreat the fragile volume, for the cover had threatened to come off in her hands.

With a careless shrug, Josiah returned the book to where Emma had left it.

Emma turned her eyes to the fire, thinking over what she had just read. God was giving her a promise for Josiah's soul. Her speech and actions could be a witness to him, and ultimately turn him to Christ.

Letting out a loud belch, Josiah was now polishing his prized Hawken rifle.

Emma sighed. It took a lot of faith to believe that such a wild man as Josiah Brown, would ever become a Christian. She didn't know if she was strong enough to maintain the witness he would need to see in her life, but she felt God was requiring this of her.

Josiah scratched his leg and then pulled off his hunting shirt to repair a busted seam.

Feeling her face grow warm, Emma turned her eyes from his masculine form. She had an even bigger problem right now, and as comforting as these promises were, she needed help.

After lunch, Emma retreated to her Bible to search the Scriptures for more guidance.

When evening came, they ate the last of the beaver and drank cold water from the bucket. After supper, Emma returned to the fireplace, her mind focused on what she had been reading.

Josiah was ready for bed, and went to go lay down on the buffalo robes for some sleep. When Emma didn't soon follow, he raised his head to observe her still curled by the fireplace, intently reading her Bible.

"You coming, Emma?"

She didn't respond, so Josiah raised his voice until she looked up from the open book.

"When I sleep, yer place is with me," he declared with a frown.

"Please," begged Emma, "just a little while longer?"

At the sight of those pleading brown eyes, Josiah felt something soften inside him. "I reckon I can wait," he nodded, taking off his shirt and then tossing it beside their bed. "If I'm asleep when you come, wake me." With a yawn, Josiah pulled up the blanket and closed his eyes.

Emma turned her attention back to the words before her. A passage from First Corinthians was keeping her busy, and she reread the words over and over to be sure of their meaning: "The woman which hath an husband that believeth not... if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife..."

Deep in thought, Emma looked over at the man now asleep on the buffalo robes. He was a part of her, for the Bible had said they were one flesh. But what of love? Would God blame her for loving an unbelieving spouse? If God would, then surely He never would have said the woman in the Bible could stay with her husband.

This very subject had been a source of great concern for Emma, for she longed to return Josiah's embraces. While in his arms, she had wanted him, and even *he* had sensed this. Turning back to the Bible, Emma read the words once more, "The woman which hath an husband that believeth not..." Seeing the words before her eyes, Emma found a degree of confidence that she had lacked.

"God," she prayed, "I choose to follow Your will for my life, and I choose to give myself to the man You have chosen for me, in these circumstances which You've allowed. Help me to be a good witness to Mr. Brown, that he might see You in my words and actions, and that he might find the confidence to place his trust in You."

Ending her prayer, Emma opened her eyes and closed her Bible. The fire crackled as she looked over to the buffalo robe. She felt as though a large weight had been removed from her shoulders, and yet... Emma was strangely frightened.

Looking down at her deerskin dress, Emma laid aside her blanket shawl. Without making a noise, she crossed the room and then crawled onto the buffalo robes.

Josiah moaned as he felt a woman cuddling beside him. "It's about time you came to bed," he mumbled groggily. Placing a large hand on Emma's shoulder, he went back to sleep and was soon snoring.

Disappointed, Emma tried to sleep. Her news could wait until morning, though she didn't know if *she* could. Displaying more courage than Emma thought herself capable, she raised herself to Josiah's mouth. Emma stared at his lips for the longest time, trying to will herself to act.

With the instincts of a hunter who knows when he's being watched, Josiah's eyes popped open and he frowned at Emma. "Thought I felt someone watching me," he muttered. "What's wrong? Can't you sleep?"

"I have something to tell you," Emma timidly explained.

Josiah yawned, impatient to go back to sleep. "Hurry about it, then. I'm powerful tired."

Emma swallowed. "I've been reading the Bible--"

"Yer keeping me awake fer the Bible?" he protested.

"And," she finished nervously, "I've decided that I can truly be your wife in all things."

Incredulous, Josiah stared at Emma as though he were still asleep and only dreaming. He knew that to Emma, there was no difference between a lover and a wife. Even in her unwillingness to return his kisses, she submitted herself to him as his spouse and didn't fight him. But to truly be his wife in all things would entail more than merely not fighting.

"Are you meaning it?" he blinked. "You ain't just going to lay there, but actually kiss and hold me?"

"God gave me to you," replied Emma, "and as your wife, it's only reasonable that I should love my husband."

Still incredulous, Josiah didn't know if he could trust Emma's announcement. It was almost too good to be true.

"I'm sorry I awoke you," she apologized. "You can go back to sleep now."

"That ain't likely!" exclaimed Josiah. He leaned forward and quickly claimed her mouth.

Instead of resisting his kiss, Emma closed her eyes, and returned Josiah's desire.

The next morning, Emma awoke to another kiss, and the two didn't leave the buffalo robes until late morning when the horses whinnied for their food.

"Don't be going nowhere," Josiah told Emma, grabbing shirt and rifle to go outside. He hurried back in record time, promptly returning to Emma's side.

"Did you miss me?" he grinned, pulling the blanket up over them both. Not waiting for an answer, Josiah kissed Emma, and the two spent the remainder of the day together on the buffalo robe.

Nearing supper, Josiah finally left their bed, requesting something to eat. He looked weary, and even a bit ill-tempered as Emma went to fix some food.

"Reckon I won't be hungering fer you, any time soon," he muttered rather gruffly.

Biting her lip, Emma handed Josiah his supper. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Did I make you angry?"

"Why did you have to go and spoil it?" Josiah lamented. "Chasing you was fun, 'an now that you've gone and given yerself to me, it takes all the frolic out of things."

"Is that all?" Emma sighed in relief. "Mr. Brown, there are more things in life than frolicking."

"Nothing ruins an affair like spending a day together like we just done," Josiah gravely shook his head.

"Are you speaking from personal experience?" she wondered a little fearfully.

"No, but I was told that tussling a woman is only good until you sicken at the sight of her. After that, it's no good."

"Well," mused Emma, "whoever said that, has a lot to learn about marital love."

Pausing, Josiah looked at Emma over his plate. "You figure you love me?"

"I don't know," she admitted.

"It'd be best if you didn't," he advised, "for I'd only break yer heart. I'm a scoundrel, and yer knowing it."

"Men can change," she reasoned hopefully. "Even a man like you."

Josiah shook his head. "I'm doubting it." He polished off the last of his food, waiting for Emma to finish hers.

"I thought you were sick of me," remarked Emma, knowing what he was waiting for.

"I ain't made up my mind," he grinned. "I'll be sick of you, tomorrow."

It was still dark outside when Emma awoke the next day. Snuggling against Josiah's chest for more sleep, Emma heard the unmistakable sound of a sigh beneath her head.

"Are you awake?" yawned Emma, looking up to see Josiah staring into the fire still burning in the fireplace.

Josiah lightly dismissed her question. "I were just thinking."

Emma placed her head back on his chest, preparing to go to sleep, when she heard his voice urging her awake again.

"What is it?" she yawned sleepily.

"Did you really tussle me, because God said you could?" wondered Josiah.

Emma looked up at him in surprise. "What makes you ask that?"

"Do all I could, I wasn't able to coax a single kiss from you," reasoned Josiah. "You git a Bible, 'an suddenly, all this happens?"

"Do you really want me to answer," Emma proceeded warily, "or are you going to mock me if I tell you the truth?"

"I won't tease," he promised.

"I know to someone like you, it may be hard to understand," Emma explained, "but I want to live my life with an honest heart before God. That means doing, or not doing something, based upon my best understanding of the Word of God. Since I didn't have God's Word, I could only act upon my conscience."

"And?" prodded Josiah.

"I wanted you," confessed Emma, "but I couldn't see how such carnal reasoning could be any good. It wasn't until I saw God's Word, that I felt the liberty to hold you."

Josiah turned his head back to the fire. "You think too much of pleasing God. I can't see going to so much trouble, just to be sure yer making Him happy."

Emma was quiet.

Gazing at her with a small grin, Josiah caressed Emma's shoulder. "I weren't mocking you," he assured her.

Emma smiled sadly. "I know you aren't trying to." Her eyes wandered to the small cracks in the window shutters for the light that signaled morning, but saw none. "It must be snowing," she concluded.

Following her gaze, Josiah got up from the buffalo robes to open the window. "It's morning, but the snow's coming down hard," he announced. He quickly closed the shutters before all the warmth of the cabin escaped. "Didn't I tell you a storm was coming?" Josiah looked down at Emma, and discovered her eyes modestly diverted from his undressed self. "Emma, you beat all!" he laughed, climbing back beneath the blanket and drawing her close.

Snuggling with Josiah, Emma closed her eyes and tried to find comfort in his arms. Happiness didn't come easily, but she was determined to be thankful for any that she found.

That night, as they ate buffalo jerky by the fireside, Josiah went to his large leather bag to get the last of the coffee beans still in his possession after trading with the Crows for Emma's Bible.

"It ain't everyday a man celebrates his new wife," he grinned. After preparing the hot beverage and pouring it into his single battered cup, Josiah let Emma have the first sip. Then he settled back to enjoy the fire with Emma and to take turns drinking the hot beverage.

"You want the last sip?" offered Josiah. "There won't be more coffee until after we rendezvous with the others in summer."

"You can have it," Emma declined. She leaned her head against Josiah's shoulder, watching as smoke from their fireplace rose up the stone chimney.

After Josiah swallowed the last bit of the treasured liquid, he put an arm around Emma and for a long while, they were both silent. Only the distant baying of a wolf pierced the solitude of the night.

"The creek will probably be froze over tomorrow," predicted Josiah. "I'll have to break through the ice so I can draw water fer the horses."

"Do you need my help?" volunteered Emma. "I have moccasins now, so I can walk in the snow."

"No, you'll have enough chores without doing mine." Josiah planted a kiss on the crown of Emma's head. He nuzzled her neck, and eventually took her back to the buffalo robes where their honeymoon continued.

Just as Josiah had predicted, the creek froze over, making it necessary to break the ice to get at the water below. Emma trudged through the snow in her warm moccasins, carrying her empty bucket to the creek so Josiah could fill it with fresh water for the cabin.

The cold nipped at Emma's face, turning it pretty shades of numbing pinks and reds. As Josiah handed the full bucket of water back to Emma, he paused a moment to take in the picture she presented. Emma's blonde hair was pinned up in braids as usual, and her new dress of deerskins fitted well over her slender form. Josiah silently remarked to himself that she wasn't quite so thin and gaunt anymore, but had an attractive figure that showed she no longer knew starvation.

Surprised to see Josiah staring at her, Emma waited for him to speak. His face was expressionless, as though he were carved from wood and unable to be read.

"Thank you for filling my bucket," Emma finally broke the stillness.

Josiah grunted.

The mountain man returned to his work while Emma trundled back to the cabin with her water. Casting a backward glance over his shoulder, Josiah grinned. That was some woman he had married.

After the horses were fed and watered, Josiah took up his Hawken and decided to go hunting. Now that the streams were frozen, beaver trapping would have to wait until spring thaw.

"Emma," Josiah announced as he tramped into the cabin with snow on his moccasins, "how about going hunting with me?"

"Me?" she asked in surprised.

"Bring yer shotgun," he directed, not waiting for her to accept his invitation. "Put on my capote and them snowshoes I traded for from the Crows."

Emma had intended to spend a little of the morning reading her Bible and giving herself to prayer, but Josiah was waiting, and she didn't want to make him unhappy. Readying her pa's shotgun, Emma hurried into Josiah's oversized capote.

The snow let up as they left the cabin, causing Emma to hope the sun might come out from hiding. The reprieve was a brief one, however, and before long the skies were sprinkled with white once more. Panting in the frigid air, Emma tried her best to keep up with Josiah's quick strides as they hiked over the deep drifts in their snowshoes.

The mountain sloped downward beneath Emma as she followed Josiah to the valley below. A mixture of excitement and dread pulsed through Emma. She wasn't sure she could keep up with Josiah, and yet, she was excited that he was willing to take her hunting with him.

Suddenly, Emma bumped into Josiah's backside when he unexpectedly stopped. Before she could understand what was happening, Josiah roughly knocked her to the ground, clamping a hand over her mouth to keep her quiet.

"Hush!" He breathed so quietly Emma could barely hear him. Josiah's eyes were fixed straight ahead, his free hand tightly gripping his Hawken in readiness.

Emma was paralyzed, but not out of fear. Josiah was pinning her to the ground with the full weight of his body, and she could barely move.

"Blackfoot," Josiah answered the alarmed eyes peering at him from beneath the hood of his capote. "Keep silent." Emma's head nodded in willingness, so Josiah slowly moved his hand from her mouth.

From under Josiah, Emma was unable to see a single thing. She could hear men speaking in a language she couldn't understand, and she could feel Josiah tensing his muscles above her. She shuddered at the look on his face: it was nothing short of hatred. Then, Josiah ducked his head, breathing excitedly into Emma's ear,

"Crows!"

Emma had no chance to ask what he meant, for the sound of gunfire rapidly filled the air. War whoops followed more gunshots, and arrows whistled toward their human targets.

Trembling with terror, Emma shuddered beneath Josiah.

The mountain man looked down at his frightened wife. "Follow me," he silently mouthed the words.

Keeping as low to the ground as they could, Josiah and Emma untied their snowshoes and then crawled on hands and knees until it was safe to get to their feet. Then putting back on their snowshoes, Josiah grasped Emma's hand, yanking her behind him at an awkward run. His eyes flashed with a wild pleasure that terrified Emma. She had seen it before when he had scalped the Blackfoot Indian, and as they heard the gruesome sounds of battle, she saw that same look in his eyes once more.

To Emma's surprise, instead of heading back to the cabin, Josiah moved about over their old tracks, crisscrossing footprints in the immediate area before finally heading off in the opposite direction as home.

The gunfire lessened, but it only increased Josiah's haste. Emma's arm nearly pulled from its socket as he dragged her behind him, his eyes and ears carefully tracking the movements on the other side of the line of trees.

A man screamed in pain, and Emma squeezed her eyes shut. She didn't want to know what was happening, but she guessed a victor was scalping his enemy while he was still alive.

Josiah barred his teeth at Emma, prompting her to keep up with his long hurried strides. Hugging her shotgun in her free arm, Emma closely trailed behind Josiah as he attempted to lead any possible Indian trackers away from their cabin.

Man and woman huffed through the snow, until they heard the crack of a rifle and the whiz of a bullet as it passed their heads. Spinning around, Josiah was ready to unload his weapon into the enemy. His eyes scanned the distance, suddenly coming to stop when he spotted a solitary Blackfoot warrior.

The Blackfoot held his rifle above his head and then waved to Josiah.

Recognition setting in, Josiah slowly lowered his Hawken. "You missed!" he shouted. "Yer eyes are growing dim, Old Man!"

To Emma's wonderment, the man waved again, before turning to rejoin the others.

"Who was he?" she panted.

"No one," breathed Josiah, his voice low and rumbling as it always did when he was angry. His chest heaved, and he wiped the sweat of exertion from his brow. Trekking further down the mountain, Josiah reached the safety of some thickly wooded trees.

Emma's teeth chattered as Josiah opened her capote and began to undress her.

"Yer animal skins are damp with perspiration, Emma. You've got to git out of this, or you'll freeze to death." The capote was relatively dry, so after peeling the buckskins from Emma, Josiah bundled her back into the dry coat.

Hurriedly discarding his cumbersome snowshoes, Josiah was looking quite cold by the time he managed to pull off his buffalo coat and hunting shirt. He flapped his arms wildly to keep warm, and then spotted a large fallen tree. Thinking quickly, Josiah harvested several snow laden branches and piled them against the fallen tree to create a lean-to.

Shivering uncontrollably, Emma felt a stab of panic when she saw the snow was coming down heavier than before.

"What's yer name?" Josiah called out as he blanketed the floor of the lean-to with pine needles.

"Emma B-Brown," she stammered, struggling to keep her eyes open. "I'm so t-tired."

"You can rest after you git warm," Josiah promised, jumping to his feet. He guided Emma to the low entrance of the lean-to and told her to take off her snowshoes and get on all fours so she could crawl inside. "Keep talking, Em."

"Aren't you c-coming?" mumbled Emma, when she saw he was remaining outside.

"The lean-to ain't finished yit," his teeth chattered. The branches wouldn't offer enough insulation by themselves, so Josiah dug at the snow for any vegetation he could find to pile on top of their shelter; this would hold in the body warmth of the lean-to. "Who am I?" he called, endeavoring to keep Emma awake until it was safe for her to sleep.

"What was all that shooting about?" she wondered.

"We came across some Blackfoot, just as they were finding out Crows were in the area," replied Josiah.

"Then, why didn't you help the Crows?" Emma tried to stop her teeth from chattering by clamping a hand over her chin.

"You want me killing my own kin?" asked Josiah. Clumps of dirt crumbled through the branches as he piled more vegetation over their lean-to.

Emma wiped the dirt from her eyes. "They were your family?"

"Who do you think that old man was?"

"I don't know," Emma's voice was becoming distant again, so Josiah urgently called her back to the present.

"He's was my ma's, pa," he informed her with a short laugh. "Thought he'd do me a good turn and warn me off with that shot. I expect he'll be wanting a returned favor one of these days."

Flopping down on his belly, Josiah elbowed his way into the narrow lean-to until he was snug against Emma for her body warmth. Sweat had turned to ice on his arms, and Emma was frightened at how frozen he had become in so short a time.

"Mr. Brown, you're freezing!"

"I'm all right, Em," he tried to calm her concern. "I've been colder."

In spite of the situation, Emma found herself smiling. Josiah hadn't scorned her for showing concern for his wellbeing, and had accepted it without doubting her motives.

Taking their discarded clothing, Josiah stuffed them into both ends of the lean-to.

Without being asked, Emma shared the large capote with Josiah. She shivered as his frozen arms slid about her warm middle.

"Thanks," he grinned. "I'm warming up some."

"Why were the Blackfoot shooting at the Crows?" wondered Emma. "Isn't this country big enough for both tribes?"

"These hunting grounds may be in Blackfoot country," explained Josiah, "but the Nez Percé, Flatheads, and even some Shoshone and Bannocks think it's theirs. Then there's the Crows. If a people were ever borned to war against each other, it's the Blackfoot and the Crows. Grandpap met up with them Crows we traded with, and you heard what happened."

"Are the Crows all right?" Emma wondered helplessly.

Josiah shook his head. "I'm thinking they're dead by now."

"What about the children?" she cried. "What will happen to them?"

"There's nothing that can change it, so you best think on something else," advised Josiah.

"But, that sweet little boy," whimpered Emma, tears coming to her eyes. "God, please don't let them *all* die!"

"That 'sweet little boy' most likely would've grown up to be yer enemy, so stop crying." Josiah adjusted the coat to make sure Emma was keeping warm. Her cheeks were returning to a healthy color, though she still looked exhausted from shivering for so long.

"Don't you care what happened to those people?" wept Emma. "Where's your heart?"

"My heart is right here, where it belongs," Josiah thumped his breast indignantly. "If you don't stop yer moaning, I'll put you outside."

By the dark gleam in his eye, Emma knew she had pushed him too far.

"Death ain't a stranger in these parts, so it ain't no use letting yerself git too fond of anyone." Josiah tried to lessen the sting of his rebuke by resting his cheek against Emma's, and holding her more tenderly. "All I have are you and my trapper friends. No one else matters."

"What about the Blackfoot? They're your people, aren't they?"

Josiah harrumphed. "I have no people."

Startled, Emma backed her head away from Josiah's. She saw hatred flicker across his features before it disappeared in a weary grin.

"We're warm enough to git some sleep now." He returned Emma's head to his cheek, and then closed his eyes.

At Emma's side, she felt Josiah's strong hand secure their two rifles. If trouble came looking, he would be ready.

Beneath the lean-to, Josiah and Emma slept until the sound of crunching snow awakened them. The deadly end of the Hawken immediately raised, poised for action. Emma trembled as Josiah peered through the cracks of the lean-to's roof.

Outside, Josiah saw a mass of furs move about, and once or twice, it stooped to examine the ground. Then the furs moved toward their hiding place, and a human eye suddenly appeared between the tree branches.

Josiah cocked back the hammer of his rifle, letting the metallic sound warn the intruder that he was armed. At once, the form quickly backed off.

Not wanting to expose his rear end to enemy fire, Josiah pushed away the clothes he had stuffed into the lean-to's front entrance, before crawling out headfirst. Josiah didn't bother getting to his feet before his rifle immediately trained on the mass of furs standing before him. When the trapper saw who it was, he got to his feet, coming face to face with an elderly Blackfoot warrior.

"What are you doing in these mountains?" the old man asked in halting English. "You were warned never to come back."

"I go where I please, Grandpap." Josiah squatted down to look inside the lean-to. "It's all right, Emma. Git dressed."

"If your clan finds you here, it will mean your death," the old man worried.

"I don't kill so easy," grinned Josiah.

The old man shook his head in disbelief when he saw a yellow haired woman emerge from the lean-to. "Did you take her with her people's consent?"

Josiah scowled at the question, feeling the answer was obvious.

"The white men will hang you for taking her," pronounced the old Blackfoot, as though the matter were already settled in his mind.

Snatching the shirt Emma held out to him, Josiah quickly put it on before he froze again. "I reckon they won't hang me-- not if she's with child come springtime. I ain't asking fer permission to stay, Grandpap. From you, nor anyone else."

"Is your hand still against us?" wondered the old man. "Do you still bring the white man here, to our hunting grounds?"

"She ain't a trapper," Josiah pointed his chin at Emma.

The weathered face of the old Blackfoot looked as though it had seen many hard days. He gazed at Emma and then turned his eyes back to Josiah. "You make enemies of your mother's clan, and now you will anger the white man against you as well."

"I ain't caring," retorted Josiah. He spat at the snow, drawing the sleeve of his shirt across his mouth.

"I never should have given my daughter to Hiram Brown," the old man shook his head grimly. "I never considered what he would sire." He looked at Josiah with disdain that mirrored his grandson's. "Keep out of sight until spring, and then you must leave these mountains and never return."

Though Emma thought she saw a twinge of hurt cross Josiah's face, he remained defiant and unmoved.

"If I come back, it'll be *my* decision."

"*I'm making it for you!*" the two eagle feathers in the old man's hair quivered indignantly. His rifle remained relaxed in the crook of his arm, but Emma had the feeling it was out of authority, and not out of fear, that it remained where it was.

"Don't do me no more favors, Old Man. If I die, I die."

"You will never change your ways," the old Blackfoot sighed in despair. He hesitated before turning to leave. "You still owe me."

"I ain't forgetting," nodded Josiah.

The old man gazed bitterly at Emma, as if blaming her for the fate he felt his grandson was facing. Then without another word, he returned to his people.

After the old man had left, Josiah gave Emma a laughing grin. "I don't think Grandpap is very fond of you."

Emma was quiet. "Is that why you brought me to these mountains?" she wondered. "So I'll become with child?"

"Among other things," he grinned, his smile masking the anger behind his eyes. "Now that yer tussling me, I reckon my neck is a little safer. Git yer things. We're heading back to the cabin."

After tying on her snowshoes, Emma picked up her pa's shotgun to follow Josiah home. Even though her husband was grinning, he was in a foul mood. He angrily slapped at tree branches as he went, not caring when they snapped back and hit her side. When Emma asked him to stop, Josiah only grunted and continued slapping branches.

Upon reaching the cabin, Josiah loaded himself with the usual supplies he took on an extended hunting trip. Then without telling Emma when to expect him back, he headed out the door with two of his traps slung over his shoulder.

Resting her head against the doorjamb, Emma waited until Josiah was out of view before closing the door and then lifting the heavy bar back in its place. To her surprise, she found herself pitying Josiah. It was strange to feel that way about a man who needed no one, but perhaps that

was why she had pity. Josiah was like a bear, living out the majority of his existence alone, and only coming into contact with other bears when it suited him.

Even in her wifely concern, Emma tempered her pity with reality. Josiah might be alone, but he carried most of the blame for that on himself.

On his way to hunt game, Josiah made an effort to find out what had happened to the Crows he had traded with. He located their abandoned campsite, carefully examining tracks to determine the Crows' numbers. To his great surprise, most of them had escaped with their lives, after all.

"God hath heard [Emma]; He hath attended to the voice of [her] prayer."
~ Psalm 66:19 ~

"A man [Josiah] that hath friends must shew himself friendly."
~ Proverbs 18:24 ~

Chapter Five
Never Alone

1836, Southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"I [Emma] am not alone, because the Father is with me."
~ John 16:32 ~

When Josiah didn't arrive back at the cabin before nightfall, Emma wasn't very surprised. He had taken enough supplies to be gone for several days, so Emma felt no alarm at his continued absence. Instead, she contented herself with reading her Bible and keeping the small cabin tidy.

Night came, and Emma curled up on the buffalo robe by herself. She thought over the meeting with Josiah's grandfather earlier that day, and the bitter words they had exchanged.

Then the memory of her own family moved to the front of her tired mind, and visions of a happy childhood comforted Emma as she waited for sleep to come. She could see her father's face, and how his eyes often smiled when he spoke. And then there was Ma, with her encouraging words whenever her daughter became disheartened by life's inevitable trials. The contented evenings by the fireside when Pa read from the Bible, and the mornings when Emma could hear her mother moving about to fix breakfast, all came back to her like long-lost friends. Emma wished for the old days, when she was surrounded by people who truly loved her. She sorely missed the fellowship of her parents, and the friendship of familiar acquaintances. They were all the more cherished, now that she knew the loneliness of the wilderness.

A stab of grief cut through Emma's soul. Josiah might be a solitary bear, but she wasn't!

"Please, God," prayed Emma, "please don't let me wallow in self-pity. I am never alone, because You are always with me. But, dear God, how I miss my parents!"

Emma had hoped, rather than believed, she had finally shed enough tears over her parents' death that more would be unnecessary. She laughed at the naivenss of such a thought, knowing that for as long as she lived, she would never stop missing them. At least when buried in Josiah's arms, she wasn't so aware of how very alone she was.

In the silence of the cabin, Emma's heart reminded her that the next time she would see her parents, it would be in Heaven. If she remained in these mountains, Emma felt she would never again know the joy that came from the fellowship of such like-minded people. It was a lonely thought, and it made her shudder beneath the warm blankets.

Emma hastily turned onto her other side. "This is what comes of too much solitude," she rebuked herself. "I'm thinking too much."

How long it took for Emma to fall asleep, she didn't know, but the next time she opened her eyes, light was pouring through the cracks in the window shutters. Hearing the horses whinnying for their food, she hurried out of bed to tend to their needs as best she could.

The blue heavens were cloudless as Emma carried water to the ponies. Snow was temporarily retreating from the sun's rays, and bare patches of brown broke through the blanket of white still covering much of the ground. Though winter was just beginning, Emma was grateful for this small reprieve that let her go outside without putting on snowshoes.

After she had finished with the three horses, Emma started back for the cabin to thaw herself before the fireplace.

Out of the corner of her eye, Emma saw two figures emerge from the line of trees surrounding the cabin. Their presence frightened her, for she understood that trouble would come if Josiah's relatives knew they were here. Were these Blackfoot? Or were they from another tribe? Suddenly realizing she had no cover, Emma scurried into the cabin. With trembling hands, she grabbed at the shotgun hanging over her shoulder, and stood in the entrance of the doorway. If these two were hostile, she could always duck inside and bar the door.

Endeavoring not to betray any signs of weakness, Emma returned the intruders' steady gaze without flinching or giving way to the trembling she felt in her bones. Though the figures were not far from the cabin, the details of their faces were only a blur to Emma's poor eyesight. Their garb, however, was more distinct, and Emma knew they were Indians.

Emma watched as the taller Indian turned to the other. The shorter one nodded, and then, to her horror, they started toward the cabin!

Displaying calm control, Emma brought the butt of the rifle to her shoulder, but kept the barrel pointed toward the ground. She didn't want to shoot anyone, but was determined to defend herself, should the situation come to that.

As the two forms grew closer, Emma distinguished the features of the taller Indian to be those of Old Man, Josiah's grandpap. Feeling a great sense of relief, Emma brought down the rifle, and was embarrassed to find the old man grinning at her.

"Your eyes are very poor," he laughed in near derision, "for you did not lower your weapon sooner!"

Emma smiled politely, trying not to let his comment irritate her. Her eyesight was a sensitive subject, and it didn't take much to hurt her feelings.

The second Blackfoot was a woman, bundled in several layers of blankets against the harsh cold. Her demeanor exhibited quiet strength, and though she looked old enough to be Emma's mother, she was quite beautiful to look upon.

Even as Emma endured Grandpap's mock at her poor eyesight, Emma could feel the woman's penetrating gaze.

"Won't you come inside?" Emma invited the two Blackfoot into the cabin.

Grandpap grunted. He stepped into the small lodge and immediately went to the fireplace to warm himself.

To Emma's surprise, instead of sitting down on the warm skins before the fire, the Blackfoot woman went to the table and sat down in one of the split-bottom chairs. She was obviously acquainted with the white man's ways, for she waited for Grandpap to introduce her to Emma before speaking.

As Emma took the remaining seat at the table, Grandpap introduced the woman using a long name in Blackfoot that Emma couldn't understand. Emma nearly jumped from her chair, however, when she heard the words, "Josiah's mother."

"Mrs. Brown?" Emma exclaimed in surprise.

"My white husband called me Cora." Cora's English was halting, though her expression betrayed no awkwardness. She was the picture of confidence, and Emma secretly envied her. If only *she* could be as calm!

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Brown," Emma held out her hand in polite friendship. "My name is Emma."

Cora formally accepted Emma handshake without smiling in the slightest. "I am not called Mrs. Brown anymore."

"Oh." Emma tried to manage a smile, though her polite manners seemed to go unnoticed by her guests.

Grandpap sat beside the fire, content to watch the two women as they stared at each other across the table. He even seemed to derive some amusement when Emma awkwardly shifted in her chair under the steady gaze of his daughter.

"My son is gone?" asked Cora.

Grateful for the broken silence, Emma quickly nodded. "Yes, he left yesterday. I'm afraid I don't know when he will be back."

Cora grunted. She eyed Emma's deerskin gown and shook her head in disapproval. Her own deerskin dress was unornamented, and such decorations could only mean one thing.

"You have been trading with the Crows?"

"Yes... I mean... Mr. Brown has... I mean, did," Emma stammered, realizing that she was admitting Josiah had been trading with their enemies.

Again, Cora grunted. "Has he beaten you?"

"Who? Mr. Brown?" asked Emma in surprise. "No, he's never struck me."

Cora nodded, the first sign of any emotion being one of relief. "Good."

"Has he hit many women?" Emma asked timidly.

"Josiah is too much like his father," Cora replied in a cold voice, "but he swore to me never to beat a woman as Hiram did."

"Oh." Emma tried not to sound as relieved as she felt.

"Did he force you?" asked Cora.

Emma gulped. "Force?"

Cora grasped her wrist with her other hand, forcing it down to the table as though being restrained.

That's the question Emma was afraid it was. "Mr. Brown was rough for awhile, but when he understood he was hurting me, he became gentler."

Cora looked frustrated, as if her question was still not being answered. "How did he take you to wife?" she demanded. "A woman like you, would never accept such a husband."

Realizing her response had not satisfied Cora, Emma replied the best way she knew how-- with the straightforward truth. "When Mr. Brown found me, my situation left me with no choice but to accept him as my husband. I wanted to live, and Mr. Brown offered me life when others did not."

Cora eyed Emma cautiously, though there was now a glimmer of respect in her eyes. "Another might have taken her life, rather than let herself be handled by such a man."

"To be honest, I asked God to do just that," Emma confided, "but instead of death, He sent Mr. Brown."

Cora was very quiet. So quiet, Emma could hear the slight intake of Grandpap's breath, as he lit a tobacco pipe.

Cora's eyes narrowed. "You have religion?"

"I am a Christian," Emma nodded.

At this, Grandpap harrumphed, but his daughter quickly silenced him. She turned back to Emma. "My son has a Christian wife?" Her tone was one of disbelief, though she obviously believed Emma's statement to be true. "Josiah is not such a person... *but I am.*"

Emma was unable to conceal her surprise. "You? A Christian?"

"My husband was not a good man," explained Cora, "but he taught me of Jesus when he read stories from his thick book."

"He had a Bible?"

"Yes," nodded Cora, "but he 'lost' it after he said I was taking the stories from the book too seriously." Her eyes grew dark with the pain of past memories. "When my beauty faded, he left our bed, and found another wife."

Emma bit her lip. She prayed Josiah would never do anything like that to *her*.

"Josiah was a boy when I took him with me to return to my people. It was not good for him at my village, so he went back to his father." Cora's voice was matter-of-fact, though the pain remained in her eyes.

Silent, Emma didn't know what to say.

Cora looked at Emma curiously. "Do you have family?"

Emma sighed in a moment of unguarded honesty. "No, I only have Mr. Brown." When she realized how that must have sounded, Emma covered her mouth in embarrassment.

Instead of scolding, Cora's mouth parted in the slightest of smiles. "It is not good for you to be alone with my son. You will be happier with a child."

Emma blushed, for the subject of children seemed to come up with every Indian woman she came into contact with.

"You would like a child?" The question seemed to greatly interest Cora.

"I've always wanted a large family," admitted Emma, though she had intended to have it with a godly husband.

Hopefulness flickered behind Cora's eyes, and for a moment, Emma thought she was about to say something very important. Indeed, Emma had had that feeling ever since Grandpap and Cora's arrival. There was a deeper reason for their visit, and Emma had a strange hunch it was no accident that they were here while Josiah happened to be away.

Gathering her blankets around her shoulders, Cora stood up. "We must go."

Grunting in agreement, Grandpap tapped his pipe against the fireplace and then got to his feet. He gave Emma one last cursory glance before the two headed out the door.

There were no tender goodbyes, and no promises of future visits. Even so, Emma felt herself wishing that they had. She liked Cora.

Her visitors gone, Emma put the bar back over the door. The cabin was eerily quiet, making Emma realize all too much how she sorely missed the company of others. It felt good to talk to someone, even though that someone kept looking her over with an air of distrust. Emma

thought Cora had warmed to her by the end, and hoped the woman would return for another visit.

"Please, God," prayed Emma, "please let her come back. Even if it's only for five minutes." Hearing the desperation in her own voice, Emma sighed heavily. She was pitiful. Pleading with God for five minutes of conversation with another human being. Josiah had only left yesterday, and already Emma was feeling as though it had been a week.

Settling beside the small shelf by the window to read her Bible, a verse from Proverbs dropped into Emma's heart: "The desire of the righteous shall be granted."

With grateful eyes turned upward, Emma knew she would see Cora again.

The hope of a second visit, kept Emma from feeling too lonely. God was a very present comfort to her spirit, and Emma knew that even if she never saw another human again, she would survive the solitude. Still, the anticipation of speaking to Josiah's mother again, gave Emma something to look forward to.

The next day, as Emma tended to the ponies, she kept a close watch on the trees surrounding the cabin for any signs of Cora and Grandpap. Emma wished she had invited them to come again while she had had the chance, but now all she could do was pray and wait.

The nickering of one of Josiah's ponies caused Emma to look up from where she was gathering firewood. Something moved near the trees, and her eyes caught sight of a deerskin clad Indian. Thinking it was Grandpap, Emma's heart beat with joy. Then she noticed the figure's shoulders didn't slightly hunch the way Grandpap's did, and her joy disappeared.

That was not Grandpap!

Three more men wrapped in animal hides moved into view, and they nodded to the first Indian.

Firewood tumbled from Emma's arms, and she took a step backward in the direction of the cabin. Emma moved her shotgun from over her shoulder and ran as fast as she could toward the lodge, not stopping until she had reached the relative safety of its thick walls.

Breathlessly securing the shutters, Emma took a brave stance in the open doorway with her shotgun. The Indians were still in the distance, but Emma wanted them to know she was not helpless. Even so, she was shaking so hard, the sturdy rifle trembled violently in her hands.

Hoping she wouldn't have to duck inside and bar the door, Emma watched as the men nodded to each other and stared at the cabin. They made no attempt to come closer, and after several minutes, they left.

When the last Indian disappeared behind the trees, Emma quickly barred the door, unless their departure should mean a surprise attack. Something within her said this was silly, for if they had wanted to attack, they could have easily out-waited her. Maybe that was what they were doing. Maybe there was still someone out there, waiting for her to leave the safety of the cabin before pouncing on her.

Emma frowned. Only Josiah pounced. She remembered his surprise attack one night, when he had tackled the buffalo robe she was hiding under.

"Oh, where is he?" exclaimed Emma. "Where is Mr. Brown when I need him?"

Besides the fact that the cabin had been found, was the bigger concern that it had been found by Blackfoot Indians. From what Grandpap had said to Josiah, Emma understood that something bad might result from discovery... maybe even Josiah's death. Emma shuddered, trying to keep her thoughts from running too wildly.

For the remainder of the day, Emma kept inside, occasionally peering out through a crack in the shutters. Every time she checked, there was nothing but quiet.

When morning peeked through the cracks of the window shutters, Emma looked to see if the men had come back.

They hadn't.

Should she venture outside to feed the horses? They were making a fuss, and she didn't know how much longer she could put off their needs.

As she was wondering what to do, Emma was startled to hear the sound of someone knocking on the door!

Instead of rushing to open it, Emma hesitated. Josiah would be yelling at her by now, so it couldn't be him. Besides, this knock had a request to it, and not one of authority that expected to be obeyed.

Steadying her nerves, Emma cracked open the window shutter to see who it was.

"Cora!" cried Emma in delight. She quickly lifted the bar over the door, and invited her guest inside.

The Blackfoot woman had come alone this time, but Emma was so excited she didn't notice Grandpap's absence.

"The cabin has been discovered." The words fell from Cora's lips without emotion. Adjusting her blankets, she went to the table and sat down in the split-bottom chair she had used during her previous visit.

Emma felt faint, but reminded herself to keep trusting God. She couldn't understand why God had let such a thing happen, but had confidence that He knew what He was doing. Folding her trembling hands, Emma took the remaining seat at the table. "How did they find us?"

"I told them," Cora's chiseled face showed no signs of remorse or apology.

"I don't understand," puzzled Emma. "How could you do this to your son?"

Cora's eyes narrowed, though she didn't appear to be angry by Emma's question. "Do you believe I would kill Josiah?"

The frank question made Emma pause before responding, "I don't *think* so."

In spite of Emma's hesitation, there was no fear in her eyes. "Good," nodded Cora, "you trust me. You must stay in this lodge and not go out. You are being watched."

"I saw Indians looking at the cabin, yesterday," related Emma. "I didn't know if they were Blackfoot."

"They were," confirmed Cora. "They watch for my son's return. You will stay inside?"

"As much as I can," sighed Emma. "It'll be impossible to remain indoors all the time, but I'll make my trips as brief as possible."

With a satisfied nod, Cora offered no explanation for her actions. For someone who had purposely led her son's enemy to his door, she looked remarkably calm.

"Do not ask me why I am doing this," instructed Cora, seeing the question plainly in Emma's eyes. "It is for the best that you do not know everything."

"I don't know *anything*," Emma sighed.

The two women stared at each other, as if trying to guess what the other was thinking.

Feeling unequal to the task of understanding this Blackfoot woman, Emma decided there was only one thing left for her to do. "Will you stay for lunch?" she invited Cora. "I don't often have visitors. In fact, you're the first."

"Lunch?" Cora looked puzzled.

Emma pressed on, unsure why Cora looked so confused. "It's nearing the center of the day, and I haven't eaten anything yet. If you'll stay for lunch, I'll make stew."

"I had forgotten this was the white man's custom," Cora nodded in understanding. "I will eat lunch with you."

"Thank you," Emma's smile was sincere. It was a rare thing to enjoy the company of another woman, and it was made even better by the fact that this woman spoke English.

"My people eat when they are hungry, and not at set times of the day," explained Cora.

"I didn't know," smiled Emma, pouring water from her bucket into the kettle. "Mr. Brown eats breakfast, lunch, and supper, just like me."

"My son is a white man in red skin," Cora mused ironically. "He has never spoken of me to you?"

"Not since I've known him," replied Emma. "Until I met his grandpap, I had assumed all his close relations were dead."

Discouraged, Cora shook her head, her two long braids rubbing against the front of her deerskin dress. "I am dead to my son. He will not listen to my words, or to the words of my father." She gazed at Emma with an unspoken hope that made Emma strangely uncomfortable.

Once again, Emma had the nagging feeling this woman wanted something from her.

Preparing as appetizing a lunch as she could, Emma placed tough buffalo jerky in the kettle of water hanging over the fire. Taking some of her precious sage, Emma added it to the kettle to make a savory stew for her guest.

Cora quietly watched on, and then opened a pouch hanging at her side. She offered some of its contents to Emma.

"What is it?" asked Emma.

"You have not had pemmican?" Cora was troubled with Emma's ignorance, for pemmican was a staple of life among the Blackfoot. Not one to waste time, Cora promptly set about instructing her son's wife in the preparation of the food. "Grind dried buffalo meat and mix it with marrow and fat. Put the powdered meat into a skin, and pound it with chokeberries and birch sap that has been made into sugar. When it is dry, it will not spoil and keep you strong when there is little food."

Emma looked at the pemmican warily. Since it was warm from Cora's body heat, the clump she offered looked sticky.

"Eat it," prompted Cora.

Politely accepting the food, Emma took a cautious nibble. To her delight, it was quite tasty.

With Cora's pemmican and Emma's stew, the ladies sat down to lunch. In spite of the alarm Cora had caused, Emma was having a grand time! It felt good to say a prayer before eating, and to know that the other person at the table wasn't impatiently waiting to get at the food.

Since all Emma had was one battered cup, she and Cora shared turns, using it to dip into the kettle of stew. All too soon, their small meal was over, and Emma was bracing herself for the solitude that would come after Cora left.

Thanking Cora for the pemmican, Emma was about to start clearing the table, when Cora stopped her.

There was that quiet hope shimmering in Cora's eyes again!

Slowly, Emma sank back down at the crudely fashioned table. Every ounce of her feminine intuition told her that Cora was about to ask something difficult.

"You would like children?" questioned Cora.

"You've asked me that, before," puzzled Emma.

"How much..." Cora hesitated, "how much has Josiah told you of his past?"

The question bothered Emma-- more so, since it had come after the question about children. Blushing bright pink, she was greatly ashamed to admit the truth. "Mr. Brown has made some remarks about being in the company of whores. I don't know how many there were, but he has said nothing of them producing any children."

"He has a child," began Cora, watching Emma closely to see her reaction, "and the child's mother was not a whore. The woman lived in my village when Josiah visited me five seasons ago. She was beautiful, and my son wanted to lay with her. Josiah persuaded her to come to him while her husband slept, but the woman's husband awoke and went to search for his wife." Cora paused, seeing Emma's face turn pale.

Emma took a deep breath. "Go on."

"The worried husband discovered his wife with my son," resumed Cora, "and after many angry words, forced Josiah to leave the village. Then he punished his wife's adultery by cutting off her ears."

Putting a hand to her mouth, Emma felt her stomach turn. Cora was speaking without obvious emotion, and Emma wondered how she could be so matter-of-fact concerning something so terrible. As Emma watched Cora's stoic face, she sensed it was out of resignation to what had already happened.

"After my son left," continued Cora, "the woman discovered she was with child. She gave birth to a white baby, and her husband swore he would drown it out of hatred to Josiah. The birth was hard on the woman, but before she died, she gave me the child so it would not be drowned."

"But," stammered Emma, in a terribly helpless voice, "I thought the reason Mr. Brown had fallen out of favor, was because he brought trappers to your hunting grounds!"

"When the woman died, her husband blamed Josiah for her death," explained Cora. "That is why my son brought the trappers."

Emma tried to swallow, but felt as though she were struggling to gulp down dry grass. She wished she could share Cora's resignation; it would make listening to this easier.

"You will take the child?" Cora's eyes had that same look of hope again, and now Emma understood why.

"Mr. Brown has refused?"

"His ears are closed to my words, but he will listen to *yours*."

"No, he won't," sighed Emma. "He's only interested in frolicking on the buffalo robe. He listens to very little I say."

"After Josiah brought white trappers to our grounds, the child was not treated well by my people. It will be better for her in her father's lodge, with his white wife."

Emma finally managed to swallow. "The child is a girl?"

Nodding, Cora leaned across the table to touch Emma's hand. "It is hard for her to live with my people, so she must make her home among the white man. You will teach her your ways? You will take her?"

Emma felt guilty for even contemplating a "no." After all, this child was Josiah's responsibility, and she was suffering because of her father's actions. Though these were good reasons to accept, Emma couldn't help but dread Josiah's reaction when he returned.

Deciding to brave her husband's anger, Emma steadied herself and nodded. "We'll take her."

"Do I have your word?" pressed Cora.

Emma took a deep breath, hoping that she was doing the right thing. "You have it."

Instead of looking relieved, Cora pensively stared at Emma, as though struggling to follow through with her desperate plan.

"The child needs you," affirmed Cora, as she steadily gazed into Emma's face. "It is settled. She will live with you and Josiah." Cora's resolve strengthened, she got to her feet, leaving behind her blanket wraps in the chair.

Emma was still getting over the gravity of what she had just promised Cora, when the Blackfoot woman opened the cabin door. Cora put her hands to her mouth, and the air filled with a strangely beautiful, birdlike whistle.

Curious, Emma came to the door. She followed Cora's gaze to the line of trees, just as Grandpap came into view with a small figure trailing beside him.

Emma glanced at Cora.

"My father brings the child," the woman answered Emma's unspoken question. "She is frightened."

"She's not the only one," confessed Emma, hurriedly straightening her deerskin dress and then making sure her hair was neatly fastened in the back.

As Grandpap and the child slowly approached the cabin, he shouted something in Blackfoot to Cora, and Cora responded with a nod. Grandpap grinned broadly, showing off a space where his teeth were missing. "Josiah has a good woman!" he praised Emma in English.

Emma did not hear the old man's praise, for her eyes were transfixed on the short person silently rooted at his side. Her form was almost entirely bundled in warm blankets, which covered most of her face and all of her head. In her hand, she clutched a small doll that slightly trembled whenever its owner did.

Standing in the doorway with Emma, Cora motioned for the child to enter the cabin, but the child remained where she was. Grandpap nudged the bundle of blankets forward, and they reluctantly obeyed, not stopping until they had gotten past the white woman and safely behind Cora's dress.

Leading her granddaughter to the fireplace, Cora began unwrapping the girl's winter blankets.

"This is your new ma," Cora spoke English in a tone loud enough to be sure Emma could hear. "She will be kind to you, and you will learn much from her."

Feeling a lump in her throat, Emma watched as the last blanket came off. Before her stood a white complexioned little girl, no older than five years of age. Her dark brown hair hung in two long braids that curled at the ends, showing she had inherited her father's curls.

A small, stoic face gazed up at Emma, and Emma saw the girl's bottom lip quiver.

Cora fondly stroked the child's head. "You must be brave, Mary. Your new ma will feed you, and show you where you will sleep, and then you will not be so frightened." Cora turned to Emma, and beckoned her to come closer. "This is Mary. I named her after the mother of Jesus. Her name was Mary, also?"

"Yes, it was." Emma gave the child a friendly smile. "It's a lovely name."

Mary blinked, and a single tear rolled down her cheek.

Remembering what Cora had said, Emma took a buffalo robe and folded it in half, placing it on the opposite side of the fireplace where she and Josiah slept. Then Emma took two warm blankets, and completed the bed for Mary.

Cora led the child to her new bed. With an audible sigh, Mary sat down on the warm buffalo hide with her Indian doll tightly wrapped in her arms.

Emma turned to Cora. "Would she like stew?"

Cora smiled, and handed Emma the leather pouch hanging at her side. "Give her pemmican."

Emma noticed that Cora had told *her* to do the giving, so Emma opened the small bag and pulled out some of the dried sweet meat. Bending down, Emma offered the pemmican to Mary.

For the longest time, Mary simply stared at Emma. Then, slowly, she took the meat from her new mother's hand.

Cora sat down on the buffalo robe beside Mary. "See? Your stomach knows this is home."

With another sigh, Mary leaned against Cora, burying her face from Emma's view. "Take me with you," Emma heard the child plead in a muffled voice.

Cora looked up at Emma to explain. "The hunting here is no longer enough to feed our great tribe, so we will move our village to follow the buffalo."

"When will your people leave?" inquired Emma.

The dark look in Cora's eyes said what her mouth could not-- not in front of the child: the Blackfoot were waiting for Josiah's return.

Biting her lip, Emma nodded in understanding.

The sky outside had already faded from noon to early evening, as Grandpap got to his feet and stretched his stiff limbs. With a yawn, he made motions to Cora that he was ready to go home.

"No!" whimpered Mary, as Cora stood up to gather her blanket wraps from the chair.

Bending down to kiss the child, Cora whispered, "When you are frightened, talk to Jesus." In a hushed voice, Cora murmured a quiet prayer over Mary. Then, without looking back, the grieving woman left with her father.

Watching the two disappear out of sight, Emma swung the heavy door shut. As it thudded against the doorjamb, Emma noticed Mary stiffen.

Hoping her smile looked friendly, Emma went to the fireplace to start supper. "Would you like a little stew to go with that pemmican?"

Dropping her fistful of uneaten food, Mary quickly burrowed beneath the blankets. From the toe of her moccasins, to the top of her head, Mary had gone into hiding. Then, in an afterthought, a small hand reached out to grab her doll, and that too, disappeared beneath the blankets.

"When you're hungry, let me know," sighed Emma. She placed jerky into a kettle of water, and then hung it over the fire to cook.

Emma gazed back at Mary's buffalo robe, her thoughts still reeling from what had just transpired. Josiah had a child? Emma shuddered. Josiah had an *illegitimate* child. What would her neighbors back in Indiana have said about this? Even in these distant mountains, Emma could feel the reproach of their shame. Suddenly feeling cold, Emma put on her blanket shawl for comfort.

A low, mournful sound came from Mary's blankets. Even though Emma could barely hear each stifled sob, she knew the little girl was crying.

"Would you like to join me for supper?" invited Emma.

"No!" came the tearful response.

With a heavy sigh, Emma poured hot stew into Josiah's battered cup. After saying a quiet prayer, Emma ate by herself.

Evening sunlight glinted off the snow as Josiah gathered his two traps from the frozen banks of the creek. These few days of hunting hadn't caught a single beaver, and he was counting himself a fool for wasting time. The surface of the creek was frozen and the beaver were keeping to their warm lodges to wait for spring, just as Josiah reasoned *he* should be doing.

Short though it had been, Josiah's recent meeting with Grandpap had been their first talk in years. Their bitter exchange had left Josiah in a foul mood, and it had taken these icy winds to distract him from his anger. It was easier for a man to forget his past when his fingers tingled with the cold, and his feet needed to be rubbed so frostbite wouldn't claim more of his toes. It was easier... and yet, the past never left Josiah.

Squinting his eyes to shield himself from the retreating sunlight, Josiah tried to dismiss his Grandpap's concerned indignation. He thought a lot of that old Indian, and it hadn't been easy for Josiah to go against him.

An icy wind bit into the trappers face, and he embraced the numbing pain with a grin. Sometimes, Josiah didn't know why God bothered to keep him alive. It would be easy for the cold to rob him of his breath, and for the snow to entomb him in a winter grave where the dead felt no pain. Josiah shook his numbed senses back to reality, suddenly realizing just how cold he was becoming. Thoughts like those were rare, and it startled him back to his shelter before the night plunged the temperatures even lower.

A warm blaze glowed in the fireplace as Emma lifted her head from the buffalo robe to check on Mary. Emma had finished her supper without Mary emerging from under her blankets, and now that Emma had gone to bed, the cabin was completely silent. Only the crackling night fire broke the stillness.

It had been awhile since Emma had heard Mary last stir, and it caused Emma concern as she stared at the blankets, waiting for them to move. Just as Emma was about to go check for a pulse, the sound of a yawn and then the rustle of moving blankets showed Mary was still alive.

Scolding herself for being silly, Emma let her head fall back to the buffalo robe. Emma had never raised a child, and the thought of suddenly being responsible for one, frightened her. For many years, she had hoped and prayed for such a precious responsibility, though she hadn't expected that responsibility to come *today*.

Feeling more than a little overwhelmed, Emma dearly wished she could talk to her ma, and ask her what to do. Ma would've known how to make Mary at home. That little girl wouldn't have cried herself to sleep, if Ma had been here.

"Help me, God," Emma prayed silently. "I'm trusting You."

Sleep tugged at Emma's eyes, enticing her to get some rest. Giving Mary's blankets one last check, Emma drifted to sleep.

When Josiah awoke early the next morning, he was ready to go home. He was missing Emma something terrible, and wasn't looking forward to another lonely night without a woman at his side.

Gathering his belongings, Josiah started back for the cabin. The air still held the bite of cold from the previous night, for the sun had yet to appear over the towering peaks of the Rocky Mountains.

It was a quiet morning. The snow crunched beneath his snowshoes, punctuating the silence with an uneasy monotony. Josiah paused in his tracks long enough to bring the collar of his buffalo coat up around his neck. Even the birds seemed to be absent this morning. It was almost as if all of nature were holding its breath.

Josiah cautiously pressed onward, his senses sharpened by the electricity that was running down his back. He was being watched. He was almost sure of it. A startled bird suddenly took to the sky. Josiah's eyes darted to the cover where it had been hiding.

There was nothing.

Sighing in relief, Josiah let down the Hawken he had raised without even thinking. He had been sure someone was there. Trying to shake off his uneasiness, he continued his journey.

The feeling that he was being dogged every step of the way, grew stronger until Josiah was unable to dismiss his instincts. He was being hunted, and Josiah had the sinking feeling he had just walked into a trap.

War cries suddenly pierced the air, and before he had time to react, Josiah's world went dark.

With a small groan, Emma stirred on the buffalo robe. She wanted a little more sleep, but something had awakened her. Wondering if the child was in trouble, Emma raised her head to find Mary sitting on her bed.

"Do you need a trip outside?" asked Emma, realizing Mary probably had to relieve herself.

The girl remained silent, her dark eyes flashing fear.

Emma was getting concerned. "What's wrong?"

There was no need for Mary to answer, for the very next moment, Emma heard the indistinct sound of men shouting outside the cabin.

Going for her pa's shotgun, Emma quickly checked to make sure the weapon was loaded. Not daring to open the window shutters, Emma found a space between the split logs and peered outside.

Two Indians were dragging a half-conscious man to a large tree. Emma's blurred eyesight struggled to distinguish the limp body. She couldn't be positive, but it looked an awful lot like Josiah. Other Indians followed, and they all gathered around the tree.

Fearfully, Emma strained to get a better look at the man's face. Indians raised his limp arms, and then lashed his wrists to a high hanging branch. His front was now to the tree trunk, giving Emma a good view of his backside and long, dark brown mane. It *was* Josiah!

"Dear God!" Emma prayed frantically. "What should I do?"

As Emma watched, someone took a knife and ripped Josiah's hunting shirt, exposing his flesh to the cold air. Regaining consciousness, Josiah struggled against the sinews binding him to the tree.

"Ma! tell them to stop!" Emma heard him command.

Her eyes growing wide, Emma searched the crowd until she saw a woman's form among the Blackfoot men.

"Cora?" Emma breathed in amazement.

"Ma!" shouted Josiah, as one of the men produced a whip made of buffalo hide. "Grandpap? Ain't you going to stop them?"

Emma saw a hunched old man sitting down on the snow, as if unable to stop what was about to happen.

Twisting himself about to face his enemy, Josiah brazenly grinned at them all. "I ain't afeared of you!" he shouted. "Do yer worst! You'll never hear me ask fer mercy!"

The Blackfoot with the whip looked more than happy to oblige Josiah, and two men turned the mountain man around to face the tree trunk. The whip cracked, digging into Josiah's back, and

leaving a crimson trail of torn skin in its wake. As much as it must've hurt, Josiah refused to scream... although Emma *did*.

Surprised by her scream, the Indians paused as Emma burst from the cabin. She leveled her shotgun at the nearest Blackfoot, ready to defend her husband's life.

"No!" Cora called to Emma. "Do not shoot!"

The call distracted Emma from pulling the trigger, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw Cora running toward her.

"Put down the rifle!" commanded Cora.

Josiah's strained voice called to his wife. "Best do as she says, Emma!"

Dazed and confused, Emma looked back at Josiah as he twisted around to get a look at her. His face betrayed the pain he was enduring, though he managed to give Emma a weak grin.

Reaching out her hand, Cora lowered the barrel of Emma's shotgun. "You must not stop this. If you do not put away the rifle, Josiah may die."

Emma grasped Cora's arm. "They won't kill him?"

Just then, Mary appeared at Cora's side, looking very happy to see her grandmother again.

"Go back," Cora gravely instructed the child.

Quickly shuttling Mary inside the lodge, Emma returned the shotgun to its pegs on the wall. Though Emma didn't understand what was happening, she also knew she didn't want to be the cause of Josiah's death.

After closing the door to be sure Mary couldn't watch, Emma returned to Cora's side.

The threat of the rifle now gone, the Blackfoot raised his whip. Josiah's teeth clenched as it ripped across his back.

"Mr. Brown!" whimpered Emma. She tried to take a step forward, but Cora firmly held her back.

"This must be done," whispered Cora. "Josiah must satisfy my people that he has been punished."

Though Emma knew Josiah deserved this, and probably much worse, it didn't make it easier for her to watch. Again and again, the whip cracked through the air, coming down on Josiah's back.

"I ain't asking fer mercy," panted Josiah. "Never."

Hearing this, the Blackfoot threw down his whip, swiftly unsheathing the knife at his side. Cora shouted to him, but the man ignored her. He grabbed a handful of Josiah's long hair, and jerked the trapper to one side, as if preparing to scalp him!

Emma nearly fainted.

Frantically, Cora ran forward to intercede for her son, while Grandpap gripped something concealed beneath his heavy winter robe. Pleading to Josiah's tormentor in Blackfoot, Cora pointed to the corral. The man hesitated, as if considering what Cora had said.

Realizing Cora was trying to buy Josiah's life, Emma hurried inside the cabin and went straight to the pile of beaver pelts stacked in the corner. Gathering as many as she could in one armload, Emma raced back, dropping them at the feet of the Blackfoot still holding Josiah by his scalp.

"Please," begged Emma, "take the horses and the beaver, but spare his life!"

Even though Emma had spoken in English, the Blackfoot seemed to understand her meaning. He looked down at the willow hoops of stretched beaver skins, his face still undecided.

Emma retrieved every beaver pelt she could lay her hands on, and then offered them to the Blackfoot.

"*No*," a voice rasped in defiance. Everyone looked at the man yanked to one side by his scalp. "You won't git a single beaver from *me*!"

Fearful that he was about to seal his own fate, Emma swiftly kicked Josiah.

The Blackfoot Indians laughed. The man with the knife released Josiah's hair, letting the mountain man dangle by his wrists from the tree limb. Sheathing his knife, the Blackfoot man looked Emma over with an appreciative eye.

"Don't you touch her!" Josiah barked hoarsely.

A rifle quickly appeared from Grandpap's winter robe, its barrel aiming straight at the man's belly. Grandpap said some things in Blackfoot, and Emma looked to Cora to interpret.

"She is not for you," translated Cora. "You have had your revenge, and it is enough."

Emma gasped. "Is he the wronged husband?"

Cora nodded that he was.

The Blackfoot cast Josiah a parting glare before retrieving his newly acquired horses from the corral.

While the men collected Josiah's beaver pelts, another Blackfoot inspected Josiah's prized Hawken. Yanking wildly at the tree limb, Josiah struggled in vain to get free. Every time his knees buckled, the sinew cut even deeper into his wrists.

The man looked over the Hawken and admired its craftsmanship, for such rifles were rare in these mountains. When the Blackfoot looked as though he were going to take it, Grandpap muttered something, and the disappointed Indian dropped it back on the ground.

Taking away every single beaver pelt, the three ponies, Josiah's buffalo coat, the two heavy traps he had carried with him on the trip, his Bowie knife-- and even Josiah's snowshoes-- the Blackfoot Indians departed with their revenge.

Confronted with the pity on Emma's face, Josiah turned his bloody back to her and motioned to Grandpap with his chin. "Cut me down."

Silently thanking God for sparing Josiah's life, Emma gazed at the half-dressed man bound to the tree. His torn hunting shirt was dangling from his arms, and blood trickled down his back, staining the white snow beneath him.

When Grandpap cut away the sinew, Josiah's body dropped to the ground.

"Stinking savages!" swore Josiah.

"You should be grateful they did not kill you," Cora scolded her son.

Glaring up at his mother, Josiah unleashed a string of curses until the startled woman backed away. "I don't want you coming near me!" he finished with an angry growl.

"You need me to help," entreated Cora.

"I don't need *anyone*," muttered Josiah, struggling unsuccessfully to get to his feet.

Running into the cabin, Emma soon returned with a large blanket. Josiah looked ready to resist Emma's help, but as she knelt beside him in the snow, his face softened.

Quietly, Emma gently covered his quaking shoulders with the warm blanket.

"It stings," he muttered, as the cloth came into contact with the cuts on his back.

"You need to get inside," urged Emma.

"Fetch my Hawken first," requested Josiah, seeing his beloved rifle still in the snow.

Refusing Cora's help, Josiah struggled to his feet while Emma and Grandpap supported his shoulders as best they could. Emma was crushed under Josiah's weight, but she managed to keep up with Grandpap.

Mary hid behind Cora as the large bear of a man staggered into the cabin with his human crutches.

"We'll put you on the buffalo robes," guided Emma, as they led Josiah toward the bed. "Roll onto your stomach so I can clean your back."

"You'd best git out that trading knife I gave you," the injured man directed through gritted teeth, "and start heating it over the fire."

Feeling numb, Emma handed the knife to Cora. "Bring it to me when the blade is hot," requested Emma.

Cora nodded her willingness to help.

Grabbing the water bucket, Emma went outside to fetch water from the creek. When she returned, she found Josiah on his stomach, waiting for her.

Pulling a handkerchief out from one of Josiah's leather bags in the corner, Emma knelt beside him to examine the wounds.

"Before you start," panted Josiah, "I need something to chomp down on."

Emma looked about for something that would do, and gratefully accepted the stick Grandpap handed her.

"I'm ready," muttered Josiah. He placed the stick between his teeth, bracing himself for the pain that was sure to come.

Closing her eyes in a moment of prayer, Emma soaked the handkerchief in the water bucket. Then, with trembling hands, she carefully dabbed the shredded skin on Josiah's back. In one place, she could even see the white of his backbone. Biting her lip to dull her senses, Emma continued until his back was as clean as she could make it.

As Cora approached the buffalo robe, Emma heard Josiah pant even harder.

Cora handed the knife to Emma. "Do you want me to do this?" she offered.

"No," Emma bravely shook her head. "He did as much for me, when he rescued me. I owe him this." Emma saw Josiah's body harden as the heat of the blade touched his skin.

One by one, Emma cauterized the torn skin, searing the flesh together so there were no open wounds on Josiah's back. By the time she was finished, Josiah had gone limp.

"He's passed out," trembled Emma. She looked to Cora and Grandpap for advice. "Should I wake him?"

"Let him rest," urged Cora, wiping the perspiration from her face. She looked about, only to find Mary huddled in a far corner of the cabin, clutching her Indian doll. "It is all right," she smiled encouragingly to Mary.

"Is that my pa?" asked Mary in a frightened voice.

"Yes," coaxed Emma, "but he's sleeping now, so we must keep quiet." Emma got to her feet, but when her knees wobbled, she had to lean against the fireplace mantle to keep from toppling over.

"I will prepare the noon meal for you," prompted Cora, gently pushing Emma back to the buffalo robes. "You rest now."

Emma smiled weakly, grateful for a chance to lay down and soothe her tattered nerves.

The excitement over, Grandpap settled beside the fireplace and got underfoot as Cora moved about to fix something to eat.

Lying on her side, Emma watched Josiah's unconscious face. He was still on his stomach, and she figured it would be quite awhile before he would be comfortable enough to lay on his back again.

Josiah moaned, and his eyes opened. He grinned when he saw Emma's brown eyes gazing at him in concern. "I always knew you had pluck," he breathed unsteadily. "I'm proud of you, Em."

"Thank you for not screaming," she sighed gratefully.

Josiah closed his eyes, letting the fatigue of pain pull him to sleep.

It was evening when Josiah awakened from his rest. Emma quickly came to his side, dabbing his face with a cold cloth and then looking over her handiwork on his back.

"Do you want me to apply the same Indian remedy you used for me?" she inquired thoughtfully. "The skin is cooled now."

"Git Grandpap to do it," grunted Josiah. "He knows which one to use."

Emma showed Grandpap the smelly little pouches, and the old Blackfoot quickly located the one he needed. After applying the Indian remedy, Grandpap took a long strip of cloth Emma had cut into a bandage from a blanket, and bound it around Josiah's chest.

"It will heal good," Grandpap nodded in approval. Going to the warm blaze, Grandpap sat down on the dirt floor beside his daughter, and then lit his tobacco pipe. "We can leave in the morning," he puffed smoke in Cora's direction.

To Emma's horror, Josiah rolled onto his back. His face revealed that he was in a great deal of agony, but evidently, his anger was even greater.

"Please, be careful," Emma pleaded, as Josiah sat up beside her on the robe.

From the bed, Josiah confronted his mother. "You told them where I was, didn't you Ma."

Calmly, Cora nodded. "I told them."

Josiah uttered a curse. "Why, Ma? Why'd you do this to me?"

When Cora remained silent, Emma spoke up. "Because," deduced Emma, "she couldn't bring the child here, without them knowing where we were." Emma looked to Cora to see if she had guessed correctly.

Cora nodded. "It is true."

"Child?" Josiah stared at his mother, an understanding light beginning to flicker behind his dark eyes. His gaze darted about the room, until he noticed the large blanket nestled behind Cora. Though its contents were mostly hidden from his view, he could distinguish the partial outline of a sleeping child.

The mountain man clenched his jaw. "I ain't taking her."

Gathering her courage, Emma turned to face her husband. "I told Cora we would."

Josiah grabbed Emma by the wrist. "You had no right!" he shouted angrily. When Emma whimpered, Josiah lessened his grip until he finally let go of her altogether. "You had no right, Emma. I wasn't here!"

Rubbing her sore wrist, Emma quietly nodded in agreement. "I should've waited until you returned," she conceded, "but that doesn't mean you shouldn't accept responsibility for your actions."

"I ain't letting that dirty little half-breed--" Josiah's tirade was quickly muffled by Emma's hand. She glanced at Mary. To her relief, the child was still asleep. Josiah pushed Emma's hand aside. "She ain't living in my lodge!" he finished adamantly.

"Please, lower your voice before she hears you!" Emma whispered. "If that poor girl is what you say, then what, may I ask, does that make *you*?"

"She's a bastard child, and I don't want anything to do with her!"

Emma tried to calm down, though her heart continued to pound in her ears. "Mary has a father, and now she has a new mother."

"No, she ain't!" spat Josiah.

"I gave Cora my word."

Josiah glared at Emma.

Emma knew how much value Josiah placed in keeping promises, and hoped his self-righteousness wouldn't force the child out of the cabin.

"You had no right, Emma."

"I know," she admitted, "not without your agreement."

"I ain't caring if you agree! My word is what counts!" Josiah enforced the edict by slapping his knee hard. The sharp movement of his shoulder blade caused him to wince in pain.

Wetting a clean handkerchief in the water bucket, Emma gently dabbed the chiseled features on Josiah's face. The cool water calmed him, for his hand reached up and lightly grazed Emma's cheek. He grinned as Emma melted to his touch, her cheek rubbing against his rough hand.

"I sure missed you these past days," he breathed quietly.

Coming back to her senses, Emma returned the handkerchief to the bucket. "Did you trap any beaver?"

"What would it matter if I did?" harrumphed Josiah. "You gave all my pelts away." When Emma opened her mouth to defend herself, Josiah touched her chin to keep her silent. "I ain't blaming you fer trying to save me."

Emma's beautiful brown eyes gazed at him pleadingly.

The man groaned. "You really want to keep her?"

"She's your daughter," reasoned Emma.

With a deep sigh, the mountain man prepared to lay down again. "If you've a mind to look after her, I reckon she can stay fer awhile."

"Thank you, Mr. Brown."

Muttering something Emma couldn't hear, Josiah painfully rolled onto his stomach.

Quietly staring at his back, Emma rebuked herself for not saying anything affectionate; Josiah had said he'd missed her, and Emma yearned to tell him how much she had missed his presence in the cabin.

A log in the fireplace popped, diverting Emma's attention away from her husband. Two faces stared back at her, and Emma suddenly realized Cora and Grandpap had been listening. Embarrassed, Emma smiled weakly. "Is anyone hungry? I think it must be suppertime by now."

Grandpap held up the pemmican Cora had already handed out. "Not hungry," he grinned broadly. "You and Josiah tussle now?"

Jabbing an elbow at her father, Cora gave him a don't-you-dare kind of look, and the old man backed off. Emma figured Grandpap had only been teasing, but even so, the words had made her blush.

After eating her helping of Cora's pemmican, Emma made a bed for her guests. She unfolded Mary's buffalo robe, and then placed it by the fireplace, where Mary's spot had been. Ensuring they had enough blankets to keep warm, Emma bid them goodnight.

The bar was securely over the door, the shutters were tightly closed, and Emma was content that the cabin was ready for the night.

Crawling onto the buffalo robe, Emma cuddled beside her husband. When she hugged Josiah's arm, he let out a low moan.

"Am I hurting you?" she whispered.

"I can git to liking *this* kind of pain," he sighed with pleasure, his voice not hushed in the slightest.

"Not so loud," Emma pleaded in a whisper. "They'll hear you!" In her haste to quiet him, she nudged him a little too hard.

Josiah moaned again, but this time, out of pain.

"Sorry."

Josiah grunted, and Emma heard him yawn.

"Mr. Brown?"

"Emma, go to sleep," he begged wearily. "If you keep moving around, I'll never git any rest."

"I missed you, too."

"What?"

"I said, 'I missed you, too,'" repeated Emma, this time in a slightly louder hush than before.

Josiah grunted. "That's what I thought you said."

Hearing the grin in his voice, Emma playfully swatted his arm.

Wincing in pain, Josiah rolled onto his side, so he could face Emma. "Did you know I was in fer a whipping when I returned?"

"No, Cora wouldn't tell me what she thought might happen," answered Emma.

"Good." Josiah opened his arms to let Emma snuggle against his chest. "Don't ever betray me, Em. I don't trust people too often."

"Do you really trust me, Mr. Brown?"

"When you kicked me today, I didn't hold it against you," he sighed. "Reckon that means I must trust you."

"Cora didn't betray you," Emma tried to plead her cause. "She only did what she felt she had to do."

Josiah's arms stiffened. "Keep out of it, Emma."

Emma sighed, grateful that at least Josiah hadn't taken his arms from her. She needed his closeness tonight, and from the way he was holding her, Emma sensed Josiah felt the same way.

"I've never spent so much time with one woman," he breathed in near amazement.

"Not even with Mary's mother?" Emma couldn't help but ask.

Josiah groaned. "If the child's being here is going to make you ask such questions, I'm sending her back with my ma!"

"Please, tell me," Emma begged in a hushed whisper. "Cora said you only spent one night with Mary's mother. Is that true?"

"Why are you wanting to know, Emma? It's got nothing to do with you."

"Was it only one night?" persisted Emma, her voice becoming a little desperate.

"It wasn't even a whole night," he tried to calm her. "There. I answered yer question. Are you happy?"

"Did you love her?"

Josiah groaned so loudly, Cora sat up in bed to see what was wrong. When she saw her son holding Emma, Cora lay back down, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

"Did you?" Emma repeated.

With a sigh, the trapper moved his hand to the small of Emma's back. "I've never felt any deep affection for the women I've bedded," he finally replied. Lightly massaging Emma's back, Josiah drew her closer until his lips touched her ear. "I ain't asking you to give me yer heart, but if you do, don't expect me to change. I'm meaning it, Emma."

Snuggling even harder against Josiah, Emma tucked her head beneath his chin. "Thank you for answering," she murmured quietly.

Josiah sighed longingly, his lips brushing Emma's hair. "I want to keep holding you, but I can't frolic. These stripes on my back are hurting something fierce."

"I don't expect anything more," Emma whispered softly. "I'm just happy to have your arms around me, Mr. Brown."

The answer must've pleased Josiah, for Emma heard him moan one last time before falling to sleep.

"He [Josiah] that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding."

~ Proverbs 15:32 ~

"I [Emma] had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD."

~ Psalm 27:13-14 ~

Chapter Six

A Rocky Mountain Christmas

1836, Southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."

~ Isaiah 9:6 ~

Emma stirred in Josiah's arms, tired from the concerns of the previous day, but dimly aware that it was probably morning. Her eyes fluttered open, and she found Cora sitting on her buffalo robe, while Grandpap and Mary continued their slumber.

Trying to loosen Josiah's embrace, Emma struggled against the sleeping man until he finally awakened enough to let her go. "Sometimes, Mr. Brown, I don't think you know your own strength!"

Yawning, Josiah only grinned and closed his eyes to get more sleep.

The sound of Emma's voice stirred Grandpap, and he pulled his stiff frame off the ground to go outside and find a tree to relieve himself. Mary whimpered at the cold draft Grandpap had left by tossing aside their blankets, and Cora quickly replaced the covers.

"Should I make breakfast?" Emma asked Cora in a low hush, so she wouldn't disturb Mary. "There's still some pemmican left."

Cora nodded. Her face suddenly became concerned, and Emma turned to see what Cora was looking at. There, on the buffalo robes, Josiah was slowly and painfully climbing to his feet. He winced as the flesh on his back pulled tight, but Josiah didn't stop until he was standing.

"Lay back down! You should be resting!" scolded Emma.

Bare-chested, Josiah passed the women on his way to the door. "I need to make a puddle," he said urgently. He had no shirt or coat, but seemed to not care as he quickly disappeared outside.

Dismayed, Emma grabbed a blanket and rushed after Josiah. He was standing at the recently dug latrine, (a hole in the ground), when Emma caught up to him and quickly covered his shoulders

with the blanket. Modestly averting her eyes from Josiah's yellow stream, Emma ran back to the cabin with the sound of his laughter in her ears.

Trying to ignore Josiah's howls, Emma stoked the morning fire while Cora's inquisitive eyes prodded her for an explanation.

"He's just teasing," said Emma.

Just then, Grandpap trudged in from outside, planting himself near the fire to enjoy some food and smoke his tobacco pipe.

Soon after, Josiah returned to his bed. He looked frozen, but warmer than he would have been, had Emma not brought the blanket. His eyes twinkled with amusement as Emma gave him his food, but he said nothing and ate his breakfast without teasing her any further.

Now awake, Mary munched on her pemmican, while her dark eyes quietly observed the large man on the buffalo robes.

The women ate their breakfast at the table, for there was little room in the small cabin for so many. When they were finished, Cora told Emma to take Mary outside.

"I must speak to my son," said Cora. "What I have to tell him, you should not hear."

Reigning in her curiosity, Emma wrapped herself in blankets, while Cora bundled Mary for the winter cold.

"I do not want to go with her," Emma heard Mary's frightened whimper.

Cora led the child to the door where Emma was waiting. "She will not harm you, Mary. Now go. I will call you when it is time to say goodbye."

With shotgun in hand, Emma took Mary outside. They found a spot beside some trees where the wind was not quite so chilling, and there they stood in silence, waiting to be called back into the lodge.

"All right, Ma," Josiah braced himself for the worst, "speak yer mind while you can. I ain't letting you and Grandpap stay much longer."

Cora returned to the table, her eyes fixed on the buffalo robes where Josiah was sitting. "When you took Emma to wife, she had no white man's wedding?"

"No." Josiah's face hardened when he realized where this line of questioning was leading.

"You will shame her among her people, if you will not do this. It is the white man's way."

"I ain't caring, Ma."

Cora sighed. "Then you will stay here?"

"Only for the winter."

"You must not bring white trappers to our hunting grounds," warned Cora. "It will mean your death. I can not make peace for you a second time."

"I never asked you to make peace!" Josiah spat at his mother in contempt. Grandpap grunted so loudly, Josiah knew the old man was displeased. "Why is she always against me, Grandpap?"

"Because, you are against yourself," Grandpap took another puff from his pipe. "You must make peace with the white man or the Blackfoot. Your mother knows you cannot live with your hand raised against *everyone*."

"There's always the Crows," harrumphed Josiah.

"You would fight against your people?" asked Cora.

"I already have," chuckled Josiah. "I went after them two Blackfoot braves that killed Emma's pa; they won't be going back to their women as anything but ghosts."

Cora was silent. She looked to her father.

"I have claimed many scalps, and some were Blackfoot," Grandpap admitted with a shrug. "Sometimes, it cannot be helped."

"They was planning to kill me, so I had no choice," Josiah pulled the blanket up around his bare shoulders. It was harder to keep warm, now that he no longer had his hunting shirt. "It's time fer you and Grandpap to be leaving, Ma."

"I have something to say," Grandpap slowly puffed at his tobacco as though he had all the time in the world. "You still owe me."

The old man was speaking of when he had given Josiah a warning shot, back when the Blackfoot and the Crows had fought, and Josiah knew it. "Name yer price, and be gone," grumbled Josiah.

Grandpap was thoughtfully silent, as though trying to pick from the great number of choices this situation presented. "You will take Emma to wife again, this time, the white man's way," Grandpap said finally.

Josiah nearly laughed. "Why should I? She's already mine!"

"You have better peace with the white man than the Blackfoot, so you will follow the white man's ways," Grandpap calmly continued to smoke his pipe. "Maybe, you will not be hung."

At the sound of Cora's voice, Emma ushered Mary back into the cabin. It was terribly cold outside, and the two girls quickly went to the fire to toast themselves. Emma glanced at Josiah. He looked as though his patience was being sorely tested.

Grandpap exhaled a draft of tobacco before speaking to Emma. "When you are among the white man, Josiah will take you to wife again. This time, he will follow the white man's ways, and you will have a wedding."

Surprised, Emma looked to Josiah.

"Have it yer way, Old Man," Josiah said wearily. "I'll keep my word and try, but there won't be a willing parson to be found, unless she's already with child."

Cora looked worried again, but Grandpap didn't flinch. He tapped his pipe against his knee, and tucked its stem beneath his belt. "I have done all I can," Grandpap said to his daughter. "The rest is up to your God and your son."

Tired, Josiah reclined on the robes, rolling onto his stomach to avoid putting pressure on the scars on his back. Emma knew he must be in a lot of pain, for he said no more and shut his eyes.

Grandpap's weathered face stared at his grandson. The old man shook his head. "If you do not change, one day, it will mean your death. Come, daughter. We are leaving."

Mary remained absolutely silent as Cora hugged her and said one last prayer before parting. Then, the two Blackfoot left to join their tribe as it moved to follow the buffalo.

Teary-eyed, Mary returned to her buffalo robe by the fireplace. She blinked at Emma, and then pulled the blankets over her head to cry.

"Would you like a hug?" Emma offered the small lump of blankets.

"I ain't feeling too frisky right now," declined Josiah. "Maybe later."

"I was speaking to Mary."

Grunting, Josiah fell asleep.

Quietly going to Mary's bed, Emma sat down beside the crying child concealed beneath the blankets. An Indian doll lay nearby, and Emma tucked it beneath the blankets where Mary could find it.

"Yesterday was Sunday," Emma thought out loud, "but I was unable to keep the Sabbath. I suppose I'll make today Sunday, instead. I don't really know what day this is, or even the month. I think it might be December, but I'm not sure. You wouldn't happen to know, would you?" When the blankets snifled, Emma smiled kindly. "Do you know what December brings? Christmas."

When Mary's hushed crying stopped, Emma had hopes the child was listening.

"Mary, have you ever had Christmas?"

"What is it?" a small voice asked from under the bedding.

"It's the day we celebrate Christ's birth. Do you know who Christ is?"

"Yes," sniffed Mary. "He is the Son of God."

"Your grandmother is a Christian," Emma ventured carefully, needing to know what this child believed, if she was going to raise her. "Are you a Christian, too?"

"Yes. Are you?"

Emma smiled happily. "As one Christian to another, would you like me to read you a story?"

"Story?" Mary curiously peeked out from under the blankets.

Emma got up to fetch her Bible.

Returning with a thick book in her hands, Emma opened its worn cover. An engraving of a man and woman immediately caught Mary's attention. The couple stood beside a tree, where a large serpent was coiled around its trunk. Fascinated, Mary touched the page. "What are those?" she asked, pointing to the lettering beneath the picture.

"It says, 'Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden,'" read Emma. "Each letter combines to form words, and the words make up sentences." Seeing Mary was positively clueless as to what she was saying, Emma flipped through the pages, until Mary stopped her at another picture and asked what it was.

"Would you like me to read this story?" asked Emma.

Forgetting her fear of the white woman, Mary sat with her doll in her arms and listened as Emma read from the book. It was about a wicked city named Jericho, and how a man named Joshua made its walls to tumble down flat, simply by marching and shouting and blowing horns.

When it was done, Emma tried to get to the story she had thought more appropriate for a little girl, the story of Ruth and Boaz, but Mary asked about another picture, and it too, was about a battle. After David had slain Goliath, Emma decided Bible story time was over.

"Do you know any hymns?" Emma thought it unlikely, but was unsure how much Hiram had taught Cora, thus limiting what Mary could possibly know. When Mary gave Emma a blank stare, Emma sang a hymn, while the child watched on in curiosity. Then, after the hymn, Emma let Mary look at the pictures sparsely sprinkled throughout the Bible, instructing her not to damage the fragile book, for it was very old.

Slinging the strap of her shotgun over her shoulder, Emma took the water bucket outside to the creek. Its surface was frozen, but Emma managed to break through the ice and fill her bucket. Just as she was about to start back for the cabin, Emma heard Mary's terrified screams! Dropping her bucket, Emma ran as fast as she could to answer Mary's call.

When Emma reached the door, she found Josiah calmly standing beside the fireplace. In a far corner, Mary was crouched against the wall, her eyes wide with terror.

"What happened?" panted Emma.

Josiah shrugged. "I got up to put more wood on the fire, and she ran off screaming."

Sighing with relief, Emma went to the corner, gently pulling Mary back to her small bed. "He won't hurt you. *I promise, he won't.*" Emma glared up at the large mountain man, and he rolled his eyes. "I have to fetch water. Will you be all right without me?"

Mary shook her head that she would *not* be all right, so Emma bundled the child into her winter blankets and then took her outside to help retrieve the water bucket.

When the girls returned with freshly drawn water, Josiah was back on his buffalo robes, lying on his stomach.

The cabin needed tidying, and as Emma went about her daily routine, the timid little person at her side kept getting under foot-- mostly because she was hiding from Josiah. Mary went to great lengths to keep behind Emma's deerskin dress, so much so, that Emma stepped on the poor girl's foot more than once.

"Why don't you play with your doll?" Emma said as kindly as she could, without sounding as though she were trying to get rid of Mary.

Mary peeked around Emma's dress, only to find Josiah watching them. The girl looked up at Emma with frightened dark eyes, vigorously shaking her head, "no."

"He won't hurt you," Emma smiled gently.

Mary didn't look at all sure, and refused to leave Emma's side for even a moment.

"Would you like to talk while I work?" suggested Emma. She hoped Mary's fear of Josiah, might help the girl overcome her fear of this strange white woman who was now her ma. But Mary's braids shook "no" so Emma worked in silence, making the small cabin remarkably quiet for two adults and a five-year old.

Emma took out buffalo jerky for lunch, and Josiah made room on the bed so Emma could join him while they ate. Mary, however, was terrified to be by herself, so Emma sat on Mary's robe and the cabin had a very quiet lunch.

Supper was also eaten in silence, and afterward, Emma readied the lodge for bedtime. After Emma tucked Mary into her blankets by the fire, the girl grabbed Emma's dress and refused to let go.

"I can't sleep here," Emma said kindly. "I have my own bed." Emma glanced in Josiah's direction and saw that he was closely following every word. "Now, lay back Mary, and go to sleep. I'll just be over there, on the other side of the fireplace."

"No," whimpered Mary, holding on even tighter.

"Where's your doll?" Emma suddenly remembered. She looked about the bed, and picked up the small figurine clad in animal skins. Placing it under Mary's arm, Emma unwound the small fingers clinging to her dress. "Do you want me to hear your bedtime prayer?"

"What is that?" puzzled Mary.

"Well," stammered Emma, suddenly realizing the girl was unfamiliar with this childhood ritual, "my ma always said it was best to start and end the day with a prayer. We ask for God's blessings in the morning, and then thank Him for answering us at night. What happened today that you can be thankful for?"

"Are you going to be much longer?" asked Josiah.

"I'll be along soon," Emma said patiently. "What blessings have you had today, Mary?"

The child shrugged her shoulders.

"Let's see," Emma thought out loud, "you got to sleep beside your grandmother last night, and you enjoyed the Bible stories today, didn't you?"

Mary's head soberly bobbed up and down in a "yes."

"Dear Heavenly Father," Emma bowed her head, "we thank you for Grandmother's care over Mary, and for the stories that were read today. Please keep us safe while we sleep, and give us pleasant dreams. In Jesus' name, Amen." Emma opened her eyes, and found Mary had followed her example and bowed her head, as well. "Snuggle down with your doll," smiled Emma, tucking the warm blankets around the child as she wiggled under the covers to get comfortable. "God keep you till morning," Emma kissed the girl's cheek. "Goodnight, Mary." Emma would have felt better had Mary returned her smile, but she contented herself that at least Mary hadn't recoiled from her kiss.

After checking the bar over the door one last time, Emma crossed the room to the buffalo robes where Josiah was waiting.

"You shouldn't coddle her," said Josiah, as Emma climbed beneath the covers. "Kindness weakens a body, until they can't fend fer themselves. If you want to be kind to the runt, then let her be."

Instead of snuggling against Josiah, Emma rolled onto her side, so that her back was to him.

"You ain't going to take it like that, are you, Em? Yer going to nestle with me, aren't you?"

"You're right, I shouldn't coddle people so much," Emma said evenly, "so it's best I don't nestle with you anymore. After all, I wouldn't want to weaken you."

"I ain't laughing," muttered Josiah.

"If you haven't noticed, Mr. Brown, neither am I."

Suddenly, Emma felt a strong arm drag her across the buffalo robe until the space between her and Josiah closed. Firmly placed beside him, Emma saw the mountain man close his eyes to sleep.

"Be kind to the girl," Emma said quietly. "I don't want her to fear you anymore than she already does."

Josiah's hand moved to Emma's shoulder, and he squeezed it threateningly. "Don't tell me what to do."

"I will when it concerns Mary."

Gasping, Emma suddenly found herself on her back, her face inches from Josiah's.

"Don't defy me, Emma!"

Swallowing hard, Emma struggled to push aside the intimidation she felt welling in her breast. "I won't let you hurt that little girl's feelings. I simply won't let you do it."

"Bold words fer a woman!"

"I'm not just a woman," Emma said bravely, "I'm your wife. You told me I was to be the one to look after Mary, and that's just what I'm doing."

In spite of himself, Josiah's features lost some of their fierceness. "You ain't no ordinary woman, that's fer sure. And it ain't because yer my wife." He gazed at her with a small grin, though he still didn't look very happy. "All right, I'll back off when it comes to Mary."

"Despite what you're thinking, I'm not trying to defy you," said Emma.

Josiah smiled grimly. "If you ain't, yer doing a mighty good imitation of it. Let it slide, Emma. I ain't angry anymore." Josiah held her close, until she relaxed against him. "You gave that runt a goodnight kiss, and you never give *me* one."

"It was Ma's tradition to kiss my cheek before I went to sleep," Emma said quietly. "It was to give me sweet dreams."

Josiah squeezed Emma. "I want a kiss, too." When she kissed his cheek, he scowled. "I want a real one."

"I'll give you a real kiss, but only if you'll stop squeezing the stuffing out of me."

Immediately, Josiah's arms were tender. To Emma's surprise, she saw him tremble as she raised her mouth to his. He quickly dominated the kiss, and all traces of vulnerability disappeared, leaving Emma to doubt her eyes.

"We should stop," she said finally. "Your back needs a chance to heal."

With a loud moan, Josiah pushed away from Emma. "I hope this won't git to be a habit with you. There you go, telling me what to do again."

"If you want to tussle, I won't stop you, but it probably won't help your scars."

On his side, Josiah looked across the buffalo robe at his wife. "Yer probably right, but it pains me to admit it."

"You'll be in worse pain if you don't," smiled Emma. "If you still want me to, I'll cuddle you."

Josiah harrumphed. "Yer getting mighty sure of yerself."

Emma couldn't help her confident smile. "I admit, after all these days, I know you a little better than I did before."

"Don't git too cocky, Emma. If you try to rein in my heart, I'll fight you. Just try me, and see if I won't."

Emma yawned. "If you don't want to cuddle, I'm going to sleep. I have a busy day tomorrow."

"I never said I didn't!" Josiah gently gathered Emma in his arms, and was rewarded with a kiss on his cheek.

"Goodnight, Mr. Brown."

"Goodnight, Emma."

The next morning, Emma started the day early by getting her chores done as quickly as possible. Mary followed her about the small lodge, getting under foot, and hiding from the man watching them on the buffalo robe. Emma knew Josiah had little else to do while he was getting better, but she felt if he would only take a nap or turn his eyes elsewhere, little Mary might not cling to her dress quite as much.

Putting on Josiah's capote, Emma lifted down her pa's shotgun and then located the ax, propped against the wall behind the door. An excited smile on her lips, Emma bundled Mary against the cold, and then prepared to leave with ax and rifle.

"I don't know what yer up to," Josiah finally spoke up, "but I don't want you straying too far from the lodge. It ain't safe."

"We won't go far," nodded Emma. She looked down at Mary. "Come, Little One, let's go tree hunting!" Mary's face was just as puzzled as Josiah's, but Emma didn't let that discourage her holiday spirit.

Opening the heavy cabin door, Emma stepped outside with Mary following close behind.

"What are we doing?" asked Mary, as Emma went to some nearby trees and looked them over with a critical eye.

"We're selecting a Christmas tree, just like the ones I used to have in Indiana. Ma would put our small Christmas tree on a table in the parlor, and people would come from miles around, just to see it! Let's go a little further into the woods and see if we can't find a small tree."

Casting a glance over her shoulder at the cabin, Emma ventured into the thickly wooded trees further down the mountain.

"What is a parlor?" Mary asked in halting English.

"It's a room where you receive guests into your home."

"Oh." Mary still didn't sound as though she understood, and Emma realized her previous life in Indiana had been vastly different from the one Mary had known with the Blackfoot.

Wiping her runny nose against her blanket wrap, Mary watched as Emma chopped the top off a middle-sized evergreen.

"This should suit our purposes just fine!" laughed Emma. "Now, to get this back to the cabin!"

Letting Mary tote the small tree, Emma started back in the direction of home.

Even though Josiah was flat on his stomach, his back was bothering him again. With an impatient groan, he wondered when Emma would return. It was nearing the center of the day, and he had expected her to be back by now. Lumbering over to the window, Josiah opened the shutters to look outside. The snow was coming down heavily, and Josiah knew it would quickly cover tracks, making it difficult for Emma to find her way back to the lodge. Concerned, he prepared to go after her.

Since Josiah no longer had a hunting shirt or buffalo coat, he wrapped himself in a blanket and then a heavy robe. As he started for the door, he heard the sounds of a talking woman, not too far from the cabin.

Hurrying off the blanket and robe, Josiah cast them aside and quickly went back to his bed just as the door opened.

A blast of air rushed inside, and Emma appeared in Josiah's capote, covered with snow but laughing. Mary was smiling broadly, as she held what looked to be a miniature tree in her hands. The moment Mary's eyes met Josiah's, however, her smile disappeared and she quickly got behind Emma.

"Emma, where have you been?" Josiah's dark eyes flashed his disapproval, but to his consternation, Emma only smiled.

"Just down the mountain a little way. Look, Mr. Brown, isn't it a sweet little tree?"

"You've bin gone fer most of the morning," Josiah said accusingly.

"Did you miss us?" laughed Emma. Then her eyes caught sight of the blanket and buffalo robe heaped on the floor against the wall. She looked back at Josiah. "Did you go somewhere?"

"Not exactly," he stammered. "Stop dodging my question, Emma. You should've bin home sooner!"

"Oh, I see." Emma bit her lip, but Josiah saw that she was fighting back another smile. "I didn't mean to worry you, Mr. Brown."

"You didn't," he lied.

"Are you hungry? It's not quite noon yet, but I have things to do afterward."

Josiah grunted, and rolled onto his side while Emma went to get out some buffalo jerky for lunch. While Josiah ate by himself, he heard Emma tell Mary about Christmas.

"My ma's people came to the American colonies in 1737, on a great ship. They settled in Pennsylvania, hoping to begin a new life in the New World. They were 'Deutsch,' meaning German, but to the Americans the word sounded like 'Dutch,' so they became known as the Pennsylvania Dutch. They brought many German customs with them, but the best custom of all was the Christmas tree."

Josiah saw Mary's eyes grow wide with wonder.

"When I was a little girl, every Christmas, Ma used to tell me the legend of the German reformer, Martin Luther, and the first lit Christmas tree. This happened long, long ago, back in the Old Country, before my ma's people immigrated to America. One dark winter night, Martin Luther was walking in the woods, when he saw a great big fir tree pointing straight up at the many brilliant stars overhead-- just as they did on the night of Jesus' birth. Martin was so awed by this sight, he took a small tree home to his family and then decorated it with candles that shone like the stars over Bethlehem. Martin knew that when a lit Christmas tree points up to Heaven, it's trying to remind us of the Christ-child, Who came to save us from our sins. That's why my family always had a tree every Christmas."

"Is this a fir, like Martin's tree?" asked Mary, picking the small evergreen from off the dirt floor and gazing at it with a sparkle of excitement in her eyes.

"Why do you think we chose it?" smiled Emma.

After lunch, Emma took an old split log intended for firewood, and, using a knife, bored a small hole in its side. Then she stuck the end of the tree in the hole, so it would stand upright on its own. While Mary watched, Emma placed the evergreen Christmas tree on the table.

Josiah watched Emma's face. He could see she was feeling a little badly that it was such a plain looking tree, for it had no candles like the one she had mentioned in her story. Her look of sadness vanished, however, when Emma saw Mary's face lit with joy. Like Mary, Josiah had never seen anyone purposefully bring a tree into a lodge, where trees simply didn't belong. It was an odd thing to do, but he had to admit it held a curious fascination. Josiah had seen thousands upon thousands of trees in his lifetime, but he found his eyes glued to this small evergreen sitting on the table. For some reason, this tree meant something special.

Maybe it was because of Emma's story.

Supper came, and the cabin grew colder. Emma put more wood on the fire, but the wind howled and blew against the sturdy walls of the lodge as though trying to reduce it to a pile of logs.

After eating, Mary curled up on her buffalo robe, letting Emma tuck her and her doll in for the night.

"When will it be Christmas?" Josiah heard the child ask. The mountain man smiled to himself when Emma paused, obviously unsure of the answer herself.

"I think next Sunday," Emma said finally. "We'll have a fine supper, and then I'll read the story of Christmas to you."

"When is Sunday?" came Mary's next question.

"Five days from now," smiled Emma. "It's time you went to sleep now. Do you want me to hear your bedtime prayer?"

Mary closed her eyes, and the first thing she thanked God for, was their Christmas tree. Next came Grandmother and Great-Grandpap, and then her doll. A sure sign of Mary's growing acceptance of Emma, came when the child paused her prayer to ask, "What should I call you?"

"Would you mind terribly, if you called me 'Ma'?"

Mary closed her eyes, adding to her prayer, "Thank you for Ma."

"God keep you till morning," Emma said softly. She kissed Mary's cheek, and the girl smiled sleepily.

"Goodnight, Ma." Mary's eyes drooped, and before long, she was fast asleep.

In the semi-darkness of the other side of the fireplace, Josiah watched Emma gently stroke Mary's braids. Emma stayed there for quite awhile, before getting up to check the bar over the door and then coming to bed.

"She called me 'Ma,' tonight," said Emma, climbing beneath the blankets.

"I heard. Yer getting mighty fond of that child."

"Mary is easy to love."

Josiah grumbled something that wasn't fit for a lady's ears, and then turned onto his other side.

"Mr. Brown?"

"What?" he knew his voice sounded grudging, but he didn't care.

"Do I please you?"

The question surprised Josiah. "I reckon... sometimes," he said finally, after a sufficient amount of time had gone by to let Emma know he wasn't *too* pleased.

"Do I please you enough to ask a favor?"

"That depends." Sensing he was being outmaneuvered, Josiah felt Emma fold her legs behind his, while her hand stole under his arm before coming to a stop on his chest.

"I suppose we-- I mean, you, don't have very much after the Blackfoot took all your beaver? Things are probably scarce right now, so I don't suppose you could spare anything from your trade goods for Christmas?"

"So it's Christmas, is it?" Josiah looked down at the gentle hand on his chest. "What is it yer wanting?"

"I was hoping you could spare a candle, so I could cut it into short lengths, and put them on the tree."

"Is that all?"

"If it's not asking too much, do you have a bit of colored fabric you could do without? Mary doesn't have many playthings, and I want to surprise her with a gift on Christmas morning. It'd mean a lot to me."

Getting up, Josiah stepped around Mary's bed, and went to the corner where he had trade goods wrapped in animal skins. Evidently too eager to wait on the buffalo robe, Emma soon appeared behind him, looking patiently hopeful.

Without a word, Josiah handed Emma a long white candle. Then, he unfastened a bundle and pulled out a folded piece of brightly colored calico. "It's the last cloth I got, but you can have it."

"Mr. Brown, I really appreciate this!" Emma glanced at the sleeping child, and quickly hushed her voice. "This calico will suit my needs perfectly!"

With a grunt, Josiah replaced his animal skin packages in the corner, and then went back to bed. He watched as Emma seated herself on the floor between the two beds, and by the light of the fireplace, used her finger to trace imaginary patterns on the calico.

The next few nights, Emma sewed by the firelight while Mary slept, for it was the only time when Emma could work, and not be observed by Mary. To Emma's surprise, Josiah didn't gripe about her absence in their bed, although more than once, she felt his eyes on her before he fell asleep. Sometimes, Josiah was a perplexing mystery to Emma. She hadn't really expected him to give her the candle and the cloth-- especially when all she had to do was give him a caress.

Lately, Josiah had been quieter than usual, though Emma guessed it was because of Mary's presence in the cabin. The mountain man didn't speak to the child, and the child kept well out of the way of the mountain man. Neither looked at each other unless they could help it, and whenever Josiah's gaze happened to fall on Mary, Mary quickly hid behind Emma's dress. To her dismay, Emma found herself the only person in the lodge, who was actually speaking to everyone else.

Hoping Christmas might create a little cheer and goodwill, Emma pressed on with her plans. After she had been satisfied that Mary's present was turning out the way she had hoped it would,

Emma dropped a hint to the girl that on Christmas morning, she would have a present under the tree. Mary's eyes grew as wide as saucers, and from that day on, she repeatedly asked if it was Sunday yet.

The scissors, needles and thread in Emma's sewing box had been invaluable for making Mary's gift, but those things wouldn't work on heavy leather. After Josiah had fallen asleep late one night, Emma quietly pulled out his torn hunting shirt to look over the damage. Going to his things, Emma procured an awl and some sinew, and then went to work mending the leather garment.

The day before Christmas, Emma turned her attention on the supper she would make for tomorrow. Christmas supper was a tradition she had enjoyed since childhood, and Emma wanted something special to fix for the holiday. The only problem was, she only had dried buffalo jerky. They had already finished off the pemmican Cora had given them, and everyone was eating jerky, morning, noon, and night-- though no one complained. Food was food, and at least they weren't gnawing leather to stay their hunger. Emma had made the mistake of telling the Christmas meal tradition to Mary, and now the girl was praying for fresh meat.

Feeling responsible for Mary's disappointment, Emma waited until after breakfast before taking down her pa's shotgun. As she was putting on Josiah's large capote, his voice stopped her.

"Where do you think yer going?"

"Since you're not well enough to go hunting, I'm going myself."

"I come with you?" Mary desperately grasped Emma's capote. As Mary spoke, Josiah got up from bed, and the child quickly ducked behind Emma.

With just a few strides, Josiah crossed the room. Swinging open the door, he looked at the white ground. There were several inches of new snow, and the sky was threatening more.

"You ain't going nowhere," Josiah shut the door, putting the bar back in its place.

"But, what about Christmas supper?"

"You're not going, Emma, and that's final. The snow's too deep. I ain't taking such a chance with you-- not when I'm still trying to recover from this here back of mine."

Josiah looked prepared for an argument, but when Emma took off the capote, his shoulders relaxed.

"I ain't trying to disappoint you, Emma."

"It's all right," she sighed. "I would have had to leave Mary with you, and I'm not sure she could have endured my absence."

"No, I could not!" said a small voice from behind Emma.

Josiah groaned. "Would you tell that child I ain't going to hurt her?"

"I already did."

"Then, tell her again! That runt keeps hiding from me like I was planning to lift her scalp! I know I ain't an easy man to live with, but I ain't yet laid a hand on no little girl! She's got nothing to fear from me-- tell her that Emma."

"Why don't you tell her, yourself?"

Grumbling, Josiah went back to his buffalo robes. "This lodge is getting mighty small!"

Turning, Emma looked down at the child still hiding behind her dress. "He truly won't harm you, Mary."

Instead of looking assured, Mary shrank back and remained quiet.

"I know your pa acts like a big hairy animal, but once you get used to him, he's not so frightening." Emma moved one of Mary's braids behind the girl's shoulder. "Why don't you take a look out of the shutters and see if it's snowing? If it's not, we need to gather firewood. I don't want to do anymore work tomorrow, than I can help."

Solemnly, Mary went to the window, slowly managing to open a shutter. "Ma!" she whispered. "Look!"

Emma quickly joined Mary, and her mouth fell open in wonder.

"What are you girls making such a fuss over?" asked Josiah, coming to the window to see for himself. "A bear! Emma, fetch my Hawken!"

Josiah hadn't needed to say a word, for Emma was already going for his rifle. If Josiah could shoot this bear, it would mean fresh meat for Christmas!

The bear seemed oblivious to his peril, and casually lumbered by the cabin as though he were king of the mountain. At first, Emma thought it was a grizzly, but she recognized the dark fur and smaller size, and knew it was a black bear-- something they had back in Indiana.

Taking careful aim, Josiah brought down the bear with just one shot. Reloading his Hawken, Josiah pulled the bar off the door, and then cautiously approached the fallen bear. After nudging it with his foot, he grinned back at the girls standing in the doorway. "We got meat!"

"Praise the Lord!" Emma said happily.

Josiah scowled. "I was the one what shot him-- not God."

"God brought the bear to our cabin, and you didn't even have to go hunting."

Josiah was getting frustrated. "The bear woke up, and left its den to explore! God had nothing to do with it!"

Folding her arms, Emma looked patiently at Josiah. "Then, you don't have to have any Christmas supper. Mary has been praying for fresh meat, and God brought it to our door. I call that an answer to prayer."

"Answer, nothing!" The cold was biting into Josiah's bare chest, but he ignored it with clenched teeth. "When are you going to get it into yer thick skull that God doesn't care! The only time He pays attention to me, is to make my life harder!"

When Josiah's frame gave an involuntary shudder from the cold, Emma's concern shifted. "You're freezing, Mr. Brown. Before you begin harvesting the meat, I'd better fetch your capote."

Grudgingly, Josiah entered the lodge, causing Mary to scamper behind Emma while she pulled out the heavy blanket coat.

"Best stand watch with yer shotgun, Emma. That bear will be attracting animals soon."

"I will," nodded Emma, handing the warm coat to her husband. "Please, Mr. Brown, let's not quarrel. Not now-- not so soon before Christmas."

"You think a lot of that Christmas of yers, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"At least we'll be gnawing something besides jerky," Josiah shrugged on his coat and then tied the sash shut to keep the garment closed. Retrieving a sharp trading knife from his belongings, he stepped out the door, muttering into the air about too much religion.

As Emma wrapped herself in some warm blankets to go outside, she saw Mary's distressed face. "I know, Little One. Your pa has a lot to answer for, but that's why we must pray for his soul. Will you do that? Will you help me pray?"

Soberly, Mary nodded her head "yes."

"Emma! I ain't waiting all day fer you!"

Hurrying out the door with her shotgun, Emma turned to look back at the still open cabin. She saw Mary drag her buffalo robe to the door and then sit down to watch.

"That's right, Mary, stay inside," Emma said with a wave. "And make sure you keep warm!"

Emma turned her eyes to the snow blanketed trees surrounding the small lodge, keeping a careful watch for hungry animals that might appear without warning. The Rockies were being dusted with yet another mantel of white, its icy touch reaching through Emma's blankets, warning her not to remain outside for too long.

With an efficient hand, Josiah skinned the bear, and soon had its raw carcass exposed to the winter air. Then, he carved out the meat, tossing large steaks into the wet hide as he worked. By the time he was done, Josiah had stripped the animal of every edible bite of meat.

"Git this here wet hide into the lodge, Emma. I'll take what's left of the carcass, and put it someplace where I won't mind the wolves finishing it off."

The bear skin was wet and heavy, and Emma struggled to lift it off the ground. Seeing her chance to help, Mary came running, and the two girls managed to haul the meat into the cabin before Josiah returned.

That night, even though bear meat was curing in the rafters, everyone ate jerky for supper. Josiah complained it was foolish, but Emma wanted to save their first taste of fresh meat for tomorrow. Mary agreed, though she was too timid to tell anyone but Emma.

The special morning finally came, and Emma awoke to the childish clamor of "Christmas! Christmas!" Momentarily forgetting her dread of Josiah, Mary plopped herself down on the robe beside Emma. "I saw the Christmas tree," she told her ma with troubled dark eyes, "but there was no present."

"That's because I haven't set it out yet," smiled Emma. "If you'll help me by tidying the cabin, I'll put it under the tree."

Hearing this, Mary ran off to fold her bedding.

"I'm getting more sleep," yawned Josiah. "Wake me when the food's ready."

Crawling to a corner of her buffalo robes, Emma was about to reach between the heavy skins, when she saw Mary watching. "Close your eyes, Mary, or you'll ruin the surprise!"

Feeling Josiah's curious gaze follow her to the table, Emma placed a cloth doll under the Christmas tree. The body had been made from one of her white petticoats, and its long dress was of red calico, a design of small white flowers, green leaves, and bits of vine printed on the bright cloth. There was no face, but it wore a white sunbonnet and apron, and even had a small petticoat of its own beneath the calico dress.

"All right, Mary," Emma said excitedly, "you may open your eyes now."

Bringing down the small hands covering her eyes, Mary gasped when she saw the doll laying beneath the tree. "For me?" she looked to Emma for reassurance.

"For you," smiled Emma.

With eyes of wonder, Mary lifted the doll from the table and cradled it in her arms. She ran her fingers across the delicate, even stitches, felt its soft dress, examined the petticoat, and then looked at Emma with admiration.

"Do you like her?" Emma couldn't help but ask.

"Oh, yes," Mary said softly, "I do."

"Besides God, you have your pa to thank for the doll." Out of the corner of her eye, Emma saw Josiah sit up in bed at the mention of his name. "He gave up the last bit of calico he had for

trading, and let me turn it into a doll dress." Silently, Emma mouthed the words, "Say 'thank you,'" and nodded in Josiah's direction.

Shyly, Mary inched her way toward Josiah's bed.

The trapper looked at Mary uncertainly, as though he didn't know what to expect.

"Thank you," Mary said in a still, small voice.

Awkwardly, Josiah cleared his throat. "Uh, yer welcome. It was mainly yer ma's doing."

With a big smile, Mary threw her arms about Emma's dress, and then went to play with the new doll.

Smiling, Emma looked back at Josiah. "Thank you, Mr. Brown. You've made her very happy."

The uncomfortable look on Josiah's face made Emma smile even more. "Would you like your present now?"

"*My* present?" Josiah looked at her skeptically. "You made a doll fer me, too?"

Kneeling on the robes again, Emma pulled out a familiar leathern garment. Holding up Josiah's hunting shirt, she turned it around so that he could see its back. Instead of a jagged knife rip, Emma had brought the two sides together in a neat, long seam, so that it was hard to tell anything violent had ever happened. Emma handed the shirt down to Josiah, and he silently looked it over. Emma had even reinforced seams that had been threatening to give way for quite some time. Overall, it looked very well cared-for.

"When did you have time fer this?"

"I've been working while you were asleep, and finished it just last night."

A frown knitted Josiah's brow. He didn't look happy, but he didn't look angry, either. "When are you going to put the candles on the Christmas tree?" he asked, putting on his newly mended shirt.

"I'm going to light the tree for our Christmas supper. Is the back too tight? I thought about adding an extra strip of animal skin to the back, to help make up for the seam, but I didn't think it necessary. Turn around, so I can see." Josiah turned, and Emma examined the fit. "Yes, I think it will work. What about you, Mr. Brown. Is it comfortable?"

With a surly nod, Josiah grunted. "It'll do."

Giving the shirt one last inspection, Emma got up and went to start preparing meat for their Christmas supper. Since it was to be a grand feast, Emma decided to serve it as more of a late lunch, than a supper.

Cradling her new doll, Mary looked up at Emma questioningly. "Do you dress like this?" The child pointed to the doll's bright calico, and then lifted its skirts to reveal the petticoat. "Do white women dress like this?"

"Of course they do," smiled Emma, as she placed bear meat on a spit over the fire. Pausing, she turned to look at the curious child. "Why do you ask? Haven't you ever seen a white woman before me?"

Mary shook her head, "no."

"I have my cloth dress put away, because it isn't up to keeping me warm in these snowy mountains. Animal hide clothing is best here, and it doesn't fall apart as quickly."

"Could I see it?"

"Do you really want to?"

Smiling, Mary eagerly nodded, "yes."

Going to the buffalo robes where Josiah was still reclined, Emma pulled out her dark blue dress to show the child. "The dress needs some mending, but its still serviceable."

Small fingers lightly touched the worn cloth, and Emma could clearly see Mary was fascinated.

"Do you want me to put it on for our Christmas?"

When Mary grinned excitedly, Emma thought the child looked remarkably like Josiah-- although much prettier.

Collecting her old shoes, Emma was about to undress when she noticed she was holding Josiah's rapt attention. "I don't suppose I could expect you to be a gentleman, and look someplace else while I dress?"

"What fer? Yer my wife."

That was the answer Emma had expected, but as she started to undress, she was surprised when Josiah turned his head away. Mary watched as Emma put on the several layers of clothing, which, to the girl's delight, included petticoats! The dark blue dress came last, and then Emma completed her wardrobe by putting on her old shoes.

Mary giggled as the dress swayed when Emma moved back to the fire to cook.

"Walk more!" Mary tugged Emma's hand pleadingly.

When Emma complied, Mary put out her arms to mimic the elegant swaying of the dress.

"I must get back to the meat!" Emma laughed. "Be a good girl, and play with your dolls."

Still smiling over Mary's antics, Emma turned back to the cooking meat. It was filling the small cabin with a delicious aroma that only heightened Emma's feeling that today was very special. This was Christmas Day! Humming a church hymn, Emma's heart became all the merrier.

Suddenly, Emma looked up to find Josiah standing beside her.

"Mr. Brown! I wish you wouldn't sneak up on me that way!"

"I weren't sneaking."

"Call it whatever you want, but I didn't hear a sound!"

Josiah stared back at her, until Emma felt her face grow warm.

"If you're just going to stand there, would you please move aside? I have a meal to prepare."

Josiah took one step back.

The bear meat was coming along nicely, but Emma forgot her hymn. Josiah was looking at her strangely, and she couldn't understand why. She was about to get out some sage to season the meat, when Josiah caught hold of her skirt.

"Mr. Brown, don't tear my dress!"

The mountain man reeled Emma in, until she was firmly in his arms.

"What's gotten into you?" Emma looked at him wonderingly.

Josiah didn't say a word, but gazed into Emma's brown eyes. He touched her cheek, and then brushed a wisp of stray blonde hair from her face.

The tender look in Josiah's eyes took Emma's breath away.

"What are you doing to me, Emma?" Josiah laughed softly, but he wasn't smiling. His gaze fastened on her lips, but he didn't kiss her. "Reckon I know what's happening, but I ain't sure I like it much."

Emma was quiet. Josiah looked into her eyes, and then back to her mouth, his breath growing heavy. Still, he didn't kiss her. He kept looking at her pleadingly, and then back to her mouth, until Emma understood that he wanted *her* to kiss him. Instead of complying, Emma freed herself and then turned back to the fireplace.

"What's wrong, Emma?"

"I don't think I love you, Mr. Brown. I tried to, God knows I tried to, but I don't."

"Yes, you do," said Josiah. "I've been knowing it's been coming on fer awhile now, but when you fixed my hunting shirt, there weren't no more question about it."

"Please, don't mock me," Emma looked into the fire, still sensing Josiah was behind her. Slowly, two large hands encompassed her waist, until she felt Josiah's breath on her neck.

"Oh, Emma, yer like sunshine in my heart. I thought it weren't possible fer a man to have such feelings fer his wife, but I do."

"Please, don't say that unless you mean it."

Clutching Emma, Josiah turned her around until she was facing him. "Could I hold you like this, unless I meant it?"

"I-- I don't know." Emma searched his face, trying to find the truth. "I don't know, Mr. Brown, I just don't know."

"Then kiss me, Emma. Just one kiss. I've been hankering for one all morning."

"If you want a kiss so badly, then why don't you take it?" Emma weakly fought to get out of Josiah's arms, but even *she* knew she didn't want to leave his embrace.

"This is why I don't like what's come over us," Josiah said, taking a deep steadying breath. "I hate needing someone this much."

"You don't need me! All you need is a woman to keep you warm at night!" Emma struggled to get free, but Josiah held her even tighter.

"Kiss me, Emma. *Please.*"

Emma held still. There was a marked ring of desperation in Josiah's voice that made her wonder if he really meant what he was saying. He was trembling again, and this time, Emma knew her eyes weren't playing tricks. But, was Josiah?

Feeling her heart quicken, Emma's hand reached around the back of Josiah's neck, and he let her lower his mouth to hers. She thought about the Bible he had given her, the calico for Mary, and the way he had held her gently in bed. Closing her eyes, Emma's lips touched Josiah's. Josiah felt helpless in her arms, and Emma knew he had been telling the truth. He needed her. Not just a woman, but *her*.

With a gasp of joy, Emma came up for air.

Josiah wasn't ready to stop, and he coaxed Emma by brushing his mouth against her cheek.

"I love you, Josiah."

He looked surprised. "I was wondering if you'd ever git around to calling me by my name."

"Tell me you love me," Emma pleaded.

"I just did."

"Please, let me hear the words."

Lightly touching Emma's face, Josiah smiled tenderly. "I love you."

Emma hugged him tightly.

"How about tussling?" he asked.

With a sigh of dismay, Emma pulled away from Josiah's arms. "Must you say it quite like that? It's not very tender, Mr. Brown."

"What happened to 'Josiah'?"

Putting her hands on her hips, Emma stared Josiah down. "I have supper to finish, so you'd better get out of my way."

Grinning, Josiah swatted at her skirt before leaving. "Don't think you can rule me, Emma."

"I won't."

Still grinning, Josiah went back to his bed.

As Emma examined the cooking bear meat, Mary appeared at her side.

"Did he hurt you, Ma?"

"No, Little One, I'm just fine."

"What did he mean by 'tussle'?"

Groaning, Emma shook her head. So Mary had heard that. "You're too young to understand, so I'll just say it means to be on friendly intimate terms, and leave it at that."

"Oh." Mary looked at the cooking food and smiled. "I am sure hungry, Ma. I ain't had bear in a long time."

"You've been listening to your pa too much," sighed Emma. "'Ain't' isn't a word. We should say 'haven't.'"

"Huh?"

"I *haven't* had bear in a long time."

"That is what I said."

Emma smiled patiently. Mary's English was still halting, though she was learning fast; Emma just wished the child wasn't learning from Josiah's vocabulary.

Before Christmas supper, Emma pulled out several bits of candle, and then carried them to the tree on the table. Melting each bottom over an open flame, Emma placed the small candles on the evergreen's branches.

"You going to set it on fire now?" asked Josiah. He climbed off the robe and then strode to the table expectantly. "Best have a bucket of water to douse it, when it gits out of control. I ain't letting you burn down our winter quarters, just so you can have Christmas."

"I've done this many times before without any adverse effects," Emma said confidently.

"He said 'ain't'!" piped up Mary.

Josiah gave the girl a scowl, and the child ducked behind Emma's wide blue dress.

"This will be our first family meal together at the table," Emma said with satisfaction. Josiah had been eating on his robes, while Emma had eaten her meals with Mary on the child's bed.

Mary looked uncertainly at Emma.

"We need something for you to sit on, because there's only two chairs. Let's see..."

"I'll sit on the bed," said Josiah. "Let the runt use my chair."

"I am *not* a runt!" When Josiah gave Mary a challenging glare, she quickly silenced her protest.

Josiah's stomach growled, making him all the more impatient.

Emma, however, was firm. "We are eating at this table as a family!" After searching the cabin in vain, she went to the pile of firewood she had gathered the evening before. Digging through the dry sticks, Emma came to a wide log about two feet high, that Josiah had chopped some time back. It had never been split into firewood, for Emma had thought it could be made into something useful. Rolling out the wide, flat-ended log, Emma stood it at the table and then motioned for Mary to sit down.

Groaning, Josiah slumped in his split-bottom chair. "Let's git to the food!"

"We must thank God first," Mary said seriously.

With an amused grin, Josiah regarded the little girl. "Yer getting mighty talkative."

Mary stared at him bravely. "I ain't afraid of you."

"Mary, please don't say 'ain't'!" Emma said in discouragement.

"Tell the runt to mind her tongue, Emma."

Emma looked at them pleadingly. "Let's bow our heads to say grace?"

Getting down from her makeshift chair, Mary scooted it along the dirt floor until it was beside Emma. Then, the child climbed up and bowed her head.

"Dear Heavenly Father," said Emma, "thank you for bringing us together, to celebrate the gift of Your Son. Please make us worthy of Your love. It was love that brought Jesus into this world, and it was love that sent Him to the cross to save us from our sins. Please, help us to remember this all year round. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Going to the fireplace, Emma returned with a sizable slab of bear meat, and then placed it on the table using one of their two plates. Smiling, Emma took a firebrand and began lighting the candles on the Christmas tree, one by one.

For all of his complaining about hunger, Josiah didn't dive into the meal. Instead, he sat there, staring at the little tree.

The evergreen glowed just like the stars up in the heavens, and was truly a wonderful sight to behold, especially in these wild mountains. Everyone present felt the same way, and Mary had difficulty paying attention to the food before her. Her eyes kept turning back to the Christmas tree on the table.

"In all my days, I ain't never seen anything like it," breathed Josiah. "I heard someone once talk about Christmas trees, but I thought he were just telling tales."

"It can't be lit for very long," said Emma, "for the candles aren't very tall. If we blow them out now, we'll have just enough to light it again this evening. It'll be even more beautiful, at night."

Hearing this, Josiah blew out his side of the tree, leaving Emma to do the same for hers.

Then, everyone started in on the meat before them. This was no tough jerky, but moist, fresh meat. For once in a long while, Emma filled her stomach until she was full. Most days, they only

ate a portioned meal, not trying to go through their store of dried meat too quickly. But today, Emma could feel the happy satisfaction of being full.

After everyone's stomach had been satisfied, Emma fetched her Bible, and then crawled onto the buffalo robes to begin reading. Mary eagerly took her place beside Emma, her small arms filled to capacity with her two dolls. Josiah lingered at the table, but when he saw Emma's pleading eyes, he relented, and soon joined the girls.

With little Mary on one side, and Josiah on the other, Emma began reading the story of Jesus' birth. "And [Mary] brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

Mary craned her neck to look at the picture in Emma's Bible. Even Josiah wanted to get a better look. It was a scene from the nativity, and showed Joseph and Mary looking down into a manger where the small infant was sleeping.

"Now for a tune of lofty praise," Emma began a favorite hymn, her voice sweetly filling the cabin, "to great Jehovah's equal Son! Awake, my voice, in heavenly lays, tell the loud wonders He hath done. Sing how He left the worlds of light, and the bright robes He wore above; how swift and joyful was His flight, on wings of everlasting love. Down to this base, this sinful earth, He came to raise our nature high; He came t' atone almighty wrath; Jesus the God was born to die."

Whatever Josiah was thinking, he kept it well to himself. Emma was unable to discern anything more than a mild tolerance for the Bible reading, and a fondness for her singing voice. Those weren't the results Emma had been praying for, but at least Josiah was trying harder to make her happy. If only he would do the same for God.

Closing her Bible, Emma ended their church service with a prayer.

In no hurry to leave Emma, Mary began playing with her dolls on Emma's dress. One doll was a Blackfoot, and the other white. Watchfully, Emma saw Mary interacting one doll with the other, as though the two sides were not quite on speaking terms.

"Why don't they become friends?" asked Emma.

Mary shrugged.

"Ask one of them if they'll say something nice to the other."

Mary introduced her Blackfoot doll to the white sunbonnet. "How about tussling?" she asked, bobbing the Blackfoot as though the doll were speaking.

"What'd she just say?" Josiah looked around Emma and peered down at the playing child.

"I told her it meant 'to be on friendly intimate terms,'" Emma said with some embarrassment.

"She's too young for any more of an explanation than that."

"No, she ain't. When I was her age, I saw Pa with--" Emma interrupted Josiah by clamping a hand over his mouth. She didn't trust what he was about to say, and didn't want to run the risk of Mary overhearing.

"Mr. Brown, I'll explain everything to her when she's older. Mary," she said, turning to the child, "find something else friendly for the Blackfoot to say. Tussling is something only married people do."

Shaking his head in disagreement, Josiah stretched out on the robe to get a little shuteye. His back was feeling much better today, and he found he could lay back without much discomfort.

"Tonight, I'll be wanting to hear you say my name, Emma. When we're alone, no more 'Mr. Brown.'"

For the remainder of the day, Emma's family rested and occasionally got up to enjoy a little more bear meat. When the sun darkened the cracks between the split log shutters, Josiah reminded Emma of her promise to light the Christmas tree one last time.

"Burn it until the wax gives out, Emma."

One by one, Emma lit the Christmas tree candles, their warm glow filling her heart to near-capacity. The wind howled outside as though there were no tomorrow, but here in this small refuge in the mountains, a tiny tree glowed with the hope Emma felt in her breast.

"You ain't going to cry, are you?" Josiah leaned forward to look into Emma's misting eyes. "There now, Emma. I ain't going to let you do it-- not after you've made this shining day fer us." Rough fingers dried her cheeks, and then he pressed Emma's head against his chest to watch the flickering lights on the Christmas tree.

"Are you happy, Josiah?"

Grinning, Josiah rubbed the small of Emma's back with a broad hand. "Reckon so, Emma. I reckon so."

This Christmas was happier than Emma had even dared to hope for. Emma now knew, for the very first time, what it felt like to hear a man tell her, "I love you." It hadn't been quite the romantic moment she had always thought it would be, but Emma welcomed it with open arms. Josiah loved her, and that was enough.

"And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

~ Luke 2:10-11 ~

Chapter Seven
Making Adjustments

1836-1837, Southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies... She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness."

~ Proverbs 31:10, 26-27 ~

Christmas night, Mary was too excited to go to bed. Her eyes were heavy with sleep, and she struggled to keep them open as she sat with Emma on the large buffalo robe by the fire.

"When is she going to sleep?" Josiah asked Emma, as he strode to where the girls were enjoying their full tummies after feasting on bear meat all day.

"I told her she could stay up for as long we did," said Emma. She peeked at the tired child, and smiled when Mary's eyes forced themselves open one more time. "I don't think she'll last much longer."

"She'd better not." Josiah didn't sound pleased by Emma's permission, especially when he evidently had other plans.

"It's Christmas, Mr. Brown. Let the child enjoy herself."

Josiah frowned. "She's gitting in the way. I was figuring you and me could frolic, tonight. My back is healed enough fer it."

"I told her she could stay up like the grown-ups."

"Then tell her you changed yer mind!"

Mary's chin jutted at Josiah defiantly. "I will *not* go to bed."

"Hold yer tongue, afore you lose it."

"There's no need for threats, Mr. Brown. Mary, when you speak to your pa, show more respect. Since I'm about to turn in, it's time for you to start getting ready for bed."

"Do I have to?" Mary gave Emma a sweet pleading look that tested Emma's resolve.

"You've already stayed up much longer than usual. Start moving, Little One."

"I am not tired."

"You will be, after you lay down." Hoping Mary wouldn't force her into a disciplinary measure, Emma went to check the bar over the door, as was her habit before bedtime. She had yet to punish the child, for Mary was such a sweet-tempered little girl, it hadn't been necessary. Out of the corner of Emma's eye, she saw Mary get to her feet and then step across the space between the two buffalo robes to her small bed. Gratefully, Emma smiled in relief.

Now that his own bed was vacant, Josiah seated himself on the already warm buffalo hides and then pulled off his shirt.

"I am ready to pray now," said Mary, cuddling beneath the blankets with her two dolls.

After tucking the child in, Emma listened while Mary prayed for the usual people on her list. Tonight, however, Mary added a request.

"Please, save Mr. Brown's soul."

Finishing her prayer, Mary yawned sleepily-- the first unabashed admission all night that she truly was tired.

"Goodnight, Ma."

With a pained smile, Emma kissed Mary's cheek. "God keep you till morning."

"Emma, I'm waiting," Josiah said impatiently.

"Are you staying up?" Mary looked at Emma hopefully. "Can I stay up, too?"

"We're going to bed, and so are you. Goodnight, Mary."

Much was on Emma's mind as she crawled into bed. Josiah was quick to put his arms around her, but Emma remained so distracted, he finally stopped trying to kiss her.

"You feeling all right?" he asked.

"I don't want to tussle right now."

"But, I do."

Emma gazed at her husband. "She's calling you 'Mr. Brown.'"

"I ain't caring."

"You should."

Rolling onto his back, Josiah muttered something under his breath that Emma could just barely understand.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"I said," Josiah's voice grew impatient with anger, "if this is what I'm to expect with the runt around, then I'm sorry I let her stay."

"She's your daughter, Josiah."

When Josiah didn't respond, Emma reasoned he was deep in thought. After several moments of silence, Emma peered at her husband and was dismayed to find his eyes tightly closed, as though fast asleep. Emma's instincts told her he was still awake, and that this was his way of ending their argument.

This time, Emma went to sleep without kissing Josiah goodnight.

The day after Christmas, Emma took down their small tree from off the table, and while Mary wasn't watching, discreetly hid it outside where it could decay in peace. Its needles had been falling off at a quick rate, and Emma didn't want everyone to see their special tree completely fall apart before their eyes. After discarding the tree, Emma hurried inside before she froze.

"It's getting colder!" Emma said in amazement, closing the door before any more of the winter made its way into their cabin. "I didn't think it was possible to get any colder, but it is!"

Sitting cross-legged on the bed, Josiah was preparing the bear hide he had skinned. He lifted his head a moment to look at Emma, and then went back to work without comment.

"That'll make you a good warm coat," said Emma, trying hard to overcome last night's tension. "It was Providential the bear came when it did." Suddenly remembering his disagreement over God's provision, Emma bit her lip. Josiah was already in a bad mood this morning, and she didn't want to make him any worse.

The mountain man gave Emma a defiant glare, but when he saw her regret, he made no argument.

After warming her hands before the fireplace, Emma told Mary to sit down at the table to begin her lessons.

"Lessons?" Mary asked in puzzlement.

"When I was your age, Ma started teaching me my alphabet and numbers."

"What are those?" asked Mary.

"Climb up onto your chair, and you'll find out."

Taking out her Bible, Emma opened it to the book of Genesis. "See this letter? That's the letter 'A.' It's the first letter in the alphabet. Trace an 'A' on the table with your finger like this." Emma made an imaginary "A" on the tabletop, and then Mary followed her example. "Very good! Now we'll make a lower case 'a.'"

Mary's mouth spread into a pleased grin when Emma praised her invisible letters.

"I wish you had something more to write on than this," sighed Emma. Then, getting an idea, she motioned for Mary to climb down. Kneeling on the dirt floor, Emma made an upper case and a lower case "A" in the dirt. "Your homework is to make as many sets of these letters as you have fingers on both hands. Do you know how many that is?"

Mary shook her head, "no."

Holding up Mary's right hand, Emma began counting the child's fingers. When Emma reached ten, Mary asked her to do it again. Smiling, Emma repeated the game, until she finally patted Mary's head and told her to get to work.

Emma crossed the room to her bed, where Josiah was sitting with his bearskin. Bending down, she reached between the buffalo robes to pull out her deerskin dress. She had worn her blue dress to bed last night, and now that Christmas was over, decided it was time to change back

into her mountain clothes. To Emma's disappointment, Josiah paid her no mind while she changed. He worked as though she wasn't there, and didn't acknowledge her presence with even the smallest of glances.

Sighing, Emma put away her cloth dress between the robes and then gazed at the trapper. When he didn't look up, Emma took a seat beside him on the bed. In the background, Emma heard Mary's voice sounding out the letter "A" every time she made another character on the floor.

Emma turned her gaze back on Josiah. After skinning the bear he had shot the day before yesterday, Josiah had rubbed the bear's brains into the underside of its hide to make the skin more pliable. Now he was fleshing the hide with a knife, scraping its underside to remove any remnants of flesh and fat, while leaving the thick fur on the other side intact. All in all, Josiah was making a mess on their bed, but Emma held her peace.

A long mane of shaggy brown hair hung past Josiah's shoulders, making it impossible for Emma to see his face. Emma brushed back a long strand of his hair, only to be greeted by dark angry eyes.

"I'm sorry last night didn't work out the way you wanted," Emma said quietly.

Josiah made no reply, but when his eyes moved to her mouth, Emma leaned forward to kiss him.

"I reached ten fingers!" Mary said in triumph, excitedly coming to Emma for her approval.

Dropping his knife on the robes, Josiah embraced Emma while Mary tugged at Emma's dress to compete for her attention. "I did my homework, Ma."

"Josiah," Emma struggled to free herself from his arms, "it's time to stop."

With a loud protesting groan, Josiah snatched up his knife to go back to work. "I ain't happy, Emma. Not by a long shot." He started in on the bearskin with a vengeance, only to have the blade slip through and pierce the hide. He let out a string of curses, and Emma quickly told Mary to cover her ears.

"Please, don't use those words in front of Mary."

"I can't help what comes out of my mouth, Emma!"

Emma disagreed, but struggled to find common ground with Josiah. "I'll settle for you just doing your best," she offered.

Sighing, Josiah gave her a surly nod.

Emma combed back Josiah's hair with her fingers, and a grin slowly spread across his face.

"You'll have tonight, Josiah."

Josiah raised his eyebrows. "Your word on it?"

"My word."

"How about one more kiss to tide me over?"

Smiling, Emma gave him another kiss.

With a broad grin, Josiah returned to his work, in much better spirits than before.

"Mary, you can take your hands down from your ears," said Emma, climbing off the buffalo robes. When it was apparent Mary couldn't hear, Emma gently lowered the girl's hands. "It's time for your next lesson."

"There is more?" Mary asked disappointedly.

Emma smiled. "I think you'll enjoy this."

Looking unsure, Mary watched as Emma pulled out a petticoat with a large square missing from the hemline of one side.

"I need to hem the edges where I cut out your cloth doll, so this is as good a time as any to begin learning how to sew."

Hearing this, Josiah interjected his opinion on the matter. "She needs to learn how to work leather-- not cloth, Emma. Fine sewing won't do her no good in these mountains."

"I appreciate your advice, Mr. Brown, but Cora expressly instructed me to teach Mary how to live among the white man, and that's just what I'm doing."

There was an argument brewing in Josiah's eyes, but he kept it to himself. Instead, he turned his attention back to the bearskin before him.

"If you wish to teach Mary about leather though, her sewing lesson can wait until another time."

Josiah glared at Emma. "I weren't making no offer."

"Oh, I thought perhaps you were."

With a harrumph, Josiah worked his knife against the animal skin, noticeably careful to not make any more suggestions out loud.

Emma glimpsed the sad eyes peering up at her, and sighed. "He'll get used to you, Mary."

"Is he really my pa?"

"That's what your grandmother told you, isn't it?"

"Yes," Mary said disappointedly. With a sigh, she grasped a handful of Emma's dress, and didn't let go as she followed Emma to the shelf below the closed window.

"I need to fetch my sewing box," said Emma, "but we'll work on your bed, so we'll have enough light to see by. After all, we wouldn't want to hurt those pretty eyes of yours."

The compliment extracted a shy smile from Mary.

Sitting side by side on the warm buffalo robe, Emma opened a carved wooden box. Mary gasped with wonderment as Emma pulled out one treasure after another.

Selecting a slender needle, Emma threaded it with a measured length of wool thread. "Did you see how I did that?" asked Emma. "Now, it's your turn."

Wetting one end of the thread in her mouth as Emma had done, Mary tried to push the strand through the tiny eye of the needle. The harder Mary tried, the more frayed the thread became, until Emma noticed tears welling in the girl's eyes.

"It's all right, Little One. It's only thread." Emma tenderly touched one of Mary's braids, just as a tear slid down the girl's cheek. "Maybe you're too young for this. Why don't we start with some basic sewing, instead?"

Giving the needle and thread back to Emma, Mary rubbed the tears from her eyes with a small fist.

"You'll learn," Emma said encouragingly. "There's no need to cry."

Mary sniffed. "I miss *naabks*."

"What is that?" asked Emma.

"Her grandma'am," Josiah said from across the fireplace. "She misses Cora."

"I want to go back to my grandmother," said Mary, rubbing out more tears. "Please, take me to her, Ma."

"I can't, Little One."

Frantically, Mary dug through the blankets until she found her Blackfoot doll. Wrapping her arms around the doll, she hugged it so tightly, its head fell off. Mary broke into uncontrollable sobs, and Emma quickly scooped the child into her arms.

"Don't cry, Mary. I'll fix it."

Movement from Josiah caused Mary to hide her face against Emma's chest, and her tears came even harder.

Lovingly, Emma lifted Mary onto her lap, cradling the grieving child in her arms. "It's all right, it's all right," Emma said softly. Then, gently rocking Mary, Emma hummed a lullaby her ma used to sing. The tune was like a soothing balm, and except for the occasional sniff and stifled sob, Mary stopped crying.

"Do you want me to put you down?" asked Emma.

Mary whimpered "no," and Emma stroked Mary's braids, continuing to hold her just as she would a baby. Mary seemed to soak up the attention, her small hand clutching Emma's dress as though Emma were all she had left in the world.

Sewing lessons over, Emma continued to cradle the five-year old. Never had Emma felt more like a mother, than at that very moment. This small life may not be her flesh and blood, but Mary was rapidly finding her way deep into Emma's heart. Humming the lullaby, Emma felt Mary's body relax, until the gentle sound of her breath told Emma that the child had fallen asleep.

"Such a sweet little one," Emma said in a hushed voice. She hugged Mary, and even in her sleep, the girl clung to her all the tighter.

"Yer spoiling her," said Josiah, scraping the last bit of flesh from the bearskin before putting his knife away.

"She's just hungry for love," Emma said quietly, still gently rocking Mary back and forth in her arms. "Everyone needs a little extra love now and then."

Josiah gazed at Emma, and she saw the harshness fade from his eyes. His look became almost tender, and Emma knew what he was thinking.

"I promise, tonight."

"I'll hold you to it," grinned Josiah. Climbing to his feet, the trapper shook off the mess he had made on the bed, and then threw the bits of bear flesh and fat into the fire where they sputtered and popped until disappearing in the flames. "When's lunch, Emma?"

"My arms are full right now."

"Then put her down. I'm hungry!"

As much as Emma was tempted, she bit back a retort and commanded patience to the forefront of her emotions. "Would you mind preparing it yourself?"

"Why should I, when I got you to do it?"

"Very well, I'll start lunch." Emma nudged the child in her arms. "Mary, it's time to get up." She coaxed Mary awake, and then shifted the girl back onto the blankets. "Do you feel better now?"

Quietly, Mary nodded "yes." Seeing the broken doll, Mary buried it out of sight under the blanket, and then closely followed Emma as lunch was being prepared.

"Mr. Brown, we're almost out of firewood," said Emma, stoking the fireplace with more wood. "I've gathered all the nearby branches and limbs that I can, without taking an ax and chopping down a tree, myself."

"I'll git it done after lunch," said Josiah. Coming to the fireplace to cast one last piece of bear fat into the flames, he knocked into Mary, who was intently keeping close to Emma's side. "Watch where yer going, you little runt."

While Emma busily started bear meat cooking on a spit over the fire, she noticed Mary hiding behind her deerskin dress. "Are you frightened?" asked Emma. "Where's that brave little girl I saw yesterday?"

A large tear splashed against Mary's cheek, and her small face looked ready to cry again. "He does not want me," she whimpered.

If Josiah overheard, he didn't let it show. He grabbed his ax, and set about sharpening the instrument on his bed.

Kneeling on the dirt floor, Emma gazed into Mary's sad eyes. "I know I can never replace your grandmother, but I promise to love you as my daughter."

With a tearful smile, Mary hugged her ma.

"You are a great big blessing from Heaven," said Emma, comforting the child with a loving kiss on her forehead.

The smell of burning meat came wafting from the fireplace, for Emma had been so busy with Mary, she had quite forgotten to keep an eye on their lunch. With a cry of dismay, Emma checked the damage. Mary giggled, her face lighting up with smiles as Emma pulled their blackened lunch from off the cooking spit.

Josiah frowned. "Emma, you burned our meal! Bear meat don't come along every day!"

Emma tried to remain optimistic. "It's only a little charred." When Mary began to laugh, Emma had to smile in spite of herself.

Josiah shook his head in disgust. "What a mess."

"I'll eat the worst of the burnt meat, Mr--" Emma hesitated, suddenly remembering Mary was listening, "I'll eat the burnt meat myself, Josiah."

Mary quickly came to Emma's defense. "I will eat burnt meat, too!"

"Then you two will be eating the entire meal," said Josiah.

For all of his complaining, Emma thought she detected him smothering a grin. "Do you want me to fix you more bear meat?" she asked.

Josiah got to his feet to put away his sharpened ax. "No, I'll feed on buffalo jerky, instead. Then I'll head out to chop wood."

"Good," said Mary.

Josiah grimly stared at the child. "Looking to git rid of me, are you?"

"Yes."

"Mary!" exclaimed Emma.

"Only for awhile," Mary said timidly.

With a harrumph, Josiah grabbed his buffalo jerky, and then took a seat at the table.

Seeing how badly the food was burnt, Emma turned to Mary. "You don't really want any of this, do you?"

"It should not be wasted," Mary said knowingly.

"I suppose not," Emma sighed. Placing the meat on a plate, Emma sat down at the table to begin eating.

Keeping true to her word, Mary scooted her chair next to Emma, helping herself to the blackened meat.

"I'm sorry I burned lunch," Emma said apologetically. "This happens to everyone, though. I'm sure even your grandmother makes mistakes."

"No, her meat never turns black," said Mary.

Josiah choked on his jerky, and Emma knew he was struggling to keep from laughing. Refusing Emma's offer to pat him on the back, Josiah managed to swallow down his lunch without further trouble.

Her mouth full of food, Mary turned to Emma thoughtfully. "When will Mr. Brown come back from chopping wood? Will it be several days?" There was an unmistakable ring of hopefulness to her voice that saddened Emma.

"I expect he'll only be gone for a few hours, Mary."

Looking disappointed, Mary chewed on her meal in silence.

Emma decided not to reprove the child for calling her father, "Mr.," after all, Josiah was doing precious little to earn the privilege. Still, it grieved Emma that the two were getting along so terribly. Josiah took little interest in his daughter, and Mary was trying to do her best under the circumstances.

Since the Blackfoot had taken his snowshoes, Josiah tried on Emma's pair. They were crafted for smaller feet, but it was much better than nothing. Putting on his heavy capote, Josiah tied a leather strap on his Hawken, and then slung the weapon behind his back to keep his hands free for an ax. Pulling up the hood of his capote, Josiah grabbed his ax, a worn leather hide and some sinew rope, and then waited by the door for Emma.

Folding her arms, Emma eyed him curiously, as though not understanding what he wanted. "Why are you still here? I thought you were leaving."

"Are you going to kiss me before I go?" he asked.

"What's this?" Emma laughed playfully. "You want me to kiss you before you leave, as well? One before bedtime isn't enough?"

Josiah didn't look amused, even though Emma plainly did.

Catching a wide grin on Mary, Emma shook her head in refusal. "I won't give you a kiss, Josiah, until you give something in return."

"That's enough, I'm going." Josiah turned to leave, but stopped short of opening the door. "You got me curious, woman. What do I need to give?"

"A smile."

He grinned.

"To Mary."

Josiah's grin vanished.

Even though Emma sounded playful, she was *very* serious. From the dour look on Josiah's face, she knew he understood her meaning.

Callously, Josiah barred his teeth at the little girl.

Mary's giggles abruptly stopped.

"For that, you won't even get a goodbye," said Emma, all good-humor disappearing from her voice. "Go, before I start wishing you never return."

A stunned look flashed across Josiah's face, and his jaw clenched. Disappearing out the door, he left without his kiss, or even a warm smile to brace himself against the bitter cold.

Placing the bar back over the door, Emma gazed apologetically at Mary.

"Can we sew?" asked Mary, her face brightening now that Josiah was gone.

"Sew? After the tears from this morning? Are you sure?"

"I want to try again." Excitedly sitting down on her bed, Mary waited as Emma went to fetch the sewing box.

Emma's mind wasn't on the sewing lesson, though Mary gave her much to smile about. The child was willing to learn, and even more eager to please, making Emma all the angrier at her husband. Shoving aside her anger, Emma smilingly hugged Mary. For Mary's sake, she wasn't going to let Josiah spoil this time away from him.

The air was so frigid, every breath pained Josiah's lungs as he slowly lumbered across the deep snow. The mountain man paid little heed to the pain, however, and even the distant howl of wolves were not enough to shake Josiah from his brooding. The memory of Emma's face as she told him to go, haunted his every step. Part of him wanted to go back and apologize, while his stubborn side refused to admit he had been wrong.

Just then, the ground beneath Josiah's snowshoe burst into a flurry of white feathers and wings! As the startled grouse flew off, Josiah realized that if his mind hadn't been so preoccupied with Emma, he could have shot the fowl for supper. Cursing his own weakness, Josiah moved down the mountain where the trees were more plentiful and the cabin a little further from his thoughts.

The cracks between the window shutters signaled the approach of nightfall, and there was still no sign of Josiah. Emma and Mary had a wonderful day together, sewing and practicing the letter "B," but Emma's mind had never strayed very far from Josiah. Now, as the sun was threatening to disappear behind the towering Rockies, Emma wondered if the mountain man would camp for the night to lick his wounds. Emma yearned for Josiah, but at the same time, his brusque treatment of Mary was something she simply had to fight. Emma felt she had no choice.

As Emma thought this over, the sound of heavy footsteps greeted her ears. Picking up her shotgun, Emma cautiously opened the door. She saw a tall figure dusted in white, dragging a leather covered burden behind him in the snow. Unsure who it was, Emma raised her weapon at the stranger.

"Are you still so angry, I'm greeted with a rifle?" asked a familiar deep voice.

"Josiah! Thank God, it's you!" Emma lowered her shotgun in relief. "I didn't recognize you under all that snow!"

"Yer mighty blind," he chuckled, dragging his heavy load to the cabin door. Emma stiffened at his criticism, prompting him to add, "But mighty purty, too."

"Another half hour, and it would've been dark," said Emma, moving aside so Josiah could enter with his load of firewood.

"I'm knowing that, Emma. Ain't got a clock, but I reckon the sun is as good as any to keep time by. Why? Were you worried I wouldn't come back?"

"I wondered if you might make camp for the night, instead of returning in the dark," said Emma, securely placing the bar over the door as Josiah shed his coat before the fireplace.

"Would you have bin sorry, if I had?" he asked, shaking the snow from his capote.

Emma was quiet. Moving Josiah to one side of the fireplace, she hung a kettle of water over the flames.

"Emma?"

"I'm heating some broth to warm your insides," said Emma. "Mary, please take your pa's coat and hang it on the bottom peg to dry."

A small person moved toward Josiah, holding out her arms for the capote. Josiah handed over the garment, and Mary drooped a little under its weight.

"You never answered me, Emma," Josiah turned back to his wife. "Are you sorry I came back, tonight?"

"I suppose not," sighed Emma. "If you don't mind, Josiah, we'll talk about this later... after bedtime."

Glancing at Mary, Josiah nodded in understanding.

Since Emma and Mary had already eaten supper, Josiah hungrily gulped down his broth and then ate a hearty meal of bear meat. Even before he had finished supper, Emma began readying Mary for bed.

During Mary's bedtime prayer, the little girl once again listed off the people in her life, and when she came to Josiah, prayed for his soul with a "Mr. Brown."

"Do I have to sleep?" Mary asked Emma hopefully, after her prayer was over. "If I stay in bed, could I stay awake?"

"You little bargainer," laughed Emma. "I know it's still a little early to expect you to sleep, so I'll allow it. Your pa and I have some private things to discuss, though, so you must keep quiet."

"I will."

"God keep you till morning," Emma said, kissing Mary's cheek as the child hugged her soft Christmas doll. "Where's that Blackfoot doll of yours? I'll fix it tonight."

Mary brought out her mortally wounded doll, and Emma smiled as the child placed its missing appendage in her hand.

"This poor doll has seen a hard life," said Emma, inspecting the break in the neck where the head had come off. Then Emma saw an old sinew cord that someone had bound around the shoulders to keep the head from falling off. Emma discreetly peeked beneath the doll's leather garments and discovered that the wooden body had been badly broken in several places, only to be bound together again by cord. So much violence had happened to the small plaything, Emma had a feeling someone had done it on purpose, for it was too much damage to be accidental.

"Grandmother fixed it," Mary said sadly.

"Who did this?"

Mary shrugged reluctantly. "The other children."

"Blackfoot children? From your tribe?"

Solemnly, Mary nodded, "yes." "Can you fix it?" she asked with a wistful sigh.

"I'm sure I can," Emma tried to give the girl an encouraging smile. She wanted to ask why the children had done such a thing, but from what she knew of Josiah's relationship with the Blackfoot people, it was not difficult to understand. "Go to sleep when you can," Emma kissed the child again. "Goodnight, Little One."

When Emma crossed to the other side of the fireplace, Josiah was lounging on his buffalo robes, worn out from a hard day's work of chopping wood. Forcing his eyes open, Josiah moved over to make room for Emma on the bed.

"You look tired," Emma said disappointedly. "I was hoping we could talk."

"I ain't too tired," said Josiah, sitting up to keep himself from falling asleep. He wearily rubbed his chopping shoulder, wincing as he worked the knots from his muscles.

"Do you want me to do that?" asked Emma. Not waiting for him to answer, Emma crawled behind Josiah to massage his shoulder.

"That feels good," moaned Josiah. "A little to the right? Thanks, Emma. I owe you."

"I'll say you do," Emma sighed patiently. "I'm angry with you, Josiah."

"I know," he groaned.

"How could you do that to Mary?"

"It wasn't hard."

"I'm not playing games with you, Josiah. I'm serious."

"So am I, Emma." Josiah reached over his shoulder, firmly grabbing Emma by the hand and pulling her around until they were face to face. "I ain't good at apologies, but I figure you got one coming."

Emma was surprised, but also more than a little wary of Josiah's charm. In spite of his woodsy ways, he could be quite appealing when he wanted to be.

"Please, don't say this, just because you're hoping to tussle me, Josiah."

"I ain't doing any such thing," he frowned. "I shouldn't have barred my teeth at the ru-- at the child."

"Why are you telling me this?" asked Emma. "Is it just because I'm angry with you?"

"Well," he hesitated, "you are, ain't you?"

"Does meanness come so easily, that you can frighten and tease and ignore your own daughter?"

Josiah sighed heavily, rubbing the back of his neck as though wishing he hadn't stopped Emma from giving him that massage. "It comes easier than I want, Emma."

"Have you tried to stop?"

"It don't work like that for me. I've tried to change in the past, and it just don't work. I ain't like you, and I never will be, so stop trying to make me over into something else."

"I don't think I'm asking for a lot," said Emma. "If you would be willing to try to change in one particular, we would have more peace in this cabin."

Josiah scowled. "What is it?"

"Please, try very hard to be kind to Mary. She hasn't had an easy life because of you, and this is her chance for a little happiness. I don't pretend I can be a better mother to her than Cora, but at least there's not a tribe here to torment her." Remembering the half-Indian before her, Emma sighed. "At least, not a *whole* tribe. One tormentor is enough to make *any* place a hardship."

Josiah eyed Emma warily. "What are you calling me?"

Emma sighed. "I'm trying very hard to love you, Josiah. Please, make this easier for me. If you won't do it because Mary is your daughter, then do it because you love me."

Josiah was thoughtfully silent. "I reckon I'll give it a try... fer your sake."

"You will?" Emma was uncertain.

"I said I would, didn't I? Just don't go expecting too much, or you'll only be angry at me again."

Wistfully, Emma touched his hand. "I wish you were doing this because it was the right thing to do, and not just because you're trying to make me happy."

"I told you I was sorry about making that face to the little girl."

"Josiah, you and I both know we've been looking forward to this night, and the only reason you're trying to appease me is so we can frolic."

"You really don't believe me, do you?" asked Josiah.

"Do you believe it, yourself?"

Josiah hesitated before answering. "I don't know, but to prove that I mean it *right now*, I won't touch you all night and I won't even expect you to nestle with me."

Emma was ready to end the discussion, for she felt Josiah was somehow trying to manipulate her to get his own way. "Since we're not going to be together tonight, I'll fix Mary's doll, and then I'm going to sleep."

Grumbling, Josiah sprawled out on the buffalo robe. "You ain't even going to let me feel good about being sorry," he said reproachfully.

It was no use, every word sounded insincere to Emma's ears, and she didn't want him to say anything further. Picking up the broken doll, Emma tried to mend the break that Cora had once repaired.

While Emma untangled the cords wound about the wooden figurine, she heard Josiah move behind her on the bed.

"Emma?"

Emma turned about to face Josiah. He was sitting up, looking strangely thoughtful.

"I thought you were going to sleep," said Emma.

"I really am sorry, Emma."

"I know, you wish you hadn't made that face at Mary."

"It's not just that." Josiah brushed back his long hair, his fingers absently toying the eagle feather dangling in his dark mane. "I've been cruel to Mary, and I know it. I ain't proud of it, and I ain't so sure I can change that part of me, but I'll try. Even if you never believe me, I'll try."

Emma looked at him longingly. "I wish I could believe you, Josiah."

"I wish I could do more than try," he shrugged. "It won't be enough, Emma. It never is."

"Without Christ, it never will be."

Grinning bitterly, Josiah shook his head. "I'm done speaking. I'll be seeing you in the morning."

Emma watched Josiah roll onto his side, and then struggle with the blankets as he tried to go to sleep. He was exhausted, and yet, Emma knew he was still frustrated and angry.

Winding the sinew cord around the break in Mary's doll, Emma set it aside and then lay down on the bed.

Just then, Mary yawned, and Emma realized Mary was still awake.

"How much did you hear?" Emma asked the girl.

"I heard everything," Mary smiled happily. She was obviously feeling quite grownup for having been able to listen.

"Do you have any questions?" asked Emma. "Are you sad?" It was a silly question, for Emma could plainly see Mary wasn't sad at all.

"No, I am fine, Ma."

"Since you're still awake, here's your Blackfoot doll," said Emma, handing the child her toy. "Are you sure your feelings weren't hurt by anything you overheard?"

A voice from the buffalo robes broke in on Emma's questioning. "Leave the child alone," said Josiah. "If she's fine, then let it be."

Annoyed at his interference, Emma shook her finger in Josiah's direction. "I thought you promised to back off whenever it concerned Mary."

"You want her to have a pa, don't you?"

"Yes."

Josiah sat up with a grin. "Then I'll have to speak up once in awhile." Scratching his chin, he gazed at Emma with a mingling of weariness and playfulness. "We're certainly a lively pair, you and I. What do you say, Mary? Have we been putting you to sleep with all our talk, or do you think we're lively enough to stay awake for?"

Surprised, Mary blinked astonishment at Josiah. "I am awake," she said timidly.

Emma wondered if Josiah would apologize to Mary, but he didn't. Instead, he rather awkwardly complained how Emma was keeping everyone awake, and then he lay back down to get some much needed sleep.

Before Mary got up the next day, Josiah awoke Emma and the two spent the early hours of the morning in each other's arms. Neither spoke of the night before, and Emma was grateful for the lack of words between them.

Gazing into Emma's eyes, Josiah breathed contentedly as he touched her cheek, gently tracing her lips with his thumb. He was about to speak, when Emma stopped him with a pleading look.

"I ain't going to argue, Emma," Josiah's voice sounded low and husky, as though his words were welling up from somewhere deep within his chest. "I love you, Em. I love you, like I've never loved anyone. There ain't much I wouldn't do fer you."

Lovingly caressing Josiah's arm, Emma kissed his thumb as it continued to trace her lips.

"I'll be nice to Mary-- you'll see."

"Thank you, Josiah."

As Josiah hugged Emma beneath the blankets, Mary began to stir and make noises, signaling she was about to get up.

Josiah moaned softly. "Don't git up, Emma. Don't leave our bed this morning."

"Don't you want breakfast?" she smiled.

Josiah grinned. "I could do without."

When Mary climbed out of bed, Josiah reluctantly released Emma so she could dress for the day.

"Ma, I need a trip outside," said Mary, hopping on one foot and then the other as she spoke.

"Don't forget yer shotgun, Emma."

"I never do, Josiah."

"I'm just making sure," he grinned playfully. As Emma was about to get to her feet, Josiah pulled her close for one more kiss.

"It is getting *bad!*" Mary said urgently.

"Hold on, Mary. Let me get my rifle first," said Emma, pulling herself free from Josiah's grasp.

The girls hurried outside, only to come back minutes later looking frozen from the experience.

Bear meat was served up for breakfast, and afterward, the girls gathered to read the Bible and then to practice the letter "C." In front of the fire, Josiah molded bullets from long bars of lead, while his bear hide stretched on the wall to dry.

"Up and around, like this," said Emma, guiding Mary's finger on the dirt floor. "Now, practice your A's and B's again."

While Mary did her homework, Emma watched Josiah as he poured molten lead into his bullet mold.

"I've bin thinking," said Josiah, releasing the two halves of the mold to reveal a round lead ball, "maybe I should make another bucket."

"I could certainly use another," smiled Emma.

"It wouldn't be fer you," he grinned. "Mary had to hold her load until morning, so you could take her out to the latrine."

"So you want to make her a chamber pot?" asked Emma.

"If that's what people like you call an indoor latrine, then I reckon that's what I mean. What are you thinking on the matter?"

"It's a very thoughtful gesture, Josiah."

The mountain man grinned ear to ear when he saw Emma's warm smile.

Evening came, and Josiah was hard at work hollowing a log. He hadn't said much to Mary all day, but it hadn't been for lack of trying; he just didn't have much to say to a little girl. Josiah took pride, however, that when he had told Mary to fetch him something from one of his bags, he had said it with a smile, and had even remembered to thank her afterward.

This "chamber pot" as Emma had called it, wasn't going to be much, but at least it would help Mary. Josiah had thought long and hard to come up with something he could do for Mary, and this had been his best idea. Josiah knew he had to convince Emma that he was trying, and had relished her approving smile when she called it "a thoughtful gesture." Josiah harrumphed. When had anyone ever accused *him* of being thoughtful?

The log hollowed out, Josiah handed it off to Emma and she placed it by the door, on Mary's side of the room.

"Do you understand what's it's for?" asked Emma.

Mary stared at the chamber pot uncertainly. "Do I have to do it in there?" she asked in a whisper, not wanting Josiah to overhear what she was saying.

Emma glanced in Josiah's direction, and seemingly understood the source of Mary's concern. "This is for nighttime, when everyone is asleep. Just cover the chamber pot after you're done, and I'll keep it clean. If you don't want to use it, then wake me up and I'll take you outside to the latrine."

Mary shook her head. "I do not like the dark."

"Then use the chamber pot." When Mary still didn't look convinced, Emma bent over and whispered something that Josiah absolutely could not hear, though he had been able to hear everything else. After some consultation, Emma straightened. "Josiah, if Mary has to use the chamber pot while you're awake, do you promise not to look?"

"Why should I look?" he chuckled.

Emma gave him a serious look, and Josiah quickly nodded his agreement. "I promise."

"See?" Emma smiled to the girl.

Staring at the floor, Mary sighed glumly.

"He *is* trying, Little One."

"Are you sure he is my pa?" asked the girl, giving Emma a pleading look that begged to be told otherwise.

Taking Mary by the hand, Emma led her to the buffalo robes where Josiah was eating a late supper. "Josiah, tell her who you are."

"Why should I?" he asked, chewing with his mouth wide open. "She already knows who I am." The disappointment on Emma's face gave him cause for concern, so he addressed the short person at her side. "I'm yer pa."

"Are you sure?" asked Mary.

"You didn't git that white skin from no Blackfoot," grunted Josiah.

"I am *not* white!" Mary said stoutly.

"You ain't, huh?" Josiah grabbed Mary's hand, holding it up to his for a comparison. "Lookit, yer hide is whiter than mine. Yer first ma was a full-blooded Blackfoot, so the white in you came from *me*." He abruptly released Mary's hand, only to notice Emma looking a little frightened. "I didn't hurt her, Emma, so stop looking at me like I did."

"Please, be gentle," asked Emma.

Josiah stared at the child. "Like it or not, I'm yer pa. You don't have any choice in the matter, so it won't do you no good to fight it."

Mary hung her head, and Josiah heard her sigh.

"While we're speaking to each other, Emma is bothered yer calling me 'Mr. Brown.' I reckon you'd best stop." When Mary remained silent, Josiah tilted her chin up so he could see her eyes. "I know I'm rough, but I won't hurt you. I ain't used to living with so many women, but I'll git used to it."

A shy, timid smile tugged at Mary's mouth, though she still looked disappointed that he was her father.

"I know, I ain't too pleased about it, myself," he sighed. Not knowing what else to say, Josiah held up the last of his supper to the girl. "You want it?" he asked. Quietly, Mary accepted the bear meat, and then went to sit down on her blankets to eat. Josiah wiped his greasy hands against his buckskins. "How much bear is left, Emma?"

"We have enough for tomorrow." Emma sat beside Josiah, folding her legs close to her body to keep warm, for the cabin was cold in spite of the fire.

With a strong hand, Josiah slid Emma closer to him, and then wrapped his arms around her as they watched the flames in the fireplace. "I'll be going hunting in the morning."

"You don't have to, Josiah. We still have plenty of buffalo jerky."

Josiah nuzzled the back of Emma's neck. "That jerky is to tide us over in between kills. We don't have enough for the whole winter, so I have to go out and find more game."

"Can I go with you?" Josiah and Emma looked up in surprise at Mary. "Can I?" asked the child.

Emma was stunned. "You want to go with your pa... alone?"

Josiah's first impulse was to turn Mary down, but when he thought it over, this was a good chance to prove he was trying to be kind. "All right. If yer really wanting to go, I'll take you."

Emma looked doubtful, even though Josiah could tell she was happy he had said "yes."

"Stop yer worrying, Em, I'm bringing you with us. It'll take me a few days, but after I make myself some snowshoes and finish that there bear coat, we'll go hunting! Until then, we'll eat jerky."

By the morning of the very next day, Mary was excited about Josiah's promise to take her hunting. It was no wonder, for besides the trips to the latrine and the daily chore of fetching water, Mary hardly got to go outside at all. Even Emma had to admit she was looking forward to escaping these four walls in exchange for some fresh air-- even though that air was sharp with cold.

After Bible time, Emma started Mary on another letter of the alphabet, while Josiah went out to find some willow to make himself a pair of snowshoes. The girls were just about to start their sewing, when the door flew open, and Josiah lumbered in with his wood. Emma drew up the blanket shawl about her shoulders, warming herself against the chill Josiah had brought into the cabin before he closed the door.

With a great deal of concentration, Mary guided one end of her thread through the eye of the needle, and then pulled it through with a happy grin.

"I threaded the needle, Ma!" Excitedly jumping to her feet, Mary ran across the room to where Josiah was tugging off his capote. "Look!" the child held her needle and thread before the burly man, "I did it all on my own!"

Josiah gave Mary a gruff nod. "So I see."

At Josiah's cool praise, Mary stared at her simple accomplishment and then hung her head.

"Fetch my ax, Mary."

With a sigh, Mary returned her needle to Emma, and then located the ax behind the door. With both hands, Mary dragged the heavy object to Josiah.

"Here," she said quietly, her tone much more subdued than before.

"Thanks," grunted Josiah. Sitting cross-legged on his bed, he split a willow branch into thin sections to form the skeleton of his snowshoes. Then Josiah reached over to the kettle where strips of leather were soaking in water. While the leather was wet, he bound the ends of the two willow strips together, fastening small lengths of willow in the middle to support his foot. Josiah repeated this a second time, until he was ready to lace the snowshoes with leather, so that when he walked, the webbing of lacing would stop his foot from sinking into the snow.

Interested, Mary squatted down to watch him work. She remained silent, and smiled at Josiah when he looked up to see her still there.

"Ain't you got nothing else better to do?" asked Josiah.

"When will you work on your bear coat?" asked Mary.

"After I finish with these here snowshoes."

Mary wobbled a little on the balls of her feet, her ankles tiring. She shook her head as Josiah wove the leather webbing. "That is not how it is done," she said gravely.

"This is how *I* do it, so keep yer mouth shut."

With an audible sigh, Mary continued to watch.

When Josiah brought one end of the leather up around the edge of the snowshoe, Mary winced as though he were making a terrible mistake. In disgust, Josiah dropped what he was doing and glared at Emma. "Ain't you going to call her back to yer sewing?"

Folding her arms, Emma smiled firmly. "Right now, this is more important."

Grunting his protest, Josiah picked up the snowshoe to resume work.

"What is that for?" asked Mary, pointing to the eagle feather dangling in his hair. "You must be very brave to have a feather."

"What are you talking about?" Emma asked the girl.

"An eagle feather means he did something with much courage," said Mary.

"Really?" Emma looked at Josiah curiously. "What act of courage did you do?"

Proudly, Josiah opened his mouth to answer, but Emma saw him quickly shut it again, as though searching for something else to say.

"I killed me a griz," he finally said, weaving the leather through the webbing on his snowshoe. When the girls weren't properly impressed, he went on. "I killed him after he tore off half my scalp. Meanest animal I ever come across."

"What happened?" asked Mary.

"I was trapping beaver with my friend, Pierre, in the Green River Valley, when we lost our horses to some thieving Crows. We were left high and dry without food nor ponies, and not a rifle between us."

Mary's eyes grew wide. "What did you do?"

"Pierre and I began walking to the nearest trading post, when we come across the biggest, meanest, old griz I ever laid my eyes on. Pierre started mumbling prayers, saying we was dead men, but I weren't ready to give up the ghost so quick. When that griz started galloping at us on all fours, I knew it weren't no use trying to outrun him, so I grabbed my knife and stood my ground."

Emma eyed Josiah skeptically. She felt he was just spinning this tall tale to amuse Mary.

"He took me down, and with his great jaws, ripped back my scalp. While we was wrestling, I managed to lodge my knife in his heart, and after that, it didn't take him much longer to die."

Mary looked a little doubting, but when Josiah nodded that it was so, she grinned proudly.

"That's right, yer pa killed that old griz. Afterward, I put an eagle feather in my hair so all would know I wasn't a man to tangle with lightly."

"What was Pierre doing all this time?" asked Emma.

Scowling at his wife, Josiah continued on about his exploits while his hands kept busy weaving snowshoes.

Emma didn't like the fact she believed Josiah was telling a falsehood, but something else bothered her even more-- that long pause he had given before telling his fantastic story. She had the distinct impression a bear had nothing to do with why Josiah wore that eagle feather in his hair.

By the end of the day, Mary had quite forgotten her sewing lesson, having spent her time watching Josiah and listening to his stories. All of them were entertaining, though Emma doubted their truthfulness, for some were simply so far-fetched, she thought it impossible he could be telling the truth.

After supper, when Emma had managed to get a rather rambunctious Mary to sleep, Emma rested on the buffalo robes next to Josiah. He seemed thoughtfully quiet, and in no hurry to be the first to speak.

"Josiah? Why do you really wear that eagle feather?"

The trapper turned his head to look at Emma, silently regarding her face before answering. "Reckon it's best if I don't say. I'd be a fool to give you more cause to dislike me."

"Does it have to do with a woman?"

Gazing into Emma's brown eyes, Josiah groaned softly. "I can't hold nothing back from you, can I?"

"Did you love her?"

"No." Josiah's answer came so readily, Emma knew it was the truth. "She was my first whore, Emma. That's all."

Closing her eyes, Emma felt Josiah take her into his arms. When she stiffened, he held her even tighter. "I shouldn't have told you. Now you're angry."

The eagle feather dangled in Emma's face, and she turned in Josiah's arms to get away from that blatant reminder of his past.

"Emma," Josiah gently spoke her name, love permeating his deep voice. Taking Emma's hand, Josiah guided it to the eagle feather and then closed her fingers around the offending object. "I don't want it anymore, Emma. Take it. From now on, the only one I'll wear in my hair is *you*."

Tearfully, Emma pulled the feather from Josiah's hair. She would have rather chosen to believe the grizzly story, than to think he had placed so much brazen pride in something so shameful.

Josiah drew Emma closer, letting her face dry against his hunting shirt. "I wouldn't do this for any woman but you," he said in a hushed voice.

Emma tenaciously clung to Josiah's love, squeezing every drop of affection she could from his tender words. He loved her enough to give up his trophy, and Emma comforted herself with that thought.

When morning came, Josiah began working the bearskin into an actual coat. It was crudely done, and not at all a finished garment like Emma's soft deerskin dress, or even Josiah's own buckskins, but the coat would work well to protect him from the winter.

As Josiah worked, Mary watched nearby, asking questions whenever she could. For once, Josiah didn't seem to mind the interruptions until Emma stopped him as he was about to begin a story.

"Josiah, I would appreciate it if you didn't fill Mary's head with fantastic yarns that never happened. I'm trying to teach her the truth-- not fables passed off as the truth."

"You don't believe me, Emma? My own wife?"

Emma could hear the playfulness in Josiah's voice, and she struggled not to dissolve under the influence of his sweet-talk.

"You know what I mean, Josiah. Very little of what you told Mary yesterday, was the truth."

"I'll admit to flavoring the facts, but the particulars were true enough."

"Come now, Josiah, you never had your scalp ripped off by a grizzly. Admit it."

Setting aside the bearskin, Josiah pulled back his long hair so Emma could see a great ridge of a scar that ran from behind his right ear all the way to the front of his hairline. Emma wondered she had never noticed it before now, but then again, Josiah's body was full of old scars.

"What about your friend, Pierre?" Emma asked incredulously. "What was he doing while you were being mauled?"

Letting his hair down, Josiah shrugged. "He was clawed when he tried to get the griz off me. After the bear took my scalp, Pierre sewed it back on afore he died."

Swallowing hard, Emma felt a little lightheaded.

Josiah stared at her skeptically. "You ain't going to swoon, are you?"

"That was a little more detailed than I expected."

"It's the truth."

"Those other stories... you didn't make them up?"

"Only here and there," he shrugged. "There's no harm in stretching things to make a good story."

"As long as you don't try to pass it off as the truth," Emma looked at him sturdily, and Josiah knew he had met his match.

"All right, Emma, have it yer way." Josiah picked up a sharp awl to puncture holes in the bearskin to make room for the seams. Grinning, he winked at Mary. "I do believe Pierre would be alive this very day, if your ma had been there, Mary. Why, that old griz wouldn't have stood a chance against Emma!"

Mary giggled and Josiah flashed Emma a broad grin. Then his grin slowly faded, and Emma guessed he was remembering his friend. This was a hard wilderness filled with hard people, and Emma no longer wondered at Josiah's roughness. A man would need to be anchored to something greater than himself, to not let these rugged mountains change his soul for the worse. She knew Josiah did not have that anchor, and she longed for him to possess that steadfast hope.

"Lay hold upon the hope set before us: which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast."

~ Hebrews 6:18, 19 ~

Chapter Eight
The Hunting Party

1837, Southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"With my soul have I [Emma] desired Thee [God] in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek Thee early: for when Thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness."

~ Isaiah 26:9 ~

After a long day's work on his bearskin coat, Josiah fell asleep while Emma was hearing Mary's bedtime prayer. Josiah didn't know how much time passed until he awoke, but when his eyes opened, the cabin was silent. Turning his head slightly, Josiah found Emma sleeping beside him on the buffalo robes. Ready to go back to sleep, Josiah heard a soft, faint sound coming from the other side of the fireplace. His eyes focused on a small child, tiptoeing toward the door in her moccasins. Josiah frowned. Was Mary trying to leave? Emma wouldn't like it if she left.

Before Josiah had a chance to move, the child stopped beside the bucket he had hollowed out for her to use as a chamber pot. Relaxing, Josiah waited to see if Mary would finally use it. It had sat untouched for two whole nights, and every morning, Emma had been urgently awakened for a trip out to the latrine.

Josiah saw Mary cautiously peek over her shoulder to make sure he was truly asleep. Shutting his eyes, Josiah let himself drift off into slumber. At least the girl was using the bucket. Finally. In his half-awake consciousness, Josiah could see Emma, hugging him for doing such a thoughtful gesture for Mary. Then a dull thud broke through Emma's praise, and Josiah was awake again.

Scanning the room, Josiah found Mary on the ground by the door, her bare bottom in the dirt. Beside her was an overturned bucket. Josiah felt the strong urge to laugh, for she had obviously fallen off.

Stunned, Mary looked up to see him wide awake and staring at her. Her bottom lip began to quiver and Josiah was suddenly afraid the girl was going to start crying.

"Emma," Josiah nudged his wife.

Groggily, Emma turned in bed, but remained fast asleep.

Shaking Emma's shoulder, Josiah lowered his gaze to keep Mary from bursting into humiliated tears. "Yer needed, Emma. Mary's had a spill."

By now, Mary had picked herself up, and was desperately trying to clean up the mess the overturned bucket had made.

With an understanding nod to Josiah, Emma quietly went to the girl. Without a word, Emma helped Mary scoop up the soiled dirt in a shovel, and then dispose of it outside. All the while, Mary looked on the brink of tears, but Emma's understanding smiles and soothing hugs kept them at bay.

As Emma led Mary back to bed, the girl lamented her situation. "He saw everything, Ma!"

Josiah scowled as Emma turned to him for verification. He sure wished that child was a boy. Boys would be less trouble.

"Well?" asked Emma. "How much did you see?"

By the cautious look on Emma's face, Josiah understood she didn't want him to make a big deal out of whatever he HAD seen. Even so, Josiah's sleep had been interrupted, and now he was being questioned for opening his eyes.

It was too much.

"All I saw was a runty mixed-breed who couldn't keep herself on a bucket," he heard himself mutter. "Quiet her down, Emma, so I can sleep." With that, he shut his eyes. If Emma didn't like him for speaking his mind, then it was just too bad. After all, how much was a man supposed to take?

Feigning sleep, Josiah half expected to hear Mary sobbing something about how terrible he was. Instead, all he could hear was silence. Unable to contain his curiosity, Josiah peeked open one eye. Instead of crying, Mary was happily snuggled under her blankets beside Emma. Getting comfortable in the small bed, Emma whispered something into Mary's ear that made the girl smile. Josiah heard a "Goodnight, Little One," and then the girls closed their eyes to sleep.

Josiah swallowed hard. Emma wasn't coming back to his bed. Tossing onto his side, he tried to pretend that he didn't care.

The next morning, Emma awoke to find Josiah already awake, and working on his coat. He didn't say a word as she started breakfast, and wouldn't even look up when she placed his cup of hot broth beside him on the robes.

Feeling tired, Emma wasn't up to soothing Josiah's ruffled pride. He had behaved terribly last night, and for once, she didn't feel like trying to make things better. At least Mary was in good spirits. She knew the child had enjoyed sleeping beside her, and Emma was already making plans to repeat last night's sleeping arrangements, if Josiah didn't soon apologize.

Having already had their broth, Emma took Mary to the small bed to begin their daily Bible reading. More than once, Emma was aware of Josiah watching them, though she resisted the temptation to see if her intuition was correct.

Finally, Emma heard Josiah's deep voice rumble above the Bible story.

"Ain't you going to say nothing to me, Emma?"

Emma paused, collecting herself before lowering the book.

"*You're* the one who needs to speak, Mr. Brown."

Josiah noticeably grimaced as he heard the "mister" in her address. "I reckon I was a bit harsh on Mary last night."

"Is that an apology?" Emma's eyebrows raised expectantly.

Josiah twisted his face into a scowl. "Yer pushing me, Emma."

"In that case, we're returning to our story," said Emma, forcing her eyes back onto the page.

"Where was I, Mary?"

"The great fish swallowed up Jonah," said Mary.

"Oh, yes," Emma found her place and began reading.

"I'm sorry," Josiah spoke up so his voice could be heard over Emma's.

Emma lowered her Bible. "What did you say?" she asked.

Gritting his teeth, Josiah repeated his words. "I swear, woman, yer making this mighty hard."

Emma sighed, closing the large Bible. "Josiah, I'm tired. I'm tired of your animosity toward Mary, and I'm tired of forcing you to make peace with her."

Josiah looked at Emma uncertainly. "Ani-what?" he asked.

"It means to have ill will," said Emma.

"I made her the bucket, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"And I told her all them stories, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did."

"I'm going to keep my promise to take her hunting."

"I'm glad to hear it."

At the end of his list of good deeds, Josiah looked flustered. "I don't know what yer wanting from me, Emma."

"Yes, you do." Emma's voice was unflinching.

Josiah tossed aside the awl in his hand, and threw back the partially formed bearskin coat in his lap. He got to his feet as though angry, and yet, his expression was not one of anger. "I'll be kinder to Mary," he said finally.

"Kindness would come easier if you loved her," said Emma.

"Don't make this into a war, Emma. You won't win."

The sharp edge in Josiah's voice warned Emma to back down. He had promised to be kinder, and that would have to be enough.

"Am I forgiven?" asked Josiah, towering above Emma with his arms folded across his chest like a proud Indian chief.

Emma looked over to Mary, and the girl nodded "yes."

"I suppose you are," sighed Emma.

Squatting down, Josiah picked up the Bible in Emma's lap. As he flipped through the pages, Emma sensed he was deliberately putting himself in her way. After more page turning, Josiah offered the Bible back to her.

"Are we friends, again?" he asked.

"I suppose so," said Emma, accepting the Bible from his hand.

"Aw, Emma, I don't want another 'suppose.'"

Josiah lightly caressed Emma's cheek with his rough fingers, and Emma was surprised when tears came to her eyes.

"What are you crying fer?" he asked.

"I don't know," Emma quickly brushed away the stray tears. "I'm so tired."

Pushing aside Mary, Josiah took her place on the small bed beside Emma. Then, as though an afterthought, he looked at the girl. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No," Mary said, looking somewhat shocked that he had even asked.

Josiah turned back to Emma. "Are you tired of *me*, or just plain tired?"

"I don't know," shrugged Emma. "Maybe both."

As if carefully trying to gauge her feelings, Josiah slowly put an arm about Emma. When she didn't stiffen, he drew her to his side. "I know what we're needing," he nodded. "We need to stretch our legs and git out of this here lodge. If I have some help on my bear coat, we could go hunting tomorrow."

"I will help!" said Mary, her small mouth in a broad, Josiah-like grin.

"There now, ain't that something to look forward to, Emma?" Josiah peered down at Emma as she buried her face against his chest. Then she began to cry.

"Is Ma all right?" Mary asked in concern.

"I ain't rightly knowing," said Josiah. "Emma? You still angry with me?"

"I don't think so," came her muffled reply.

"Well, that's something, anyway," he chuckled. "Come now, Emma, gather yer senses. No one died, so there ain't any call fer tears. Take a look at Mary there. See? She's smiling, so you should, too."

"I see her," said Emma, trying very hard to stop the oncoming tears. She finally managed a smile, and Josiah let her sit up on her own strength. It startled Emma that she should cry so hard over a situation Josiah had already diffused, and it made her carefully think over her condition. When Emma and her father had been on their own in the wilderness, her menstrual cycle had disappeared. It had yet to come back, though she was now eating regularly and much healthier than before.

As Josiah showed Mary his coat, Emma realized her back was sore-- a sure sign of an upcoming cycle. Back home in Indiana, Emma would have used sheepskin during such times, but there were no sheep to be found in these mountains. Emma knew she had to make due with whatever was on hand, so while Josiah worked with little Mary, Emma went to the leather packages stacked in the corner. Without asking permission, she began to open and go through Josiah's belongings.

"Emma!"

At the sound of her name, Emma glimpsed Josiah over her shoulder.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

The sound of Josiah's brisk stride crossing the room made Emma feel a little weak.

"I never said you could go through those things," he said, coming to her side with a frown.

Emma prayed Josiah would understand. Leaning forward so Mary couldn't overhear, Emma quietly explained what was about to happen.

Thankfully, Josiah understood. He searched through his limited store of animal skins until he pulled out a mink. "At least it's soft," he said, handing the skin to Emma.

Not only was the skin very soft, but its underside was watertight. Grateful, Emma kissed Josiah's cheek. "Thank you, Josiah. I don't know what I would have done without this."

Josiah looked at her thoughtfully. "Is that why you were crying this morning? It's yer cycle?"

Embarrassed, Emma nodded "yes."

Josiah was pleased. "Until you start bleeding again, I reckon you can't become with child."

Emma felt self-conscience for discussing such things with a man, even though that man was her husband. "I think that's why nothing's happened so far," she said quietly.

With a broad hand, Josiah pulled Emma close. He wrapped his arms about her, and Emma relaxed in his warm embrace. When Josiah gave a contented moan, Emma knew he was pleased to have her back in his arms. Just then, a small tug on Emma's dress drew her attention away from Josiah. Emma turned, and saw Mary beaming up at her proudly.

"See what I did, Ma?" Mary held up one end of the heavy bear coat she had dragged across the dirt floor.

Josiah's tenderness turned into a scowl, and Emma heard him groan impatiently. Then he saw the dirt on his coat, and Emma could tell he was struggling against frustration. His dark eyes flashed at Mary, and then at Emma.

Without speaking, Emma nested in the strong arms still around her.

"She's ruining my coat, Emma. Lookit, she's tugged one of the unfinished sleeves half off."

Emma nestled even harder.

"All right, I'll let it slide, Emma."

Emma looked up at Josiah's strong face. He was in a better mood than he should be, considering what Mary had just done to his coat.

Disappointed, Mary hung her head. She had obviously hoped she had done something praiseworthy.

Taking his coat from the child, Josiah ran a large hand over the dirty fur. He absently patted Mary's head, and then lumbered back to his workplace on the buffalo robes. When the girl remained where she was, Josiah called out, "Am I going to have to finish this on my own?"

Eyes brightening, Mary ran back to the robes and then plopped down beside her father to continue their work.

Grateful for Josiah's efforts to include Mary, Emma retrieved her knife to cut the mink skin into lengths she could use. The soft skins were then placed into a kettle of boiling water, to clean them from oil and grime. After they were boiled clean, Emma hung them over the fireplace to dry.

Since Mary was intent on helping Josiah finish his bearskin coat, Emma set aside Mary's lessons for the day. It did Emma's heart good to see father and daughter getting along together, though Emma knew deep in her heart that Josiah was only doing it to please his wife. At least it was a start, and Emma prayed it would be enough.

Gathering her sewing, Emma settled down on Mary's empty bed to mend one edge of her frayed petticoat. She hadn't gotten very far in her progress, before her back began to ache even more. Emma sighed. She hoped her "monthly visitor" would come soon, and relieve her of these symptoms. Adjusting herself on the buffalo robe, Emma resumed her sewing.

By suppertime, Josiah's large coat was finished. Its seams were held together by strong buffalo sinew, and the long bear fur gave Josiah a shaggy appearance when he put it on for Emma to see.

"Oh dear," sighed Emma. "Josiah, you look even more like a large bear than you did before-- and I didn't think that was possible."

Josiah grinned. "To my way of thinking, that ain't a bad thing." Going to his things, he pulled out a bushy fox skin cap, and then plunked it on his head to complete his attire. "Reckon we can go hunting tomorrow."

Excitedly, Mary jumped up and down, her long braids dancing behind her back as she celebrated the news.

"You'd better take that thing off before you start perspiring inside the cabin," said Emma, "and Mary, please stop jumping about. It's suppertime, and I need you to put the plates on the table."

"We are going hunting!" Mary said over and over, until Emma gave her a patient look that asked her to stop.

Taking off his coat, Josiah hung it on a peg on the wall. "When did you last check the priming on yer shotgun, Emma?"

"I always check it before I leave the cabin," Emma said, preparing more buffalo jerky for their meal. She looked at the unappetizing dried meat, and felt her stomach rebel. She already knew she wouldn't be eating very much supper tonight.

When Emma sat down to a smaller than usual portion, Josiah looked at her curiously.

"You didn't eat much lunch, either."

Emma nodded. "I know."

"You've got to eat more than that, Emma."

"I will-- tomorrow."

Josiah didn't look as though he approved, but said nothing more.

Bedtime came, and with it Mary's list of people in her nightly prayer. When she came to Josiah, Mary was about to say "Mr. Brown" again, when she heard Josiah clear his throat. Peeking one eye open, Mary looked at Josiah, and he shook his head at her reproachfully. Mary looked thoughtful, and then proceeded to pray for the saving of "Pa's soul."

When it was over, Josiah flashed Emma a "Does she have to do this every night?" kind of look.

With Mary tucked in her blankets, Emma checked the door and then came to bed.

"I know you think differently," said Josiah, "but my soul don't need anyone praying fer it. Especially every night."

Lying down, Emma winced as her sore back straightened on the buffalo robes.

"You hurting?" asked Josiah.

"It's my back."

"Has yer bleeding started yit?"

Emma sighed. "Must you be so uncouth?"

Frustrated, Josiah cursed under his breath. "What do you *want* me calling it? Emma, you and yer highfalutin words! You must have had a powerful lot of book learning."

"No, it hasn't started yet," Emma said finally.

Josiah's face softened when he saw Emma's discomfort, and he opened his arms, as though inviting her to come closer.

Gratefully, Emma leaned her head on Josiah's shoulder, and let his arm envelope her in an embrace. She resisted when he proceeded to rub her back, but when she realized he was trying to help her pain, and not frolic, she slowly relaxed. Emma wasn't in the mood for romance tonight, and from the careful way Josiah was holding her, she knew he didn't have to be told. It was obvious.

"Could she say her prayer to herself?" asked Josiah. "Does she have to say it out loud?"

"Who do you mean?" asked Emma. "Mary?"

"It's not that I begrudge her some religion, but I don't enjoy feeling like a heathen every night in my own lodge." When Emma didn't respond, Josiah lifted his head just enough to see Emma's face. "You crying again?"

Unable to speak without openly weeping, Emma buried her face against his hunting shirt.

Josiah rubbed her back consolingly. "I love you, Emma."

"I love you, too," Emma said in a muffled voice.

"Then how about a kiss before we sleep? Mary got one."

Planting a warm kiss on Josiah's cheek, Emma snuggled deep into his arms. "I'll ask Mary to lower her voice when she prays out loud."

Josiah squeezed Emma, and the cabin lay still as the small family went to sleep.

Morning came, and Emma awoke to a gentle kiss. Her eyes flickered open, and Josiah grinned down at her.

"You feeling better today?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," Emma moved slightly, trying to see how her back felt. It wasn't as sore, but even now, Emma could already sense an edge to her emotions that she didn't like. She had been fighting it the day before, and this morning, it was still present.

Josiah stroked Emma's cheek.

Annoyed, Emma sighed patiently. "Please, I'm not in the mood."

"All I want is a little sunshine," he said grinning.

"Josiah, I don't feel like playing with you right now."

"Where's my sunshine?" he asked. He reached under Emma's arm, and she gasped involuntarily.

"Josiah! Stop it!"

"Not until you give me some sunshine," his voice was playful but insistent. Josiah stared at Emma, as though willing her mouth into a smile.

"I don't feel like sunshine, Josiah."

"You may not feel it, but you certainly look it," he said matter-of-factly. He stroked the blonde braids that Emma would pin up once she readied herself for the day. "It's like yer wearing sunlight, Emma."

Emma looked at him evenly. "I know you're trying to flatter me, but I'm really not in the mood."

Instead of leaving her alone, Josiah gathered Emma in his arms and quietly snuggled with her. Emma would have protested, but his calmness felt good against her tattered nerves. When Emma sighed contentedly, she heard Josiah grin.

Just then, two small feet made their way to the buffalo robes. "I am hungry," said Mary.

"You know where the jerky's at," said Josiah.

Mary blinked at him, and then turned to go find breakfast.

Stirring from Josiah's comforting arms, Emma sat up in bed. "I'll be with you in a moment, Mary."

Emma pinned up her braids, while Josiah watched her with a decided frown. Before getting out of bed, Emma paused. She turned to Josiah and gave him a heartfelt smile, and right before her eyes, Josiah's rain clouds evaporated, leaving a grinning man.

As Emma began to prepare breakfast, Josiah grabbed her empty water bucket and announced that he and Mary would go to the creek this morning, so Emma wouldn't have to.

"I can do it, myself," said Emma. She saw Mary's stoic face, and then realized he was taking Mary without her-- even though it was only to the creek. "I don't think this is a good idea, Josiah."

Ignoring Emma, Josiah waited as Mary slowly wrapped herself in a warm blanket, to brave the outside cold. She didn't look very eager, but quietly obeyed Josiah.

Emma was about to bundle up, so she could go with Josiah and Mary, when Josiah put out his hand and stopped Emma.

"This ain't nothing to get concerned about, Emma. We're just going to the creek."

"But--" Emma was interrupted by Josiah's firm gaze. It amazed Emma how he could still her with just one look.

After Mary was ready, Josiah, his Hawken, and two new snowshoes disappeared out the door. Behind him trailed a little girl, toting an empty bucket.

Josiah glanced behind his back to check Mary. She was still following, though he detected a little hesitation on her part to come with him. Shouldering his rifle, Josiah took a large tree branch, and then crashed it through the frozen surface of the creek. The bucket filled, Josiah waited before turning to go back to the cabin.

Mary looked up at him expectantly.

"You ain't even half a human yet, seeing yer just five years old," said Josiah, "but I'm expecting you to understand something important, so perk up yer ears and listen carefully."

Using the sleeve of her blanket wrap, Mary dried her runny nose.

"Emma is *mine*," Josiah said firmly, "and I ain't too eager to share her with anyone." The Hawken shifted to his hands, and for a moment, Mary looked frightened. Her dark eyes blinked at him questioningly, before he realized he was scaring her, and lowered the weapon. "Even though I don't have to, I'm willing to share Emma with you. But not when my arm is about her. You understand my drift?"

Mary sniffed, most likely to keep her nose from running.

"Are you getting any of this?" asked Josiah, wondering how much the little girl understood. "When my arm is around Emma, you keep yer distance."

Mary's head somberly nodded "yes."

"Let me hear you say it," said Josiah.

"I'll keep my distance."

He eyed the child skeptically. "Don't just repeat me. Tell me you understand."

"I understand."

"If my arm isn't there, then she's yours. That's fair, ain't it?"

Mary didn't respond.

"Ain't it?" Josiah scowled at Mary. "Yer supposed to say 'yes.'"

"Yes," Mary said promptly.

Stooping to pick up the heavy bucket, a thought flashed through Josiah's mind that it wouldn't be good if Mary looked as though he had just frightened her. Not in front of Emma. "When we go hunting," he said with a lighter tone in his voice, "would you like a weapon of yer own? I got a pistol you can carry."

Mary's face immediately brightened.

By the time Josiah and Mary returned with a full water bucket, Emma was getting a little concerned. It usually didn't take this long to simply fetch water, and she worried that perhaps

something had gone wrong. What that could be, she had no idea, but Emma wasn't at ease with the idea of Josiah being solely responsible for little Mary.

As Josiah and Mary took off their coat and blanket, Emma tried to dissuade herself of any fears. Mary was bright and smiling, and so was Emma... right up until she heard Mary say Josiah was giving her his pistol.

"I ain't exactly *giving* it to you," Josiah told the girl, "I'm just letting you hold it while we hunt."

Emma shook her head emphatically. "Firearms don't belong in the hands of children."

Josiah opened his mouth to speak, but Emma interrupted him.

"I don't care what your pa let you get away with," said Emma, "my concern is with Mary. She's much too young for a loaded pistol."

Josiah slanted Emma an exasperated glance before planting himself at the table for breakfast. "I never said anything about it being loaded."

"But, I thought..." Emma sighed patiently. "I suppose I didn't give you much of a chance to explain, did I?"

"I'll be glad when that cycle of yours gits going," he said, tearing off a mouthful of dried meat before taking a large gulp from the one cup of water they all shared. "This sure is hard on a man."

Emma smiled at him apologetically, and he grinned back.

After breakfast, while Josiah cleaned and readied their two rifles, the girls read a Bible story and then Emma reviewed Mary's ABCs. Mary was up to the letter "E," and Emma didn't want to lose the progress they had made in the last few days.

Then it was time to bundle up, and Emma made sure Mary had on more than one blanket, for they would be out for a prolonged time. Emma strapped on her snowshoes and then climbed into Josiah's heavy capote. She pulled up its large hood, and then picked up her pa's shotgun.

Grabbing enough jerky to feed everyone for the day, Josiah placed the food in a large buffalo hide that would keep them warm, should they need to take shelter against the snow. Tossing in his tin cup, Josiah bound the hide with sinew rope, and then swung the leather package over his shoulder.

By the time everyone was outside, they looked like a clan of fur bearing mountain dwellers. Emma wondered what her parents would have said, had they been there to observe her new family. Up front, dressed in his shaggy bearskin, Josiah trudged across the snow, his Hawken ever at the ready. Behind him plodded Emma, keeping careful watch as Mary kept pace at her side. In the sash tied about Mary's waist, Josiah had tucked his unloaded pistol. They left trails of vapor that vanished in the winter air, and three sets of footprints that wouldn't be erased until the next snowfall. All in all, Emma felt they were a strange sight to behold.

Josiah led them down the mountainside, until the valley below opened up like a large amphitheater, white and ghostly to Emma's poor eyesight. The valley floor was surrounded by rugged foothills and scattered with trees, rocks and wide open spaces. Hollowtop Mountain reigned over all, its flattened crown clearly visible for miles around. Emma felt vulnerable being so out in the open after the close confines of the cabin, but tried not to let it show.

"Wish I had me a horse," Josiah said longingly, his sharp eyes piercing the trackless horizon before them. "I'd scout out the elk."

A sharp chill went through Emma's frame. Tugging the sash about her capote, she made sure her coat was completely closed. The haunting sounds of a prowling wolf caused another chill through Emma, and she suddenly realized it wasn't the cold that was making her uncomfortable. She clutched her rifle, and Josiah flashed her a knowing grin.

"Cabin life has been spoiling you," he said with a laugh.

Emma smiled grimly. She remembered life with Josiah before they arrived at the lodge, and knew he was probably right. Life hadn't been easy, but it was certainly safer behind four solid walls. Another howl filled the mountains, until other wolves joined in, and soon, a full chorus pervaded the air. Emma listened to the wilderness song, until the last howl faded in the wind, leaving her to silently marvel at their wild, untamed beauty.

Cupping a hand to his mouth, Josiah cut loose with a wolf howl of his own. To Emma's surprise, his call was answered with a solitary cry.

Josiah breathed in the sharp air. "We'd best keep moving."

With every step, Emma felt her strength slowly evaporate. Her empty stomach growled from hunger, and she found herself wondering how much further she could walk. She kept putting one foot in front of the other, until she was perspiring heavily.

Struggling to catch up to Josiah, Emma panted hard before she spoke. "I'm afraid I'm getting wet from perspiration."

Josiah came to a complete halt, his face gravely serious. "Why didn't you tell me, sooner?"

"I wasn't aware of it until now."

Josiah quickly scanned the valley, and then pointed his chin to a cluster of rocks and trees. "We'll take shelter there."

When they arrived at the trees, Josiah made a lean-to, and then ordered Emma inside to dry off. After shedding her snowshoes and garments, Emma put back on the capote so she wouldn't freeze while her body cooled down. Mary crawled inside, looking almost as energetic as Josiah. Emma groaned within herself. Didn't they ever get tired?

Outside one end of the lean-to, Josiah found a dry place to sit down and keep watch. His Hawken rested in the crook of his arm, and his eyes kept alert to any signs of danger. "You doing all right in there, Emma?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Yes, thank you."

"I'm thinking now's a good time fer some lunch." A large hand reached inside to tap Emma's shoulder, and then pass her some dried buffalo.

"I'm not hungry," Emma said, giving her share of the food to Mary.

"Give it back to her, Mary." Concern sounded in Josiah's voice. "You hardly touched breakfast, Emma. You need to eat."

"I don't think I can keep down any food, Josiah."

"You said you'd eat more today, remember? Yer eating that jerky, Emma."

"I can't!"

"Yes, you are, if I have to shove it down yer gullet."

Shocked by Josiah's forceful words, Emma gazed at him numbly.

Taking off his fur cap, Josiah thrust it onto the ground with a loud sigh. He looked up at Emma, and she could see the worry in his eyes. "Emma, if you don't eat, you won't have any strength. You *must* eat."

Nodding, Emma accepted the jerky from Mary. Her teeth clamped down on the hard food, and she tore off a small bite. Almost at once, Emma felt her stomach turn. She struggled to swallow. The nausea becoming too much, Emma scrambled to her feet, brushing past Josiah on her way out. Emma fell to her knees beside some rocks, and vomited.

When it was over, two strong arms lifted her upright in the snow, and then guided her back to the lean-to.

"Mary, move over so yer ma can lay down," said Josiah, as the small girl hurried to obey.

Emma smiled weakly, embarrassed to have created such a scene. She declined to lay down, but let Mary snuggle beside her to keep them both warm. "I feel a little better now. I think I can eat."

Looking uncertain, Josiah passed Emma more jerky, and she managed to eat it without running back outside to the rocks.

"We never should've left," Josiah shook his head reproachfully. "You don't have the strength to go hunting."

Emma summoned her courage. "I'm fine. I want to keep going."

Josiah searched her face, until Emma thought he was staring so hard, he could see right through her to the other side of the lean-to. "No, I'm going to find us a place to make camp fer the night. If you can keep eating, and feel better in the morning, we'll continue our hunt." When Emma was about to protest, Josiah held up a silencing hand. "I don't want to take anymore chances with you, Emma. Yer a white woman, and you ain't as used to these mountains as we are."

Indignant, Emma looked at him defiantly. "I'm as hardy as any Indian."

Josiah harrumphed. "I know yer a strong woman, but even *you* have yer limits. We stay fer the night."

Even though she hated to admit it, Emma was glad for the rest. She felt strangely weak, but it wasn't to be surprised, for she had eaten very little yesterday and today.

As Emma put on her deerskin dress, Josiah checked her shotgun once more before handing it back to her.

"I'm just going a little ways from here, to find a place better suited for a campsite. Keep watch fer animals that venture too close, and don't leave this lean-to until yer completely dry."

"I won't," said Emma.

Opening the buffalo hide with their provisions, Josiah gave their supply of jerky to Emma, and then swung the empty carcass over his shoulder. Lifting his rifle, Josiah walked off, the sound of snow crunching beneath his snowshoes as he gradually faded into the distance. Emma took out a little of the buffalo jerky. She didn't really feel like eating, but wanted to gain back her strength as soon as possible.

Sitting cross-legged on the pine needle floor of the lean-to, Mary pulled out Josiah's pistol. She curiously turned it about in her hands, fingering the metal and wooden piece as though she had never before seen such a thing in her life.

"Be careful with that," said Emma.

Mary grinned. "It ain't loaded, Ma."

"Please, don't say 'ain't.' I know it isn't loaded, but seeing you with that pistol makes me nervous."

Mary stared at the weapon awhile longer before returning it to her belt. With a yawn, the child rested her head on Emma's lap to take a small nap, for there wasn't much else to do but wait and sleep. Resisting the desire to rest her eyes, Emma kept watch, keeping her shotgun close at her side in case of trouble.

Before long, Emma heard Josiah's snowshoes, and then she saw him drop to his knees by the lean-to's entrance.

"I made us a shelter for the night," he said, his eyes traveling to the napping child on Emma's lap. "It's beside some foothills and a mountain spring that ain't froze over. You feel up to moving?"

"I'm ready," said Emma.

Josiah's deep voice stirred Mary, and before long, Emma and Mary were outside, following Josiah to their new temporary quarters.

Beside the recess of a steep foothill, Josiah had made a sturdy dome-shaped framework of branches. It was covered with his buffalo hide to keep out the weather, and boughs of pine needles lined the edges where the skin didn't meet the ground. In the center of the lodge, the skin wrapped around a curious hole. When Emma crawled into the cozy structure, she found a pile of firewood in the center, and understood the hole in the ceiling was for smoke to escape.

Taking flint and steel, Josiah expertly lit a fire. As warmth enveloped Emma, she felt comfortable enough to take off her capote. Following Emma's example, Mary shed her blankets, and then settled on the pine needle floor beside Emma.

"This is very nice, Josiah," Emma said with an admiring smile. "You certainly know how to make yourself at home in this wilderness."

Pleased, Josiah grinned. "I should, I've lived here all my life. Keep the fire going. I'm headed back out to see if I can't find us something fer supper. Reckon fresh meat will sit easier in yer stomach than hard jerky."

"Can I come with you?" Mary looked at Josiah pleadingly.

Hesitant, Josiah turned to Emma for approval. "What do you say, Emma? I want you staying here to rest, so Mary would come alone with me."

Emma looked at Mary. She was mildly surprised when Mary didn't seem discouraged at the prospect of being by herself with Josiah.

"Don't worry, Emma, I'll take good care of her. I'll even treat her like my own daughter." It was a wry attempt at humor, though Josiah didn't smile when he spoke.

The hint of bitterness in his voice reminded Emma he still resented Mary's presence.

"No, I want her to stay," Emma said finally.

"But, Ma--"

"No buts," Emma told the girl. "You're staying here with me. We'll go hunting, tomorrow. I'm sorry, Josiah, but you'll have to go alone for now."

Josiah studied Emma's expression, as if trying to read her thoughts. "I'd never hurt her, Emma."

"I know, I'd just feel more comfortable, if I came with Mary."

Sighing heavily, Josiah nodded in acquiescence. "Yer going to have to trust me more than this, Emma." Picking up his Hawken, he crawled headfirst from the lodge.

When the sound of his snowshoes disappeared, Emma snapped a long branch, tossing both halves into the fire. Flames crackled as smoke rose up through the vent hole in the low ceiling. Emma turned her gaze on Mary, and recognized the look of disappointment on her small face.

"If I'd known we would be away for the night, I would've brought one of your dolls," said Emma.

Mary nodded, but remained quiet.

Emma was thoughtfully silent. She wished Mary could've gone with Josiah. While trying to think of something to say by way of an explanation, Mary crawled to Emma's side and then rested her head against Emma's shoulder.

"Are you cold?" asked Emma, lifting her arm to let Mary cuddle against her for warmth.

Mary looked up at Emma smilingly. "This lodge is warmer than our cabin."

"Yes," laughed Emma, "I'm afraid it is. When the wind is strong, a lot of heat gets sucked up that stone chimney of ours. If it ever gets any colder, maybe we could ask your pa to build another of these shelters."

Mary giggled softly.

Through the small open doorway, Emma saw the ground darken as clouds covered the sun. Before long, it began to snow.

Daylight was waxing dim by the time Emma heard the tramp, tramp of Josiah's snowshoes. She saw his feet first, and then a snow-dusted fox skin cap as he crawled through the snug doorway.

"I snared us a grouse," he said, flopping the dead bird onto the pine needles. Sitting cross-legged, Josiah pulled off his heavy coat. "Snow's coming down hard." He rubbed his reddened hands above the flames, drawing them back when the heat became too much.

As Emma took a knife to begin dressing the grouse, Josiah stuffed his coat into the doorway to keep as much heat inside as possible.

"Is yer back still sore?" asked Josiah, returning to the flames to finish thawing his frozen limbs.

Emma looked at him a little sheepishly. Her back had been hurting all day, though she hadn't wanted to say anything. She had already caused enough trouble to Josiah's hunting party, as it was.

"I thought so," he said knowingly.

While Emma readied supper, Josiah took two stones to pound some roots he had gathered. After grinding the roots, Josiah pulled out the tin cup he had packed with their provisions. Momentarily opening the door, he filled the cup with snow, and then carefully melted the snow over the fire. When the water was hot, Josiah dumped in the roots, and then handed the cup to Emma.

"Drink it, it'll help yer pain."

The thought briefly occurred to Emma to ask what it was, but her back was hurting enough to be grateful for even a questionable remedy. She took a small sip, and then another, enjoying the warmth it gave her body.

"It's Blackfoot medicine," said Josiah. "I learned it from my ma."

Emma smiled at him thankfully.

"Let me finish dressing that there bird," said Josiah, pulling the knife from Emma's hand so she could finish her tea. He looked at Emma and then at Mary. "You both staying warm?"

"This is a good lodge," said Emma, taking another sip of root tea. "We've been very comfortable."

"That's good. Maybe tomorrow, I can show Mary how to use that pistol." His knife stopped to check Emma's reaction. "It's good for her to know how to defend herself, Emma. From now on, I'm thinking that pistol should be with Mary every time she steps outside. It's different when yer living among others, for they can look after children. But since there's only the three of us, everyone should carry a weapon. Even Mary."

"Did your pa give you a loaded weapon when you were Mary's age?" asked Emma.

"When I was Mary's age," said Josiah, cutting away at the bird, "there weren't much need. My pa's trapper friends looked after me, and when I grew about a foot taller, I had my first rifle. Shot at anything that would hold still," he chuckled.

Emma sighed. "But, Mary's so young."

Spearing the grouse on a spit, Josiah held it over the fire to begin cooking. "I'll teach her what she needs to know." His eyes lifted to Emma, and he remained silent for a moment, as if thinking things over. "I don't want Mary getting carried off by a wild animal, and this is the best way I know to keep her safe."

Slowly taking another sip of tea, Emma thought over what Josiah had just said. "All right," she said finally, "but she must learn how to use the pistol responsibly."

Josiah nodded readily. "Agreed." He turned the spit, letting the heat evenly cook the bird. "Thanks, Emma."

At first, Emma was puzzled why he should thank her, and then she remembered his comment about trusting him more. Finishing off the last of her tea, Emma watched as Josiah tried not to return her gaze. When he finally chanced a look, she smiled at him warmly.

Josiah sighed contentedly. "Pure sunshine."

The lodge filled with the smell of cooked meat, and Josiah cut off a healthy portion for Emma.

"I want you eating everything I give you," he told Emma seriously. "I even caught fresh meat to make sure you'd keep it down."

"I'll do my best," smiled Emma, feeling his admonition unnecessary. The grouse smelled delicious, and as she ate, her stomach didn't rebel. Josiah kept handing Emma more, even giving her some of his own food, until Emma begged him to stop. Her stomach was full, and she couldn't hold another bite.

After stoking the fire for bedtime, Josiah curled into a fetal position on his side, for there wasn't enough room to stretch out his long legs. Crawling to Josiah, Emma got into a similar position, until they fit together like two spoons laying on their sides.

"Come, Mary," said Emma, beckoning the child to lay down in front of her to keep warm.

Mary didn't budge, but sat on the other side of the lodge, staring at Josiah's arm. It was around Emma.

Josiah's arm moved, and Mary scrambled to join Emma.

Sandwiched between Josiah and Mary, Emma covered everyone with Mary's two blankets. After making a few adjustments to get comfortable, Emma kissed the top of Mary's head goodnight.

"What about me?" asked Josiah.

"I'm not messing up everyone, just to turn around and give you a kiss," Emma laughed softly. Reaching for Josiah's hand, she tenderly pressed her goodnight kiss into his palm.

When morning came, Josiah stirred to find Emma awake. Propping himself up on one elbow, he leaned forward to see her face.

"How's yer back?" he asked.

With a small whimper, Emma's voice struggled to sound hopeful. "The tea helped me sleep, but I'm afraid the pain's returned with a vengeance."

"Yer probably just stiff," said Josiah, for their small quarters restricted movement. He shifted one leg, and found his own muscles painfully tight. "Tell Mary to get up so we can start moving."

The girl yawned at Emma's gentle coaxing, but it wasn't fast enough for Josiah. Reaching over Emma, he shook Mary by the shoulder.

"Please," asked Emma, "not so rough."

"I ain't waiting any longer, Mary. Get on yer hands and knees and move over."

Still dazed with sleep, Mary did as she was told without complaint.

Josiah helped Emma to sit up, her face wincing as she straightened her sore back.

"Do you feel any stronger?" asked Josiah.

"I don't know yet," Emma shook her head wearily. "I was hoping this sore back would go away."

"It'll feel better once you start walking," said Josiah.

After Emma scooted over, Josiah crawled to the coat-stuffed doorway to go outside and stretch his limbs. As he removed his coat from the door, he was greeted by a wall of snow. "We're snowed-in," he told the girls.

Smiling, Mary quickly crawled over to see for herself.

Digging into the snow with his hands, Josiah soon found daylight. Sunlight poured into the entrance hole as Josiah came back to help Emma and Mary leave their makeshift shelter.

After finishing the last of the jerky, they gathered their weapons, blankets, coats and snowshoes, and then climbed up through the deep snow into the morning sunlight. When Emma had some trouble bending to tie her snowshoes, Josiah knelt down to strap them on for her.

After knocking away the snow atop their shelter, Josiah pulled off the buffalo hide that had kept them warm. Wrapping the heavy skin around their tin cup, he made sure his Hawken was primed and ready.

With Josiah in the lead, Emma and Mary followed behind. Every so often, Josiah turned to look at Emma, to make sure he wasn't going too fast for her to keep up. Even though she didn't say it, Josiah knew she was still weak.

"I'll be all right," Emma said, as if able to read his mind.

"This ain't no women's cycle, Emma."

"I know."

Josiah was silent. He slackened his pace to let Emma catch up to his side. He glanced at her and saw she was busy thinking.

"Reckon yer sore back will go away in nine months?" he asked. When Emma didn't look surprised, he knew she had been thinking the same thing.

Emma bit her lip. "I suppose you think I'm foolish to not know any sooner than this."

Josiah laughed, his breath sending warm contrails into the air. "You ain't a fool, Emma. You've got more book learning than any woman I know. Reckon they don't come any smarter." When Emma didn't look as though she believed him, Josiah didn't press it any further.

"Have you ever helped in a birthing?" asked Emma.

"More than one foal was helped into the world with these hands," he grinned confidently. "There ain't much to it, Emma."

Emma gave one of his harrumphs, but didn't comment.

Just then, Mary hurried to Josiah's side. "You promised to show me how to fire the pistol."

"I ain't going back on a promise," nodded Josiah.

"But," Mary looked in the direction they were headed, "we are going back to the lodge."

Giving Mary a small grin of approval, Josiah came to a stop. He pulled the pistol from Mary's sash. "Mind if we stop fer a spell?" he asked Emma. "I *did* promise her to go hunting."

"You were taking us home?" Emma asked in surprise.

Josiah winked at Mary. "White women," he chuckled. "Don't know up from down. I bet she couldn't find her way to the cabin, if her life depended on it."

"I could," Emma said a little defensively.

Realizing he had bruised Emma's feelings, Josiah backed off.

While Josiah showed Mary how to load the pistol, Emma went to sit beside some trees, to keep out of the wind. The girl was too small to follow the complexity of loading the firearm, so Josiah instead concentrated on showing her how to aim.

Squatting down to get on Mary's level, Josiah pointed the loaded pistol straight ahead. Placing Mary's small hands on the pistol's grip, Josiah let Mary hold the weapon. The girl looked nervous, though a bit excited, and she kept looking to him for reassurance.

"Keep both eyes open, and aim it at your target," said Josiah.

Mary looked about for a likely target, at last choosing the bottom limb of a nearby tree.

"When yer ready, set the cock, and then squeeze the trigger." Josiah watched as Mary tried to squeeze the trigger, but her small hands didn't have the needed strength. Just when he thought she couldn't do it, the gun exploded in a burst of white smoke and Mary squealed with delight.

"Well, well," chuckled Josiah, "you even hit yer target!" Josiah turned to the trees where Emma had been sitting, in the hopes she had been watching.

But Emma wasn't there.

Although blurry to Emma's eyesight, she knew it was an eagle. She had heard that call before, and now followed it in the hopes of obtaining a feather. The bird glided high above Emma until it came to rest on a tall fir tree. Emma didn't know what she expected it to do, and felt a little silly for even following it this far. Just then, Emma heard the explosion of a gun firing, and the bird flew off in alarm. As the eagle made its escape, a single feather floated to the ground, landing nearly at Emma's feet.

But Emma was too startled to pick up her trophy. Had that gunfire been Mary shooting Josiah's pistol? Or was there trouble nearby? Anxiously, Emma grabbed the eagle feather, and then started back for the tree she had been resting under. She wasn't sure what time of day it was, for the sun was hidden behind a thick screen of white clouds. Emma shuddered. It looked about to snow.

Hurrying across the deep snow as fast as she could, Emma paused to check her surroundings. Where was Josiah and Mary? Hadn't she left them just a few steps away? Surely, she couldn't have gone far following the eagle. Emma squinted, trying to recognize the terrain. All she could see were trees and snow, and to her horror, they all looked alike.

"Calm down," Emma said to herself. "Follow your tracks. Just follow your tracks back to Josiah."

Emma turned about, retracing her snowshoes' tracks back to the tree where she had left the eagle. The sky grew whiter, until snow filled the air. Panicking, Emma struggled to find her tracks before the snow covered her trail. The wind grew steadily worse, and suddenly, Emma couldn't see the ground in front of her.

Blindly feeling her way through the blizzard, Emma finally found refuge beside a tree, and huddled against its trunk for shelter.

"God, please help me," Emma prayed into the air. She pulled the hood over her face as far as it would go, and then hunched down on her snowshoes to keep warm. The icy wind cut through Emma like a knife, and she struggled to retain her body warmth. Emma cupped her hands to her mouth. "Josiah! Josiah!" Her call was swallowed by the wind, and Emma decided to save her strength. She was already feeling a little drained, and it wouldn't do any good to wear herself out when no one could hear her calls.

The blizzard began just as Josiah started to look for Emma, and the heavy snow forced him to return to Mary. They crouched beneath the buffalo hide to wait out the storm, and watch the steadily increasing snowfall.

Mary looked frightened, but Josiah knew it wasn't for herself.

"She'll make it all right, you just see," he said with a confident nod of his head.

The girl didn't respond, but tried to huddle against Josiah for warmth. At first, Josiah edged away from Mary, but when he saw how cold she was becoming, the mountain man let her get closer.

"Emma won't go far," said Josiah. "She'll keep her wits, and wait out the storm, just like us. Then I'll go looking fer her."

Mary blinked at him. She didn't look fooled by his brave words. "The snow is covering her tracks, Pa."

Mary's astute observation surprised Josiah, but not because he hadn't already thought of that. This little girl was smart. Smarter than he had given her credit.

"I'm knowing about the snow, but I can find her anyway," he said, sounding more confident than he was feeling.

Mary stared at him uncertainly, tears pooling in her dark eyes. "I will pray," she said with a whimper.

Josiah harrumphed, but let Mary do as she wanted. God wasn't there, and if He was, He sure didn't care about Josiah Brown or anyone else. Why, with Josiah's bad luck, Emma would be found next spring, a lifeless thawing carcass, still clinging to some tree or rock for safety. The thought angered Josiah, and he heard his clenched teeth grind. He let himself love Emma, and now God was trying to take her from him.

"I ain't letting Him get away with it," Josiah said beneath his breath.

Mary looked at him questioningly.

"The moment this blizzard let's up," said Josiah, "I'm leaving you with a loaded pistol and this here buffalo hide. You just keep yerself wrapped in the hide, and wait fer me and Emma."

Mary's eyes grew wide. "You will come back for me?"

Indignant that she should even ask such a question, Josiah snarled angrily. "Yer my flesh and blood ain't you? I won't leave you to die."

Biting down on her bottom lip, Mary quivered as she moved closer.

Feeling some remorse for growling at the child, Josiah put his arm about her. Mary softly cried against his chest, and Josiah patted her shoulder. All he could do was wait for the snow to let up.

Huddled by her tree, Emma remembered today was Sunday. Needing something to calm the terror she felt tugging at her heart, Emma began singing a hymn about Jesus.

"His name yields the richest perfume, and sweeter than music His voice; His presence disperses my gloom, and makes all within me rejoice." Emma paused to listen, but could only hear the wind gusting about her capote. "I should, were He always thus nigh, have nothing to wish or to fear; No mortal so happy as I, my summer would last all the year."

Emma stopped. She thought she heard something, but couldn't make it out over the wind.

"Josiah!" Emma shouted as loudly as she could.

The hauntingly familiar noise came again, and Emma anxiously looked about to see where it was coming from. This time, she knew what it was. Gripping her shotgun, Emma squinted through the blizzard. When the howl sounded again, Emma prayed the wolf wouldn't find her. Surely, no creature would be out in this storm.

With a startled cry, Emma saw a large form coming toward her through the heavy snowfall.

Josiah waited impatiently, while Mary continued to pray at his side.

"Bring Ma back to us, Jesus. Make her come."

"Ma would do better to stay where she was, and wait fer me," said Josiah. "Stupid woman."

Mary stared at Josiah indignantly. "My ma ain't stupid!"

"When it comes to things from books, I'm sure she ain't, but when it comes to keeping herself alive in these mountains..." Josiah's voice trailed off, unwilling to follow through with his accusation. "Yer right, she ain't stupid."

The snow finally let up, and Josiah climbed out from under the buffalo hide. While Mary looked at him bravely, he bundled the child into the warm skin, and then loaded her pistol. Handing it to Mary, her small dark eyes locked with his.

"I'll be back fer you," he said reassuringly. "I give you my word."

Mary nodded soberly.

Casting one last glance at the small bundle waiting for his return, Josiah started off in search of his wife.

Emma froze. The form moved toward her with a steady even step, and then stopped just a few feet from where she sat crouched against the tree. When the figure took another step forward, Emma cocked back one of the hammers on her shotgun, bringing it around so the large form could see she was armed.

The figure stopped again, as if to consider the situation.

By the size of the individual, Emma guessed it was a man, though he was so completely covered in fur hides and animal skins that she couldn't tell if he was an Indian or a white man.

His hand came up, pulling down the muff of furs keeping his nose and mouth warm. From the man's chiseled features, Emma knew he was an Indian. Maybe even a Blackfoot. The man stared at her for a long time, and then cast his eyes about, as though trying to ascertain whether she were alone. As the snow let up, the man took another cautious step toward Emma. He held a rifle, though for some reason he didn't aim it in her direction. Perhaps he didn't think she would really shoot him.

Standing to her full height, Emma brought up her shotgun, leveling it at the Indian's chest. To her amazement, he didn't seem very intimidated. Instead, he gave her an appraising gaze that would have gotten him into trouble, had Josiah been there.

"Please, go away," said Emma. She didn't even want to try to ask this man for help-- not from the way he was staring at her.

The man's eyes narrowed. "You have man?" he asked in halting English.

"Yes, yes I do," said Emma. "I expect he'll be along any moment, looking for me, so you'd better go."

The man grinned disbelievingly, but took a step back. Then something caught his attention, and he touched one of his two long black braids. He pointed to Emma. "Hair," he said, as though struggling for the word he wanted.

"Please, go," Emma fought to keep her voice from betraying any fear.

"Hair," said the man, gazing at Emma in wonderment. He touched his braid, and then pointed to her head.

Emma sighed. He had noticed her blonde hair, peeking out from under the hood of Josiah's capote.

In his fascination, he moved toward Emma.

Emma cocked the second hammer on her shotgun. "If you take another step, I'll let you have both barrels."

The man stopped. He didn't look pleased by her threat, but refused to step away from her.

"Five horses, two wives," he said proudly. He flexed his arm, and Emma saw his animal skins bulge with muscle. "Good hunter. Women never hungry. Take many scalps." He opened his furs, revealing leather leggings trimmed down the sides with tassels of human hair. "Very brave," he thumbed his chest with a grin. "You come."

Emma swallowed hard. This man wanted her for his wife! "I already have a husband, so please go, and leave me alone!"

The man frowned, and looked about Emma. "Where husband?" he asked.

"I don't know, but he's nearby." Emma prayed it was true.

Just then, another form stepped toward them through the lightly falling snow. The Indian turned, lifting his rifle into a ready position.

"Emma?" Josiah's voice boomed across the distance between them. "Git yerself over here, Emma."

The man looked ready to stop Emma, but when he stepped a few paces back, Emma guessed he wasn't ready to fight Josiah.

"Husband?" the man asked her disappointedly.

"Yes," Emma nodded, edging past him before running to Josiah.

Josiah roughly shoved Emma behind him. "Stay put," he told her. Training his Hawken on the stranger, Emma saw Josiah's face harden with resolve.

Looking defeated, the Indian gestured to Josiah in sign language before stepping away. He turned to look at Emma one more time before his form disappeared against the snowy horizon.

Heaving a deep sigh, Josiah's eyes remained on the horizon, as though not trusting the man to come back. "Did he hurt you?" he asked.

"No," the tension in Emma's limbs left her feeling weak. "He wanted me for his wife."

Turning to face her, Josiah angrily spat at the ground before speaking. "Why did you wander off like that? The snow covered yer tracks, Emma. It was only sheer luck I found you when I did."

"I'm sorry," Emma felt something hot splash against her cheek.

"Emma, I could've lost you."

"I'm sorry." It sounded weak, but it was the only thing Emma could think of to say. She began to weep, but Josiah remained where he was.

"Go ahead and cry, fer all the good it'll do you." Josiah turned his back to Emma, and she saw his shoulders drop. "Are you hurt?" he asked, as if needing to hear her assurance one more time. Emma couldn't see his face, but she could see the gentleness creep back into his posture.

"I don't think so," said Emma, "but I'm frozen with cold."

Not meeting her eyes, Josiah turned to tightly wrap his arms about his wife. "Don't ever scare me like that again, Emma."

"I'm sorry, Josiah."

"You got the baby to think of," Josiah said reproachfully. He tilted back Emma's chin until they were eye to eye. Without another word, he kissed her, and then hugged her so hard Emma's snowshoes lifted from off the ground.

Dangling from Josiah's safe arms, Emma let herself cry. Then, kissing her cheek, Josiah set her feet back on the ground.

"Don't leave my side, Emma."

"I won't," she said with a sniff. "Where's Mary?"

Shaking his head at Emma, Josiah took the lead with his Hawken. "I left her back with the buffalo robe and a loaded pistol. Reckon we'd best announce ourselves before we get into her range."

As the words left Josiah's mouth, they heard the explosion of a gun in the distance.

Emma gasped in alarm. "Mary!"

It was awkward to run in snowshoes, but Josiah's sturdy legs served him well, and he hurried across the snow. Emma struggled in vain to keep up, her strength lagging against the strain of the morning. When Josiah turned and saw her falling so far behind, he stopped in his tracks.

"Go, go help Mary!" Emma said frantically.

Josiah's jaw tightened. "I ain't leaving you!" In spite of his own words, he turned and continued to hurry in Mary's direction. Before long, Josiah was out of Emma's sight.

Josiah cursed himself for leaving Emma behind. He had promised Mary to not leave her to die, and the memory of his word kept moving him forward.

As he neared the place where he had left Mary, Josiah heard the low moan of a wounded man. Then he saw the same Indian he had just warned off from Emma, kneeling in the snow, cradling a bleeding arm. His rifle lay beside him, untouched.

Josiah's sudden presence startled the wounded Indian, though the Indian made no attempt to go for his rifle.

Disregarding the injured man, Josiah ran to Mary's tree, pulling back the heavy buffalo robe to reveal a frightened little girl.

"You came back!" Mary cried happily, her small arms quickly wrapping about Josiah's neck.

Lifting Mary into his arms, Josiah turned to the man in the snow. He didn't look badly hurt, although his wound needed tending.

"Daughter?" the Indian asked Josiah.

Josiah nodded "yes," and the man laughed without smiling.

"Yer luck ain't too good," said Josiah. Mary was still clinging to his neck, so Josiah let the girl remain where she was. Shifting the child onto one arm, Josiah pointed his Hawken at the man's wounded shoulder. "I got to fetch my wife. Keep pressure to the wound, and when I git back, I'll bind it up fer you."

The Indian made no protest, though he was already applying pressure to his wound.

With Mary still in his arms, Josiah retraced his steps until he saw Emma struggling along in her snowshoes. Mary clamored to get down, and Josiah let the child run into Emma's outstretched arms.

"Are you all right?" Emma checked the girl over, asking questions so quickly Mary didn't have a chance to answer. "What happened? Did you fire that shot?"

"Yer admirer paid Mary a visit," Josiah said, as Emma continued to hug and kiss Mary. "Reckon he thought he had another pair of hands to do the work in his lodge."

Mary beamed up at Emma. "I prayed to Jesus that He would bring you back."

Emma touched the girl's head before enveloping her with another hug. "He answered you, Little One."

Getting free of Emma's embrace, Mary beamed at Josiah. "He came back for me, Ma! He came back!"

Josiah scowled at the girl's joy. "I said I would, didn't I? Speaking of gitting back, I promised yer ma's admirer I would bind up his arm. Reckon we best get going, afore he thinks I was lying."

"I wish you'd stop calling him my admirer," said Emma.

Chuckling, Josiah picked up Mary to make quicker progress. Mary was smiling ear to ear, and Josiah couldn't help but feel some pride. His little girl had defended herself against a full grown man, and won.

When they reached the place where the Indian was supposed to be waiting, Josiah found only a red stain in the snow, and tracks that headed off toward his people.

"Was he a Blackfoot?" asked Emma, retrieving their buffalo robe while Josiah reloaded Mary's pistol.

Josiah shook his head. "No, Shoshone. I reckon he'll think twice, before tangling with Josiah Brown's women again!" He flashed Emma and Mary a proud grin. His smile vanished, however, when he saw Emma lean against a tree to steady herself. "If you ever stray off again, Emma..." he hesitated, stopping short of his threat. Going to her side, Josiah gave her another hug. "Whatever possessed you to wander off like that?"

Retrieving something from inside her capote, Emma placed an eagle feather into his hand. "You said you'd wear me in your hair, remember?"

Something warm and tender tugged at Josiah's insides, as he hung Emma's eagle feather in his long mane. His pride warned him that Emma was laying claim to him as her personal property. But Josiah didn't mind. As long as he kept Emma in her place, so that she never forgot that *he* was the one who owned *her*, Josiah didn't mind Emma's feather at all. In fact, he was rather proud of it.

With a brand new eagle feather dangling from his hair, Josiah moved his family up the mountain a little ways, before stopping to rest for Emma's sake. When she was ready, Josiah took Emma and Mary home to their small cabin, away from hunting Shoshone Indians, and the rest of the world.

"Let all the earth fear the LORD: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him."

~ Psalm 33:8 ~

For He will "turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

~ Luke 1:17 ~

Chapter Nine
A Trapped Bear

1837, Southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"He addeth rebellion unto his sin."

~ Job 34:37 ~

The days following their chance meeting with the Shoshone hunter, Josiah enjoyed his family for the first time. There were no big revelations, but just the general sense that he possessed something of value. Mary was a smart child, and no wilting wildflower when it came to danger. Josiah felt pride that she was his daughter. And Emma-- even the Shoshone had wanted her for his wife. What man in his right senses wouldn't? He and Emma were even expecting a child of their own. Yes, Josiah figured he had it pretty good.

A week later, Josiah lazily rested on the buffalo robes, listening to Emma as she read from the Bible to Mary. Careful to keep his eyes shut so as to appear asleep, Josiah mulled over the words Emma read out loud: "Whoso committeth adultery with a woman lacketh understanding: he that doeth it destroyeth his own soul." (Proverbs 6:32)

As much as Josiah tried not to, his mind wandered back to the beautiful Blackfoot woman who gave birth to Mary. The woman had been the wife of another man, but Josiah hadn't cared. Grimly, his eyes drifted to the fireplace. He remembered the woman's terror when her husband discovered them together. Only after being forced from the village, did Josiah learn of the woman's fate.

Fixing his gaze on the child seated beside Emma, Josiah felt his insides again turn to stone. Guilt lived in this cabin with him, and it came in the form of a small girl. Once more, he wished he had stopped his mother from forcing Mary onto Emma and himself. It was easier to put the past behind him, without being reminded of it on a daily basis.

As Josiah entertained these morbid thoughts, Mary looked up at him with a bright smile. Letting his disdain freely show, Josiah stared back until Mary's pretty smile disappeared.

Hanging her head with a loud, patient sigh, Mary scooted a little closer to Emma.

Josiah's conscience smarted, but only a little. It was then he noticed the cabin had gone silent, for Emma had stopped reading. He frowned as Emma stared at him in displeasure.

"Please, try to get along with her," asked Emma, in obvious disappointment. "You've been doing so much better lately."

With a curt grunt, Josiah stood to lift down his Hawken from some pegs on the wall.

"Where are you going?" asked Emma, closing the Bible.

"Hunting," came Josiah's one word reply. He had let himself think too much about Mary's mother this morning, and it was all Emma's fault for reading out of that Bible of hers.

"Will you be back for lunch?" asked Emma.

"Stop asking so many questions, Emma. I'll be back, when I'm back."

"Why are you so angry?" asked Emma.

"I ain't angry."

"You certainly sound it," said Emma, putting her Bible away.

Feeling the muscles in his jaw tighten, Josiah forced himself to ease off. "Don't wait lunch fer me. If I can't find game before sundown, I'll sleep in the valley." As Josiah placed his Hawken on the table, he heard Emma come up behind him. Two graceful arms wrapped around his chest, and he felt Emma rest her head against his back.

"Hurry home as soon as you can," she said in the gentle voice Josiah had come to love so much. "Don't stay away longer than you have to. I don't like sleeping alone, and neither do you."

Feeling a little playful, Josiah turned about in Emma's arms until they were face to face. "What are you meaning? I like having the buffalo robes all to myself."

A small knowing smile crept across Emma's lips. "Are you sure you have to go?"

"We need the food, afore we go through all our winter jerky."

Emma leaned against him, and Josiah heard her sigh wistfully. "God keep you safe, My Love."

A sense of helplessness coursed through Josiah, until he felt it encroach upon his very soul. At that moment, he would have done anything to make Emma happy. Anything. Even become a Christian. Drowning himself in her arms, Josiah kissed his wife until her embrace grew tighter.

Instead of feeling pleasure, however, Josiah felt trapped. More and more, his soul was clinging to Emma, and it disturbed him greatly.

Pushing Emma aside, he went to retrieve some jerky for his trip.

"Are you sure you're not angry?" asked Emma.

"Stop hovering over me like a mother hen, Emma! I said wasn't angry, so let me be before I change my mind." Josiah bundled some things into a heavy buffalo robe, and then bound it with sinew. To his annoyance, Mary came to watch him pack, keeping him in a disagreeable mood.

Josiah felt hedged in on every side, and needed some escape.

After receiving a long goodbye kiss from Emma, Josiah headed outside, glad for the freedom. Let the women have the lodge, *he* would have the mountains!

In Josiah's haste to get away from Emma and Mary, he could find no soft spot in his heart to be anything but glad that he was out on his own again. Even though it was only to go hunting, he wouldn't have to endure hearing another word about adultery, and how he was such a bad man. There would be no little girl with eyes so much like her mother's, and no guilt to continually fight against. Here, he could do as he pleased.

Instead of immediately going hunting, Josiah enjoyed the solitude of the wilderness and rested himself by the shelter of some trees. He already intended not to find any game today, and was making plans to stay out all night. Tomorrow, he would hunt, but today, he would do as he pleased. He would not deny himself anything.

As Josiah busied himself in his rebellion, a figure appeared in the distance. By the time Josiah noticed the man, he was already within shooting distance.

"Thought you was gone," said Josiah, immediately recognizing the Shoshone Indian from last week.

The man remained silent, his eyes fastened on Josiah's Hawken.

Gripping his rifle with a possessive hand, Josiah stood up from his resting spot. "This is Blackfoot country. They won't be none too pleased to find you here."

The man gave an assenting grunt, his face coming to life with a flicker of fear. The Shoshone and Blackfoot were enemies, and it was risky for the Shoshone to remain in these mountains for long periods of time. Josiah understood this, and from the Shoshone's expression, Josiah knew the man understood the hazard he was taking by remaining.

"No food," the Indian said in broken English. "Buffalo gone. People hungry."

Resting his Hawken in the crook of his arm, Josiah nodded with a grim smile. "I reckon the Blackfoot and Crows scared all the game away."

"Crows," said the man in disdain, for the Crows were also enemies of the Shoshone.

"Why ain't you gone to follow the buffalo?" Josiah asked curiously. "Scared of gitting caught, huh?"

The Shoshone straightened his back at Josiah's taunt, but kept quiet. Josiah could tell he was hungry, and probably hadn't eaten much in days.

When the man kept staring at Josiah's Hawken, Josiah shifted it to his other arm to enforce the message that the rifle was off limits.

"You trade?" asked the Indian.

Josiah scowled at him mockingly. "You've got nothing to trade that I want. Yer belly is as empty as yer head." He was about to walk away from the man, when the Shoshone invited him into his lodge to eat and discuss a trade. Josiah knew he wasn't likely to be fed very much, but since he was disposed to let the man entertain him for awhile, accepted the invitation.

As Josiah followed the man against the foothills of the valley, Josiah noticed the mended tear in the man's sleeve. "Is yer arm mending?" asked Josiah.

The Shoshone grunted. It was humiliating to have been wounded by a mere girl child, and Josiah knew it. That's why Josiah mentioned it with a mischievous grin, and delighted in seeing the man squirm with embarrassment.

The Shoshone's lodge was made with long poles, and covered with warm buffalo hides to keep out the cold. When Josiah stepped inside, he was met by three women, and a man who stared at him suspiciously. Josiah knew it was hard to disguise his Blackfoot heritage, and tried to act as unthreatening as he could by letting his rifle lay in his lap when he sat down.

The lodge was warm, but there was little food in sight. Josiah's host said something to one of the women, and she rather reluctantly brought forward a small portion of meat. Realizing he was being offered the last of their food, Josiah turned it down, and the men began to talk.

The second Shoshone man was the first one's friend, though from their short exchange, Josiah guessed they weren't very close friends. His host had two wives, while his friend only had one. From the tassels of human hair trimming his host's leggings, Josiah guessed this man was something of consequence among his people. The men were here to hunt, though since their horses had been stolen, it was difficult to leave and return to their village back west. The second man was only interested in finding out if Josiah knew where the buffalo were at, while the first kept turning the discussion back to Josiah's Hawken.

All the while, Josiah kept diverting his gaze to one of the women seated at the back of the lodge with the others. She wasn't much older than Emma, though by her worn features, it was plain she led a hard and difficult life. Her expression was one of curiosity, and Josiah found himself interested.

"You like woman?" asked the host.

"Who is she?"

"First wife," said the man.

Josiah stared at the woman, and an old, familiar sensation pulsed through his veins. It was the excitement of something new and different, and the prospect of a night of adventure. He could feel it in the air, and taste it in his mouth.

Upon seeing Josiah's interest, the second man hurried his wife out of the lodge, apparently not willing that his own woman come under Josiah's scrutiny. He glared at Josiah before muttering something to the other man. The two Shoshone exchanged some hard words, and the second man left for his nearby lodge.

"You trade?" asked the host, pointing to Josiah's Hawken.

"I can't give up my rifle," Josiah shook his head. "How will I git home?"

The Shoshone held up his own weapon-- a battered flintlock rifle. "I give with one night with woman. You trade?"

Josiah looked back at the woman, and then reached inside his bundle for something likely to fetch her attention. Holding up a small mirror, Josiah presented it to her.

Eyeing the object longingly, the woman remained undecided. When Josiah added a knife to the offering, she finally accepted them with a willing smile.

That was all Josiah needed. He handed over his prized Hawken, received the Shoshone's flintlock trade rifle, gave the woman her mirror and knife, and then followed her to bed.

The next morning, Josiah awoke with a woman in his arms. For a moment, he thought it was Emma, but when the firelight revealed the Shoshone woman, he remembered his trade. Soothing his conscience with another embrace, Josiah remained under the animal hides until the woman's husband declared his time was up.

Leaving Josiah, the woman dressed, and then went to help wife number two get the lodge ready for the day.

When Josiah passed the woman's husband on his way out, he glimpsed his Hawken proudly displayed beside the man on a buffalo robe. Anger surged within Josiah's breast, but a deal was a deal, and he paused long enough to give up the percussion caps the Shoshone would need to fire the Hawken.

Clamping his jaw shut, Josiah stepped outside into the snow. He strapped on his snowshoes, and then headed off for somewhere in the valley where he might find large game. With a groan, Josiah looked over the old trade rifle in his hands. He had lost his Hawken. The one he had saved for, and worked so long to obtain. How many beaver skins had it cost him? Josiah didn't want to calculate the sum.

Clouds parted overhead, beating heat onto Josiah's heavy bear coat. Tugging it off, he let himself cool down a moment before continuing on his way. His pulse was fast, and he felt panic nipping at his heels. Why was last night different from the others? Josiah swiped at the perspiration beading on his forehead. He felt fearful, as though half expecting a large hand to come down from the Heavens and flatten him where he stood.

Josiah turned his attention to the beat-up flintlock, to test its accuracy. Bringing the rifle to his shoulder, Josiah fired the weapon. As he reloaded it, Josiah recalled Emma's tender look as she kissed him yesterday morning before he left.

Angrily, Josiah shoved aside the image, plodding across the snow in search of something to shoot.

The skies closed once more, and the sunlight disappeared behind thick clouds. Wind swept around the foothills, chilling Josiah's frame and making him wish for the sunshine again.

"Sunshine," he said in a dull voice. The memory of Emma's soft golden hair, her warm smile, the gentle touch of her hand, the tilt of her head when she laughed, all flooded Josiah until he thought he would suffocate. Grimacing, he pulled open his coat to breathe easier. When it didn't work, he hastily closed it again to keep warm.

Josiah's eyes fell on the Shoshone's trade rifle. His Hawken was truly gone. He felt as though he had just lost a dear friend. Unbidden, the memory of Emma returned. He could feel Emma nestled at his side, happy and content in his arms. The vividness caught Josiah off guard. Try as he might, he could not stop the sound of her hushed voice as they exchanged tender words while Mary was asleep. Had his soul ever burned for a woman, as it had for Emma?

But he had embraced another man's wife last night.

In a fit of rage, Josiah slammed the old rifle against the snow. Breathlessly, he stared at the object in disbelief.

"What have I done?" he asked.

As the question set in, Josiah realized his weakness and hardened himself against the answer. He was accountable to no one-- not even to Emma. Let the world be cursed. He would do as he pleased.

Stooping down, Josiah retrieved the battered rifle, wet with snow. It had been a poor trade, but at least he had a usable weapon.

The day waxed dim, and the sun set against the mountains, signaling the approach of night. Josiah had been away for two days now, and knew Emma would be praying for his safe return. She was like that. As he built a campfire before settling down to sleep, Josiah knew he wasn't ready to go back and face Emma.

Not yet.

It was snowing again, laying yet another blanket of white against the vast wilderness. Standing in the open doorway, Emma brought up her shawl a little higher around her shoulders. Her eyes scanned the mountains, searching for someone who wasn't there.

Wanting to see for herself, Mary stood at Emma's side wrapped in a warm blanket. "Where is he, Ma?"

"Game must be scare, or else he'd be back by now," said Emma, steeling her voice with an unspoken prayer.

Sighing wistfully, Mary hugged Emma's dress.

"He'll come when he's able," said Emma, stroking the girl's braids with a reassuring smile. "Let's close the door before we let anymore snow inside."

Mary had difficulty concentrating on her lessons that morning, for every time she heard a noise, she would run to the window to peek through the shutters and see if it was Josiah.

"It is not him," Mary kept saying, each time looking a little more disappointed than the last.

Though Emma tried not to let it show, she was becoming more than a little concerned about Josiah. Evening was fast approaching, and tonight would be the third night he would be gone. Had a bear finally gotten the best of her husband? Or perhaps the snows had become too much, and he had succumbed to the cold.

In spite of her fears, it was difficult for Emma to imagine Josiah freezing to death, when he was so knowledgeable in building shelters. And he had taken a heavy buffalo robe with him, so he was probably fine. In fact, Josiah was more than likely lying beside a warm fire right now, eating grouse and enjoying a snug lean-to while the snow piled up outside. As reasonable as all this was, Emma kept up a steady stream of petitions, reminding God of His promises.

"Safety is of You, Lord," Emma would often pray.

Mary stood by the shutters until her legs grew tired. Today was the fourth day of Josiah's absence, and Emma was fighting back thoughts about going to look for him. She knew it wouldn't do any good, and probably only result in her own death, but the desire to go and find Josiah was strong.

Even Mary voiced the same thought, but Emma was quick to put it from Mary's head.

"God will help him," Emma said confidently. She promptly followed her statement with a silent prayer, and then shuttled Mary off to her morning lessons to keep the child busy.

Just as Emma was offering another prayer for Josiah's return, she heard the sound of crunching snow outside the cabin. Rushing to the shutters with Mary, Emma saw a large man with three slain rabbits dangling from his shoulders.

Emma let out a deep sigh of relief. "Thank you, God!"

Throwing open the door, she ran out to meet Josiah. Emma hugged his bearskin coat, not caring that she was getting snow on her dress.

"You had me very concerned," said Emma, letting Josiah move toward the cabin without her hanging on to him to slow him down.

"Hunting ain't so good," Josiah said, swinging down his quarry. "All I got to show fer my trouble are these thin rabbits."

Emma accepted the animals with a smile, simply grateful to have her husband back in one piece. As Josiah entered the relative warmth of the cabin, Emma noticed his face for the first time. His features were sharper than usual, and he wore a strained expression that told Emma he had seen difficulty.

"Did you have a very bad time?" asked Emma, closing the door as Josiah shed layers of animal hides before the fire.

When he looked up at Emma, she noticed a look of surprise flash in his dark eyes.

"What makes you think I had a hard time?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Emma. "Somehow, you don't look the same. Did you have enough to eat?"

Scowling, Josiah planted himself before the comfortable blaze. "I didn't starve, if that's what yer meaning. Stop fussing over me, Emma. I know how to take care of myself."

Mary was struggling to hang Josiah's heavy coat on its peg, so Emma went to help her.

The chore finished, Mary happily seated herself beside Josiah.

"Where is your Hawken?" asked the child.

Surprised by Mary's observation, Emma examined the rifle on the wall. Instead of Josiah's handsome Hawken, she found a weathered flintlock.

"Josiah! What happened to your rifle?" Emma asked in alarm. When Josiah didn't respond, Emma repeated the question.

"I heard you the first time," said Josiah. "I ain't deaf." He held up his large hands before the flames, rubbing them together until his skin returned to its normal color. "I'm hungry, Emma. How about fixing some of that rabbit fer supper?"

"But, the rifle--"

"Forget the rifle," Josiah said impatiently, "and start stirring up some supper."

Timidly, Mary looked up at Josiah, and for a moment, Emma thought the girl would be frightened away by his harsh tone. But Mary faithfully remained where she was, all the while smiling, as though hoping to encourage a similar response in her pa.

When Josiah didn't acknowledge Mary, Emma shook her head with a disappointed sigh.

Before long, a rabbit was roasting over the fire, its savor filling the small cabin. The meat fully cooked, Emma placed a large helping on Josiah's plate. He always ate more than her and Mary, and despite Josiah's claim that he hadn't starved, Emma had heard his stomach growling like a hungry animal ever since he entered the cabin.

Josiah joined the girls at the table, but he didn't wait as he usually did while Emma prayed over the food. Instead, he immediately started eating, and didn't seem to care when Emma gave him a pleading look.

After the meal, bedtime quieted the cabin even more as Mary climbed into her bed. Emma tucked the child in, quietly hearing Mary's prayer, and then giving and receiving a goodnight kiss.

As Emma crawled into bed beside Josiah, she saw that his eyes were closed, as though already asleep. From his breathing, however, she knew he was still awake.

Emma rested her head against the thick buffalo robes. "Josiah?" she asked softly.

"What is it? I'm trying to sleep."

"It's good to have you home, Josiah. You were missed." Emma turned her head to see him staring at the log rafters in the roof. "I'm sorry you had such a difficult time hunting. I wish I could've helped you."

Josiah said nothing.

Emma turned her gaze upward, at the same log rafters he was so intently inspecting. It made her feel closer to Josiah, as if she were able to share his thoughts in some small way.

"I'm so very happy, Josiah."

He looked at Emma in puzzlement. "What've you got to be so happy about?"

"The baby," said Emma. "You haven't forgotten, have you?"

"Oh, that." Josiah turned his eyes back to the rafters.

"It'll be our second child," said Emma, trying to encourage some interest in the life sprouting in her womb.

Josiah harrumphed. "What do you mean by, 'second'? You still pretending that bastard child is yours? What's wrong with you, Emma? She's the offspring of a dead squaw."

It was the first time Emma had heard Josiah use the term "squaw," though she had commonly heard it used among her own people.

"What does 'squaw' mean?" asked Emma. "Isn't it just another word for an Indian woman?"

"A squaw is a whore," said Josiah. "She don't necessarily go looking fer other men, but when she wants a trinket or something that catches her eye, she'll let the devil himself into her bed."

Emma shuddered. Josiah's voice was cold-- almost as cold as the arctic winds outside their cabin.

"Surely, you don't think that of all Indian women."

"White or red, all women are the same," said Josiah, his voice steeped in contempt. "When things git hard enough, they'll sell their soul for a bite of meat and a warm blanket."

Feeling the sting of his reproach, Emma reminded herself that she had no cause for shame.

"You just remember that yer my wife. You hear me, Emma? My woman is my own, and no one else's."

"I'll remain faithful," Emma said quietly. "You have no need to fear, Josiah."

"I ain't fearful. I'm just reminding."

Emma was quiet.

"What happened while you were gone?" she asked finally. "You're like a wounded animal, striking out at anything that comes near you. First it was Mary, and now you're almost angry with *me*, and I'm not sure why."

Josiah didn't respond, and Emma could see he was thinking.

After a lengthy period of silence, he sighed heavily. "Reckon I was a fool to try and keep it from you. You know me too well, Emma. Sooner or later, you'd have figured it out, so I might as well tell you now, so you'll stop trying to read my mind."

Emma gently touched his arm. "What happened? Does it have something to do with your Hawken? You can tell me."

Josiah stared at her a moment longer before speaking. "While I was hunting, I come across some Shoshones. One of them was yer admirer from before-- the one who tried to take Mary. He was angry about losing you and Mary, and said he was going to kill me, if I didn't give him my Hawken. I told him to do his worst, but I wasn't handing over my rifle. Then he said that if I didn't, he'd hunt you and Mary down, and take you while I wasn't looking." Emma saw Josiah swallow hard. "So I gave him my Hawken fer his old flintlock."

"Why didn't you tell me this, sooner?" asked Emma.

"I didn't want to frighten you and Mary."

Emma, however, felt anything but frightened. "Why, the terrible man! Threatening you like that! He makes me so angry, I could spit!"

Lightly touching Emma's hand, Josiah sighed in relief. "I'm glad I told you, Emma. I don't like keeping things from you, but I'm sorry you had to find out."

Emma shook her head in disgust. "Just when I thought wickedness couldn't get any lower, I'm proven wrong."

Josiah reached for Emma, and she nestled against him.

"Thank you for telling me, Josiah. I want to share in your burdens, and be a good wife to you." Emma kissed his cheek. "I love you," she said in a tender whisper.

Drawing her even closer, Josiah tightly embraced Emma.

When Josiah awoke the next morning, Emma was still fast asleep. He nuzzled her neck for more affection, but she only stirred long enough to roll onto her side before slipping back to sleep.

Mary was already awake, quietly eating buffalo jerky before the warm fire. She stared at Josiah as he climbed from bed, and he felt her dark eyes track him across the room as he went to fetch some breakfast of his own.

Without being asked, Mary moved over so Josiah could sit down beside her. It was warmer in front of the fireplace than at the table, and since Emma wasn't awake to insist on proper etiquette, the two ate cross-legged on a buffalo hide.

Wearily, Josiah rubbed the back of his neck as his jaw worked the tough meat in his mouth. He felt drained.

"You found no buffalo?" asked Mary, munching another bite of jerky.

Josiah glanced at the child, and decided to answer. "No, they're long gone by now."

"Will you get another Hawken?" she asked.

"I reckon not."

"I can read," she smiled proudly. "I can read all the way to the letter 'Z.'"

Josiah grunted.

"Can *you* read?" asked Mary.

Indistinctly mumbling something unfit for a child's ears, Josiah stared at Mary. "You ask a lot of questions."

Mary grinned happily. "I know."

The sound of Emma slowly awakening caught Josiah's attention, and he didn't hear Mary's next question. He quietly waited, wondering if Emma would be satisfied with the story he had given last night.

Josiah felt a tug on his sleeve. "What?" he asked the child, not moving his eyes from Emma.

"Will you go hunting soon?" asked Mary.

"I reckon."

"When?"

"When I've the mind to."

"But, *when*?" asked Mary.

Groaning, Josiah turned to glare at Mary. "Why are you wanting to know?"

In spite of shrinking back, Mary's expression remained unmoved. "I want to come with you."

Josiah harrumphed. "That ain't likely."

"I can help," said Mary. "I can shoot. I can help you."

"Hush up," Josiah dismissed Mary's offer with a careless wave of his hand. When he saw Emma watching, he thought better of his actions. "Yer ma wouldn't allow it, and you'd only slow me up." Biting back resentment, Josiah added, "Thanks fer making the offer, though."

"When *will* you go hunting, again?" asked Emma, coming into the conversation with a marked note of sleepiness still in her voice.

His courage failing him, Josiah announced that he would leave after breakfast. He didn't want to wait around to see if Emma still accepted his lie, for things might look differently to her in the full light of day. Lies were easier to believe when bodies were close together, and the promise of intimacy was present.

Emma looked disappointed by his news, though Josiah could discern no distrust in her face. When she joined him and Mary for breakfast, she even kissed him before sitting down. Josiah thoughtfully finished his meal. Emma had believed him.

Even though his falsehood remained safe, Josiah ached to escape the cabin once more. With Emma sitting on one side, and Mary on the other, he felt like a trapped bear, anxious for the freedom of the wilderness. His soul gave him no peace, and Josiah knew he could find rest, if he could just leave this crowded lodge.

"I had hoped you could stay longer, before going hunting again," said Emma.

Distracted, Josiah grunted. What had she said? He hadn't been paying attention.

"I suppose we need the food, though."

Josiah felt Emma lean her head against his shoulder, her breakfast remaining untouched on her lap. He tore off a small bite, and then forced it into Emma's mouth. "You need yer strength, Emma."

"I'm not hungry."

"You look worn out," said Josiah.

"You're mostly to blame for that," Emma smiled wearily.

"Eat, Emma."

Sighing, Emma unenthusiastically chewed the jerky.

"Last night, you felt weak in my arms," said Josiah, his voice hushed even though Mary was sitting right there and could hear every word. "Are you sure nothing is ailing you?"

"Nothing that nine months won't solve," said Emma.

"What will happen in nine months?" asked Mary, her face peering at them curiously.

Josiah and Emma looked at each other. They had yet to speak to Mary of the baby. Emma was so early along, it would be easy for her to miscarry, and then they would have to explain the sad news to a five-year old.

"Reckon you best tell her, Emma. You'll be needing her to help out, when you git tired."

When Emma told Mary of their news, the child jumped up and down, clapping her hands for joy. Josiah didn't know why he was still there, when he had to get ready for another hunting trip. Before he could get to his feet, though, Mary plopped herself onto his lap to give him a great big hug.

It was an unexpected gesture, and Josiah didn't know what to do with his arms. But when he felt the child hug him so trustingly, Josiah felt something stir inside him. Something protective and even tender. Was this what it felt like to be a father? Josiah didn't know, but his arms wrapped around Mary, and he returned her hug.

After several moments, Josiah was ready to stop hugging Mary, but she seemed quite content to stay where she was.

"All right," said Josiah, trying to pry the small arms from around his neck without damaging her, "I have to git going, so let go."

Reluctantly, Mary obeyed, though she stayed in his lap until he transferred her to Emma.

"Hope that baby turns out to be a boy," Josiah said as he stood up. "The women are outnumbering me as it is."

Emma laughed softly, and before he knew it, Josiah found himself smiling. Then a shadow clouded his soul, and Josiah's smile vanished.

"Are you sure you couldn't delay hunting for a few days?" asked Emma. "You need the rest, Josiah."

Afraid of betraying himself, Josiah turned his back to Emma to be sure she couldn't read his face. "We need the meat."

Josiah heard Emma sigh heavily.

"How long will you be gone this time?" she asked.

Shrugging, Josiah began packing some jerky into a heavy buffalo robe. "It depends," he said busily. "I'll chop firewood before I leave, though. I noticed yer getting low."

Grabbing his axe, Josiah headed out the door without meeting Emma's gaze.

This time, Josiah's hunting trip only lasted the day, and he returned just before sundown. He was empty-handed, and in bad temper after finding no signs of game. But it wasn't just his "bad luck" that Emma sensed bothered Josiah. Something was eating away at him from the inside. He had changed, and Emma couldn't understand why.

That night, for the first time Emma could remember, Josiah resisted her caress.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Josiah's response was sullen and depressed. "Leave me be."

"Are you brooding over your lost Hawken?"

Josiah hissed his impatience. "Shut up, Emma!"

Startled, Emma obeyed.

Kicking at the blankets, Josiah became frustrated when they tangled about his feet. He sat up to free himself, uttering something Emma couldn't make out.

"You seemed anxious to get out of the cabin this morning," said Emma.

Josiah glared at her, until Emma felt the small hairs on her arm stand on end.

Throwing back the blankets, Josiah stretched out on the buffalo robes to sleep. Emma bit her lip, wondering if she should press him further.

"Stop gaping at me, Emma."

"I wasn't gaping," she said in self-defense.

Even in the half-darkness of the cabin, Emma could see the disgusted look on Josiah's chiseled face.

"Are you angry with me, Josiah?"

Moaning, Josiah rubbed his face with the palm of his hand. "Reckon I'm more angry at myself, than with anyone else."

"Why?" It was a simple question, though from the long stretch of silence that came afterward, Emma sensed that the answer wasn't as simple.

Josiah opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came. He shut it again, turned onto his side, and then pulled up the blankets.

"Josiah?"

"Reckon I'm failing you and Mary," he said finally. "I can't find any game."

"There's still jerky left," said Emma, guessing that Josiah was trying to put her off from the truth. Something else was bothering him, and it wasn't fresh meat.

When it was obvious his answer hadn't fooled her, Emma saw Josiah scowl, and she knew her opportunity was gone. There had been the briefest of moments where she thought he would actually tell her what was on his heart. But it was gone, and Emma was left to wonder and to pray.

Josiah knew he couldn't keep going the way he had. Even his mountains offered him no peace. There was only one way he knew to rid himself of his burden, and that was to tell Emma. Forget God, and what the Bible said was right. He needed relief.

But there was his problem. Telling Emma. It galled him to no end that Emma should know, when it had nothing to do with her. The Shoshone woman had been *his* business, and Emma didn't need to find out. The burden on Josiah's conscience, however, would not let him go, and Josiah finally decided that he had no choice. If he didn't tell Emma, he would slowly go insane.

The afternoon of the next day, Emma started Mary on her lessons. The girl had been a fast learner, and Emma had picked up the pace at which she had been teaching her. Mary was ready for words, or at least very small ones, and so with Mary at her side, Emma opened their Bible and began to read. Every time Emma came across a small, easy word, she would pause as Mary sounded out the vowels and consonants. Words such as "the," "to" and "it" kept slowing the progress of Emma's reading, but Mary eagerly kept up.

"I am reading!" Mary said in awe, when they had come to the end of the passage. "Pa!" Mary looked across the cabin to where Josiah was brooding on his buffalo robes. "I can read!"

Josiah grunted, obviously preoccupied with his own thoughts.

Not wanting to dampen Mary's victory, Emma gave her another hug, and then declared the rest of the day a holiday from lessons. The cabin filled with Mary's excited clamor of how she was reading words, while Emma kept a silent watch on the man seated on the bed.

Josiah had a knife in one hand, and a stick in the other. He absently kept shaving wood from the stick, until nothing was left. Then Josiah would pick up another, and repeat the process.

As Emma watched Josiah, he looked up at her and their eyes met. He looked oppressed, as though carrying a burden that was too great for him. Emma's heart went out to Josiah, but he remained silent, and turned his full attention back to the whittling stick.

That evening after supper, Emma sat beside the fireplace with her mending while Mary sleepily played with her dolls. It was nearing Mary's bedtime, and Josiah waited for Emma to put the child to bed. Instead, Emma let Mary stay up a little later than usual.

Trying to ease his restlessness, Josiah pulled out his knife and began to work on another stick when he heard Emma announce that it was bedtime. Finally. Tossing the stick into the flames, Josiah waited as Emma got Mary ready for bed.

When Emma joined him on the buffalo robes several minutes later, she looked ready to fall asleep.

"I've been waiting to talk to you," said Josiah, trying to stop Emma from lying down.

"Oh?" Emma tiredly sat up, covering her cold legs with the blankets. "What is it?"

Josiah fumbled with the fringe on his hunting shirt.

"Would you rather talk in the morning?" Emma asked with a stifled yawn.

"No, I--" Josiah stopped short. He sorely wished he didn't have to go through with this. Going over his rationale one last time, Josiah let go of the leather fringe. "I ain't making you any apologies, so don't you go thinking that I am."

Leaning forward to listen, Emma folded her arms across her knees.

"Do you recollect what I told you about how I lost my Hawken?" he asked.

"Yes, I remember."

Josiah took a deep breath, trying to muster the courage he needed to get this over with. "Well, I didn't exactly tell you the truth."

Emma's eyebrows raised in surprise.

"The Hawken was mine to do with as I wanted, so I traded it to that Shoshone I told you about. Traded it fer a night with his wife."

Stunned, Emma's mouth dropped open.

"That's all I got to say," said Josiah. "The only reason I'm telling you this, is because it's been bothering me something fierce-- though I don't know why it should. A man's got a right to find pleasure wherever he can, so like I said, I ain't making any apologies."

There. He had said it. Now he could rest at night, and not have this burden constantly vex him.

Then Josiah saw the tears come to Emma's eyes, and she dropped to the buffalo robes in one great sob. To Josiah's consternation, Mary woke up and looked at him with large frightened eyes.

"Go back to sleep," said Josiah.

"Why is Ma crying?"

"Do as yer told!" Josiah gave Mary a stern look and the child quickly lay back down.

"How could you?" Emma said between sobs.

The muscles in Josiah's jaw tightened. If Emma wanted to cry, then it was best to let her get it out of her system. There were things Emma would have to learn to accept, and this was one of them. Reclining on the robes, Josiah shut his eyes while Emma wept.

It was a long hard struggle, but Emma finally managed to stop the endless tears. Josiah had been unfaithful to her, and even worse, he wasn't sorry. His callousness dumbfounded Emma, and she

realized the extent of the hardness of his heart. She had known he was stubborn in his wickedness, but he was blatantly proving it to her in no uncertain terms.

And this was her husband!

"Lord," Emma prayed silently, "I am innocent of Josiah's sin. Let my innocence stand before You, to remind You of Your promise to me. 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.' [Acts 16:31] Josiah is part of my house, Lord. In Your righteous anger over his sins, remember me. In wrath, remember mercy. [Habakkuk 3:2] Save him, Lord. Save my husband."

It was a heartfelt prayer of intercession, and it left Emma comforted. God was not untouched by her tears, and she knew it down to the very depths of her soul. Josiah had betrayed her, but God had not. God's loving attention was still present, and even as Emma fought against the temptation to despair, His grace held her up. If Josiah's soul were completely hopeless with no hope of ever being saved, then God would not have thrown her into Josiah's life the way He had. This thought gave Emma solace, and she clung to her faith in God's character.

Even so, stronger faith didn't stop the hurt in Emma's heart, and she let herself cry until she had no more strength for tears.

The morning after his revelation, Josiah was the first one awake. He remained in bed, waiting for Emma to stir. She had cried for most of the night, and he had been unable to get much sleep.

Before long, Mary sat up in bed and blinked at Josiah. The girl must've sensed something important was happening, for she remained absolutely still-- not even venturing from her bed to find breakfast.

Making up his mind that Emma had had enough rest, Josiah finally nudged his wife. "Time you got up, Emma."

Two swollen eyes fluttered open, and Josiah winced inwardly when he saw how exhausted she appeared. Her cheeks were tearstained, and her face showed great strain.

"I need more sleep," Emma said weakly. "Will you make sure Mary has breakfast?"

Josiah gave Emma a curt nod. He didn't want to show too much concern for Emma's present state, for that would be like an admission of guilt. Still, it was hard to admit she looked normal.

Emma closed her eyes, and Josiah lightly tucked the blanket up over her shoulders. He hoped things could get back to the way they were, before the Shoshones had come to these mountains.

Climbing out of bed, Josiah went to get some buffalo jerky for himself and Mary. The small girl sat with him before the fireplace, silent as a mouse. Her face held many questions, though she was too timid to ask.

"Yer ma and I had a fight," Josiah said a little defensively. "I ain't knowing yet, but it might not be over."

Swallowing her food, Mary stared at the ground thoughtfully. Her small shoulders heaved with a sigh.

"I reckon there won't be any lessons today," said Josiah. "You can keep busy on yer own, can't you?"

Mary solemnly nodded "yes."

It was Josiah's turn to sigh. His insides felt heavy. He had hoped to find relief by telling Emma about the Shoshone woman, but relief had yet to come. Why was this time so different? Hadn't he bought women before? After all, he was no youngster, struggling under the guilt of his first whore. At the memory, Josiah touched the eagle feather in his hair. Josiah's first feather had been given to him by his pa, as a symbol of Josiah's coming of age. This feather meant more to him, though, for it was Emma's.

Josiah waited all morning for Emma to wake up. Around the center of the day, she finally crawled out of bed, insisting she felt well enough to fix lunch.

"Mary and I can fend fer ourselves," Josiah told Emma. "Go back to bed and git more rest. You still ain't looking too well."

"I'm not an invalid," Emma said stoutly. She moved about the cabin to set things in order, and then prepared another of the rabbits Josiah had caught.

Mutely, Josiah watched Emma. Could she put the incident behind her and pretend nothing had happened? Emma was consistently avoiding his gaze, and Josiah hoped this wasn't a bad sign.

After lunch, Emma asked Josiah over to the table to discuss something important.

Uneasily, Josiah seated himself at the table. Emma sat across from him, her hands folded on the rough tabletop.

"I have one question to ask," said Emma. She gazed at him stoically, and Josiah was unable to read her expression. "Will you answer it truthfully?"

Slumping back in his split-bottom chair, Josiah harrumphed. "I don't lie."

"You lied to me about how you lost your Hawken."

Josiah had to admit Emma had him on that one. "I'll be truthful," he said.

"Do I have your word on it?"

Josiah scowled resentfully. "Will my word mean anything to you?"

"Do I have it?"

"Yes, I'll answer truthfully."

Emma gazed at Josiah, and he saw fear in her eyes. He knew she was afraid of the answer to her one question, and he waited to hear what that question was.

"Will you promise me to honor our marriage bed?" asked Emma. "Will you give me your solemn word that you'll be faithful to me?"

Now Josiah understood why Emma looked so frightened. She already knew the answer.

"Yer forgetting yer place, Emma."

"Will you promise me?"

"I own you, woman, and not the other way around."

"Please, I beg you, Josiah. Promise me."

"I'm yer husband, and if that ain't enough, I'm bigger than you."

"I can't live like this, Josiah."

"You ain't leaving me, Emma."

Emma laughed mournfully. "Leave? Where would I go? You've brought me to this barren wilderness, and now I've nowhere to go!"

"That's right," said Josiah. "You got no choice."

Emma sat up straight in her chair. "You're wrong. I *have* a choice."

Josiah narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"If you refuse to be faithful, then I refuse to share your bed."

"You can't do that!" Josiah sat bolt-upright, his hand coming down on the table so violently, it threatened to fall apart. "I won't allow it! You hear me, Emma? I won't allow it!"

"You can force me," said Emma, "but I don't think you will. I know you're bigger than me, but the only way to stop me, is to beat me." Emma leveled a steady gaze at Josiah. "And I don't think you'll do that."

"Yer taking a mighty big chance."

Emma was silent, but she didn't look as though she feared for her safety.

Josiah tried to swallow, and found his mouth had gone completely dry. Balling his hand into a fist, he stared at it in deliberation. "I won't beat you," he said finally. "You already know I won't."

"From now on, I'll sleep in Mary's bed," said Emma.

Josiah smiled grimly. "There ain't much room fer you in that pint-sized bed of hers. You and Mary take our bed," he sighed in resignation. "I'll bed down, elsewhere."

Emma looked at Josiah, and then nodded in agreement.

Josiah noticed Emma's bottom lip trembled, and she looked as though she were fighting back tears.

"You don't have to do this, Emma."

"Yes, I do."

"I still love you," said Josiah. "That hasn't changed."

When Emma didn't respond, Josiah shook his head bitterly. "At least yer still calling me by name, Emma. Thanks fer that, anyway." He pushed back from the table with a loud groan. "Mary, git yer dolls over to Emma's bed. From now on, yer sleeping with yer ma."

Ignoring Mary's happy smiles upon hearing this new sleeping arrangement, Josiah swore within himself. He cursed the Shoshone woman for accepting his mirror and knife, and railed at God for turning Emma against him. All along, Josiah had been afraid of losing Emma, and now God had fulfilled his fears.

At least Emma wasn't leaving him. Josiah congratulated himself for his foresight in bring her to this lodge. He would win Emma over yet, but until then, she was as trapped as he was.

That night, after everyone had gone to bed, Josiah tossed on his buffalo robe, trying in vain to get to sleep. After several minutes of failure, Josiah sat up, staring at the large, comfortable bed across the fireplace. He had layered several robes for Emma's comfort, only to find himself banished from his own bed!

Cursing his bad luck, Josiah drowsily rubbed his face. Emma was already asleep, though her arms were empty. Mary was resting on the far side of the bed, leaving Emma all by herself. Josiah frowned, for he knew Emma didn't like sleeping alone.

The next morning, Josiah took Mary outside to fetch water. Before returning to Emma with the full bucket, he took the child to one side.

"Would you do me a big favor, Mary?"

Surprised, Mary looked at Josiah warily.

"I need you to look after Emma at bedtime. If she starts to crying, give her a hug. And when you can see she's lonesome, let her snuggle with you. Would you do that fer me?"

Mary nodded.

Josiah gave one of her braids a playful tug. "I owe you."

Mary smiled sadly, for by now Josiah guessed she had an idea of what was going on. He and Emma hadn't exactly discussed things in whispers over the table, and now Mary went about with

the same downcast expression as everyone else. It couldn't be helped, for the cabin was so small, secrets were almost impossible to keep for very long.

Supper finished off the last rabbit, and Josiah knew he had to go hunting tomorrow. The land South of here was a good place to search for elk and mule deer, but it would mean leaving Emma behind for several days at a time.

Lifting his head, Josiah saw Mary snuggling against Emma. Emma must be lonely, for Mary was following his directions to the letter.

Sighing, Josiah leaned back against the warm hide. They needed a change. His mind made up, the mountain man struggled to find sleep.

Emma was thankful for Mary's thoughtfulness, for the child had cuddled and hugged her all night long, just when Emma had needed it most. It was hard to be away from Josiah, knowing that he only slept a few feet away. She yearned for the quiet moments they had shared on many long nights, when a simple touch was enough to let the other know they weren't alone.

At breakfast, Josiah handed Emma a tin cup of hot broth, in an obvious attempt to curry favor. She quietly thanked him, and after praying, sipped down the rich meal. As if to test his boundaries, Josiah took a seat snug against her, unwittingly prompting her to move until they no longer touched.

Even though he didn't look pleased, Josiah bit his tongue and said nothing. He ate his breakfast, then made an announcement that startled Emma.

"We're leaving," said Josiah. "I'm taking you and Mary with me to the foothills South of here. There ain't enough game in the valley to tide us over until spring, so we have to hunt elsewhere."

"Will we come back to the cabin?" asked Emma.

"We will, when we have enough meat so we won't starve."

Emma nodded in understanding. She didn't know how much longer their dried meat would hold out, though she hadn't thought they were in any immediate danger. However, Josiah was having difficulty finding game, and if they relied heavily on their store of buffalo jerky, it would disappear quickly enough.

After eating, Josiah placed the remainder of their jerky into the cooking kettle, before wrapping everything in several buffalo robes for transport. When Emma tried to add her Bible to the pack, Josiah protested.

"I ain't hauling that heavy book around, Emma. It's just dead weight."

Even though Emma struggled not to cry, salty tears stung her eyes. She knew Josiah was right. This was survival, and she could only afford to take the barest of necessities. They didn't even have a horse to carry them where they needed to go, so they had to travel as light as possible.

Taking the Bible from Emma, Josiah placed it into the buffalo robe alongside the jerky. "Don't start crying again. I'll tote it fer you."

Emma stared at him in surprise. "Are you sure, Josiah? It *is* rather heavy."

Josiah nodded brusquely. "I'm sure. You ain't bringing anything else, though. You just had yer limit."

Knowing he had ulterior motives for this act of kindness, Emma restrained herself. "Thank you, Josiah. I appreciate it."

"What about my dolls?" asked Mary, tightly hugging her two friends.

"They stay," said Josiah.

Timidly, Mary came forward, beckoning for Josiah to bend down. She whispered something into his ear.

Straightening, Josiah rubbed the back of his neck. "What do you women think I am, a pack mule?"

Mary hung her head, disappointedly.

Groaning in protest, Josiah made a concession. "One doll only."

Mary brightened momentarily, before again looking distressed. Emma knew she was wondering which friend to leave behind, but Emma was surprised that Josiah had agreed to take any dolls at all. Musing to herself, Emma wondered what Mary had whispered into Josiah's ear.

Since the Blackfoot figurine was wooden, and the Christmas doll was made from light cloth, Mary set her treasured Indian companion on the table to await their return.

They had to take knives, weapons, powder, shot, sinew rope, axe, the single tin cup, and Josiah's bullet mold so he could fashion more bullets. To this, Josiah added a small leather pouch with his flint and steel for making fires.

Everyone had to haul *something*. Mary was responsible for her pistol, Emma was to carry her shotgun and not wear herself out, and Josiah was to bring everything else. Emma knew Josiah was a strong man, but she didn't see how he could possibly manage without a horse.

While Emma watched, Josiah took two long poles, binding them at the top to form a sturdy "V." Between the poles he wove a netting made of sinew rope. When the bundle of supplies and buffalo robes were packed and ready, Josiah placed the heavy burden into the netting. Emma learned this was called a travois [pronounced trav oi'], and Josiah would drag it across the snow as one would use a wagon. It was a clever contraption Emma had seen Indians use behind their horses, only Josiah would pull this travois by hand.

Weapon loaded, and snowshoes strapped on, Emma followed Josiah out into the cold winter air.

With her pistol tucked into her belt like a small mountain man, Mary couldn't stop grinning. They were leaving the cabin, and it was obvious she longed for the wide open spaces of the outdoors. Emma, on the other hand, was less enthusiastic. Those four walls were a whole lot safer than nothing, and Emma prayed they could soon return.

Josiah slipped on the shoulder harness to the travois. Bracing himself against its weight, he pulled their supplies across the snow.

Following behind, Emma watched the flintlock swung over Josiah's shoulder, as it moved back and forth with the sway of its new owner. His eagle feather fluttered in the wind, before tangling in long rough locks of hair. Josiah hadn't removed her token yet, and its continued presence gave Emma a small measure of hope.

Emma sighed longingly. If only Josiah could love her enough to be faithful.

Emma's prayer: "The troubles of my heart are enlarged: O bring... me out of my distresses. Look upon mine affliction and my pain... let me not be ashamed; for I put my trust in Thee [God]. Let integrity and uprightness preserve me; for I wait on Thee."

~ Psalm 25:17, 18, 20, 21 ~

"Horror hath taken hold upon me because of the wicked that forsake Thy law."
~ Psalm 119:53 ~

Chapter Ten
Valley of Decision

1837, South of Josiah's cabin, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel...."

~ Isaiah 1:18-20 ~

By late afternoon of their first day's travel, Emma's strength was wearing thin. Already thankful Josiah kept their march at a slow pace, Emma was even more grateful when he announced they would stop and make camp for the night.

As Josiah built a lean-to, Emma and Mary gathered wood for a fire. Then it was time for supper, and Emma handed out their rations of buffalo jerky.

Except for loud chewing noises, everyone was quiet, including Mary. Josiah sat across the small fire from Emma, his eyes alternately studying Emma as though trying to delve into her private thoughts. Even under such scrutiny, Emma kept her demeanor well in hand, and prayed her face mirrored the resolve in her heart.

The sun had yet to set against the mountains, but Emma decided she couldn't wait any longer for sleep. Crawling into the lean-to for some much needed rest, Emma lay down as Mary squeezed in on her left side to keep warm. Before Emma could get the pine needles and buffalo robe beneath her into a comfortable bed, she fell asleep.

Barely half-awake, Emma felt passion stirring within her breast. Heat warmed her face, and then her mouth, until Emma slowly realized she was being kissed. Eyes fluttering open, she found herself in Josiah's arms!

"Stop it, Josiah!" Emma pushed him away as hard as she could until his back was against the lean-to.

In the darkness, Emma heard Josiah's quick breath and the angry growl of his voice.

"What are you trying to do to me, Emma? If you didn't want me, then why'd you start nuzzling?"

Emma was still trying to calm her senses, when she suddenly realized Josiah's accusation.

"Are you trying to say *I* started this, Josiah?"

Loudly grinding his teeth in frustration, Josiah scooted over as far as the tight lean-to would allow. "Mary, crawl over yer ma, and sleep between us."

"Honestly, Josiah, it wasn't me--" Emma stopped short of her own defense. Even in the heavy darkness, she could feel his displeasure boring holes through her skull.

"Go to sleep, Emma."

A small child climbed over Emma, and then settled down between the two adults.

Confused, and more than a little disturbed, Emma's tired mind went over what had just happened. Was it true? Had she kissed Josiah? Emma struggled to untangle reality from her dreams, knowing that the familiar intimacy of being so near Josiah would have made it easily possible. Silently promising herself to be more careful in the future, Emma prayed God would give her the strength to not weaken in her sleep.

The next morning, Josiah escaped the confinements of the lean-to as quickly as he could. It was bad enough Emma wasn't being very friendly, but with kisses like that, she was downright aggravating!

Last night's incident only made him all the more determined to regain Emma's affection.

Getting to their store of jerky first, Josiah handed Emma her breakfast with as charming a smile as he could manage. He made sure she had a blanket around her shoulders, a hot cup of water to sip, and whenever her gaze happened to fall on him, he tried to appear contrite.

After bombarding Emma with adoring looks for several minutes, Josiah tried to detect any weakening in her defenses.

To his consternation, Emma remained unfazed.

Again, they headed South, following the mountain until it brought them to a narrow valley surrounded by white foothills. The valley was flanked on the East by a partially frozen creek, and

another set of foothills and mountains. Josiah set his face against the Eastern horizon, scanning for any signs of the game he had come to hunt.

"I do not see any deer," Mary said disappointedly.

In spite of his own disappointment at the lack of wildlife, Josiah grinned. He hadn't needed to tell Mary what he was looking for, for she already knew. "That don't mean they're not here," said Josiah. "I'll make us a lodge over against that foothill, and tomorrow, I'll go hunting."

For the rest of that day, Josiah worked on a large dome-shaped lodge, covering it with more than one buffalo skin, and lining its floor with thick boughs of cottonwood. In the center of the shelter, he made a comfortable fire.

On either side of the fire, Emma spread out buffalo robes, to make two beds.

"Is Mary sleeping by herself?" asked Josiah, half hoping to receive a different reply than the one he got.

"No, it's for you."

That night, Josiah curled up on his bed feeling completely alone, and even a little unwanted. Whenever he let himself look at the other side of the shelter, he would envy Mary, as the girl slept snugly in Emma's arms.

"I hafta try harder," Josiah said quietly. Rolling onto his other side, he faced away from the happy scene.

Morning came, and Emma was awakened by the smell of cooking meat. Upon sitting up, she saw a delicious looking rabbit roasting over the fire. Josiah was seated nearby, looking very pleased with himself for surprising her with a hot meal of fresh meat.

"Good morning, Ma!" Mary smiled at Emma, and Emma suddenly realized they had let her sleep.

"Why didn't you wake me?" asked Emma. She felt embarrassed for being the last one up, especially when she saw how high the sun was in the sky.

"You needed yer rest," said Josiah, turning the rabbit to cook it evenly. When he turned to look at Emma, his gaze met hers, unabashedly.

Feeling her face grow hot, Emma quickly looked away. She pinned up her braids, then took out the Bible to read to Mary until breakfast was ready. To Emma's utter surprise, Josiah smiled pleasantly and looked as though he wanted to listen. Emma didn't mind, but his smile was overly warm, and very suspicious.

When Mary asked a pertinent question about some hard-to-understand verse, Josiah looked very attentive as Emma explained God's Word. Impatience and disgust were lurking behind those dark eyes of Josiah's, and Emma knew better than to believe his smiles and assenting nods.

Putting away her Bible when breakfast was ready, Emma saw Josiah literally sigh with relief.

"You should read before *EVERY* meal," he said, as he gave Emma her share of food. "Be sure you eat that rabbit liver I gave you, Emma. Yer body needs more than meat to survive."

Even though the cooked liver didn't look appetizing, Emma swallowed it down, knowing it contained nourishment that the meat did not.

The meal over, Josiah patted his belly in satisfaction. "That was good food. Do you reckon God sent that rabbit along, just so we could have something tasty to eat, Mary?"

Timidly nodding "yes," Mary scooted closer to Emma, as though unsure what to make of Josiah's odd behavior.

"That's what I'm thinking, too," Josiah said with a nod of agreement. "Why, my clumsy snare could've easily been empty this morning. Just because I've been snaring rabbits since before I could shoot, and know how to place them just right, outside their burrow, don't mean a thing. It's God who sends the animals into the snares-- ain't that right, Emma?"

Emma eyed Josiah warily. She didn't appreciate his sarcasm, even though he spoke with a pleasant smile.

When Emma made no reply, Josiah reached for his flintlock rifle. "Mary, you'd best pray God sends something bigger than rabbits our way."

Mary looked up at Emma, and then back at Josiah.

Both girls remained silent.

Grinning, Josiah readied the rifle on his lap. "I'll tell you what, Mary... tell God to hunt the North half of the valley, and I'll take the South, and we'll see who brings back meat, first."

Mary may have been somewhat small for her age, but she wasn't stupid. When Mary didn't smile, Emma knew the child had understood Josiah's mock against God.

Without another word, Josiah left the shelter, much to the relief of Emma.

Later that day, a sullen Josiah returned empty-handed. Emma bit back the urge to say "It serves you right," but her looks must have said what her mouth did not, for Josiah avoided looking directly at Emma for the rest of the night.

Morning came, and Emma braced herself. What would Josiah do next? She really didn't want to know.

Innocently eating buffalo jerky, Josiah behaved as though she and Mary weren't even there. His indifference to their presence went as far as to mutter to himself about the snowfall, and how it was getting heavier.

They had enjoyed a short reprieve in the weather, with unusually clear skies and surprisingly little wind. Emma smiled. It was almost as though God had held back winter, just long enough for them to safely arrive in the valley.

"Do you want more jerky?" Emma asked Josiah.

Instead of indicating that he had heard her, Josiah continued to eat. He kept acting as though he were the only one in the shelter, and though sad, it suited Emma better than his sudden religious talk of the previous morning.

In her childlike ignorance of what was happening, Mary asked Josiah a simple question. Emma winced when he didn't respond; he simply looked outside, and continued to eat his meal.

"Pa?" asked Mary. "Would you show me how you set a rabbit snare before you go?"

When Josiah remained mute, Mary sighed heavily and finished the rest of her jerky in silence.

Once again, a sullen Josiah returned from his hunt that evening, and once again, he was empty-handed.

The very next morning, Emma sat up in bed to stoke the fire before the flames died out and she would have to ask Josiah to start another.

"How'd you sleep?" Josiah's voice came from the other side of the lodge.

Looking up, Emma raised her eyebrows in mild surprise. "So, you've decided to start talking again?"

Josiah grinned wearily. "I can't get along without you, Emma."

Looking at him thoughtfully, Emma tossed more wood into the fire.

"How about coming over and just laying beside me fer awhile?"

Emma shook her head.

"Then how about giving me some sunshine?"

Emma didn't budge, and Josiah's jaw tightened.

"Yer one stubborn woman. What are you wanting from me?"

"A promise," Emma said simply. "Promise me you'll be faithful, and I'll smile all you want."

With a snorting laugh, Josiah reached around to find his flintlock. He checked the priming, then got on his hands and knees to fit through the small entrance of the shelter.

"Don't you want breakfast?" Emma called after him.

"Just hand me my coat and snowshoes," said Josiah. "I might be late gitting back, today." Squatting down, he accepted his things from Emma and their gaze met. "There ain't any signs of elk or mule deer nearby, so I have to go farther. Keep close to the lodge, and don't step outside without yer shotgun."

"I won't, Josiah."

Josiah heaved a deep sigh, and stared at Emma longingly. "I love you, Em."

"Then be faithful," she said with a challenge in her voice.

Shaking his head, Josiah chuckled dully. "Don't you ever give up?"

"I don't intend to," said Emma. "You didn't pack any jerky to take with you. Do you want me to fetch you some?"

"You'd best keep it," Josiah said, standing up to his full height and out of Emma's line of sight.

From the small entrance, all Emma could see of Josiah were moccasins and large hands as he tied on his snowshoes.

"I don't know if you've noticed," said Josiah, "but we're running low on jerky. If I don't find some game real soon, we're going to be in trouble."

"I've noticed," said Emma, grateful Mary was still asleep so the child couldn't overhear. Crawling outside, Emma got to her feet as Josiah fastened his bear coat shut. "I have to admit, I thought the jerky would last longer."

"It never does," said Josiah. "Git back inside, Emma. Yer shaking like a leaf in this cold, and the snow's coming down heavy."

Shaking her head "no," Emma wasn't ready to go inside just yet. She lingered while Josiah checked his flintlock one last time.

"As long as yer there, fetch me a buffalo hide. The way this snow's looking, I might have to take shelter."

Crawling inside, Emma soon returned with a heavy robe. Before she could find her feet to stand, Josiah took the robe, heading off without a word goodbye.

The center of the day passed, and Emma kept watch for Josiah. She hoped he would arrive before sundown, but guessed that if he couldn't find game, he would probably make camp rather than return empty-handed.

Night descended, and Josiah didn't come back. The next morning and all of that day showed no signs of him, either. Now that his large appetite wasn't there to need the remainder of their dried jerky, Emma knew she and Mary had enough to get by for at least a week. After that-- Emma shuddered. She prayed Josiah's hunt would be successful.

Josiah was well acquainted with hunger, and the bad stretches of luck that came with finding no quarry. What he was unused to, however, was the utter helplessness he felt knowing that two females were depending on him.

There were no tracks to guide him to where the animals were sheltering from the harsh snows, and no indications that they were even in this valley. Doubt dogged Josiah's every step, accusing him of bad judgement and recklessness. Maybe he should've stayed at the cabin, and taken his chances there.

After all the scrapes and close calls Josiah had experienced throughout his lifetime, he wasn't too afraid. One way or another, he always made it, and now would prove no differently.

"But, what about Emma?" Josiah's deep voice melted into the wind, so that he could barely hear himself think. He knew that by leaving, he had made the food stretch farther, but it wouldn't last forever. Sooner or later, Emma would run out of jerky.

"Sure wish I could get out of this snow," he said to himself.

As a youngster, Josiah used to think those who talked to themselves were crazy; seclusion had cured him of that notion, and now he sometimes spoke to himself when loneliness was at its sharpest. Josiah had experienced such sensations before, but somehow, this time his loneliness was different. It cut into him deeper, and he felt bereaved, as though he had lost a part of himself.

"What has that woman done to me? This is what I get fer wintering with a white woman who has thoughts about God. And what did I go and do? Give her a Bible!" Josiah spit a profanity into the air, cursing himself for his stupidity.

The trapper's footsteps grew heavier, and he searched for a place to take shelter. The snow was still coming down, and his stomach growled so loudly he felt sure it was scaring away the very game he sought.

In an attempt to numb his hunger, Josiah cut some fringe from the bottom of his hunting shirt. Working the old leather in his mouth, his thoughts returned to Emma. Everything within him wanted her, and yet, Josiah had a feeling mere lust wasn't enough to make Emma happy; desire could while away the hours of a long night, but it wasn't enough to make him stop hankering after other women-- and that was what Emma wanted. Faithfulness.

Exasperated, Josiah groaned inwardly. How was a man supposed to be faithful, when opportunity kept presenting itself in the form of willing women?

Not to be fooled by the taste of buckskin, Josiah's empty belly rebelled. Driven by hunger, Josiah checked his flintlock and continued on his way.

It had been at least a week, and Josiah still hadn't returned. Emma was concerned for his safety, but another necessity was pressing hard upon her heart. There was only enough jerky to give Mary something for lunch. After that, they would be completely out of food.

"Please, Ma?" Mary looked at Emma, imploringly. "I can set snares for rabbit, just like Pa did."

Emma shook her head, knowing Josiah had left before showing Mary his technique.

"I know how," said Mary.

Feeling the beginnings of hunger, Emma rethought her resistance. For days, they had seen wolves prowling about their camp, and Emma was very slow to step outside where they would have little protection. The wolves were obviously hungry, and to Emma, this was just another sign that Josiah was having difficulty finding food.

Even the wolves were getting desperate.

Bracing her courage with a prayer, Emma made certain Mary had her weapon. After readying her shotgun, Emma cautiously crawled from their shelter, with Mary following close behind.

As Mary got to her feet, a wolf made its presence known by showing itself against the snow. It was soon joined by others, until four or five wolves were staring at Emma and Mary.

Following Emma's example, Mary stood absolutely still.

"Have you ever eaten a wolf before?" asked Emma.

Mary grinned hungrily.

Slowly, Emma raised her shotgun.

Skittish of Emma's movement, the wolves began to pace the perimeter of the camp, as if searching for vulnerability.

"Do you have a good grip on your pistol?"

"Yes, Ma."

"I want you to get as close as you can to the lodge's entrance. When I fire my shotgun, I don't know if the rest will attack; if they do, try to hit one of them before you duck inside. If I can't make it into the shelter, stay there until Josiah arrives. No matter what, I want you to stay inside. Is that understood, Mary?"

The child whimpered in protest, but Emma remained adamant. If anything happened to her, she wanted Mary to live.

"I understand," Mary said finally.

"Start edging your way back to the entrance."

With small, measured steps, Mary left Emma's side until a low call signaled Mary was in place.

By now, the wolves were becoming brazen, lunging into the camp, then quickly retreating to see if they would be pursued for their audacity. They were thin beasts, and their desperation matched their obvious hunger.

Emma leveled her aim at the nearest wolf. The wolf didn't move, but stared at Emma until she fired a single barrel from her shotgun. With a high-pitched "Yip!" the animal fell to the snow.

Instead of attacking, the other wolves turned tail and fled.

"They are gone!" Mary said happily.

"Thank God," said Emma, breathing a deep sigh of relief.

Before Emma knew what Mary was doing, the child had pulled out a knife and approached the dead wolf. Squatting, Mary wobbled on the balls of her feet before kneeling in the snow to work.

Hurrying to Mary, Emma admired the girl's calm deliberation as the child explained what needed to be done.

"Give me the knife, and I'll do as you say," said Emma, holding out her hand for the sharp object. She still hadn't quite gotten over the fact this five-year old had a pistol, let alone access to knives.

As Emma plunged the knife into the lifeless animal, she needed no reminders that this was the wild, and everyone had to do what they could, to stay alive.

There wasn't much to the wolf but skin and bone, but the little meat that was there, was slowly harvested by Emma. When Emma thought her work finally done, Mary pointed out the liver, heart, and eyes.

"We must eat those. Nothing must be wasted."

Realizing Mary was right, Emma carved out the wolf's internal organs.

While Emma cut the meat into thin strips, Mary located some tree branches that had broken off under the weight of too much snow. Pulling off twigs and debris, Mary stripped the boughs down to bare wood. After tucking her pistol into a fold of her blanket, Mary cut the belt around her waist into two lengths. Selecting four of the straightest branches, Mary bound them two by two with her belt, to form a pair of upside down V's.

"I am not big enough," said Mary, looking to Emma for help.

Going to Mary's aid, Emma stood the two upside down V's in the snow. Then Emma lifted an even longer branch over the two ends, to create a drying rack for the meat.

After placing their precious food on the rack, Emma built a small fire below the meat to hurry the drying process. Until everything was completely dry for storage, Emma and Mary needed to keep watch for hungry scavengers.

The very next day, Emma was awakened by the sound of crunching snow. Going for her shotgun, she crawled to the entrance, expecting to find some animal, attracted by the smell of the meat they had taken down for the night.

"Josiah!" Emma struggled through the doorway and into the mountain man's weary arms.

"Easy does it, Emma," Josiah tried to steady himself from being knocked over. "I ain't too strong."

Releasing the bearskin coat, Emma looked into the gaunt face of her husband. Josiah's back hunched forward with weakness, and his broad shoulders sagged, as though it were a difficult thing to hold his rifle.

"When have you last eaten, Josiah?"

Excitedly, Mary came out to greet him.

Weakly rubbing his forehead, Josiah paused before answering. "I ain't rightly knowing. I ate all the fringe off my buckskins, and was thinking long hard about starting in on my moccasins."

Mouth wide open, Mary stared at Josiah in horror. Emma understood how the girl felt, for he looked terrible.

"I ate some roots a few days ago," said Josiah. His knees started buckling, and Emma rushed to keep him upright.

"Mary, take his flintlock, and then put out the meat so it can continue drying. Can you keep watch without me?"

"Yes, Ma." Solemnly, Mary took the heavy rifle from Josiah, and then went inside to gather their still-wet meat.

Ravenous with hunger, Josiah grasped at Emma's words. "You have meat?"

"Mary and I shot a wolf, yesterday," said Emma, as he leaned against her for support. "You need to lay down."

"I need to *eat*," said Josiah. When Mary appeared, he snatched a strip of meat from her small burden and began eating the morsel raw.

Kneeling, Emma hurried to untie Josiah's snowshoes while he busily ate. Unwilling to part with food for even a moment, Josiah clamped the unfinished meat between his teeth so he could get down on his hands and knees to crawl into the lodge.

Dropping on the nearest buffalo robe, Josiah continued eating. Emma struggled to pull his arms through his heavy coat so he wouldn't overheat in the warm shelter, but Josiah did little to help, for his attention was consumed with food.

Before Josiah had a chance to ask for more, Emma began cooking meat over the fire.

His first helping of meat safely in his belly, Josiah stared yearningly at the cooking food.

"Do you think you can wait?" asked Emma.

"I could, but I sure don't want to," said Josiah, wiping his mouth hungrily.

Reluctantly, Emma gave the partially cooked meat to Josiah. He eagerly gulped it down, wincing as the hot food burned his tongue.

By the time Josiah was nearing the end of his meal, he was falling asleep between mouthfuls. Emma made up his bed with blankets and buffalo robes, and the weary man tried to climb in before she was finished. As soon as Josiah's head hit the robes, he fell asleep.

"Ma?" a small voice called Emma to the entrance. "Is Pa all right?"

Crawling to the entrance to speak in hushed whispers, Emma smiled consolingly to Mary. "He's very hungry and weak, but I believe he'll be fine."

"Will he die, Ma?"

"No, Little One, he won't die. He's just very tired."

"Could we pray he won't die?" asked Mary.

Taking Mary's small hand in hers, Emma bowed her head. Keeping her voice low so she wouldn't disturb Josiah's rest, Emma asked God to help Josiah regain his strength, and to cause Josiah to learn from his suffering.

Having given their concerns to God's keeping, Mary smiled a little more bravely, and Emma felt a little more hopeful that something good might come from Josiah's ordeal.

Before he opened his eyes, Josiah savored the warmth of the blankets and robes; after being cold for so long, it was a welcome sensation. He first opened one eye and then the other, listening for the sounds of Emma and Mary moving about the lodge. Hearing nothing but the crackle of the fire, Josiah sat up in bed, only to discover that it was nighttime, and Emma and Mary were asleep.

Even though his belly prodded him to find food, Josiah remained in bed, silently watching Emma as she slept. The glow of the dim fire cast a warmth on her that went straight to Josiah's heart. Beside her lay Mary, cuddled in her blankets with the Christmas doll Emma had sewn.

With all the stealth of a Blackfoot warrior, Josiah left his bed without making a sound. Sitting down beside Emma's blankets, he lightly stroked her golden braids. He could barely feel the texture of her silken hair through his hardened callouses. Oh, how his soul longed for Emma!

As though sensing he was close by, Emma unexpectedly stirred. Before he could hide, two eyes were peering up at him.

"Is it morning, already?" asked Emma.

"No, it's still dark out. Reckon I slept the day through."

"There's not much meat left after today, but Mary and I saved you enough for a good meal."

Josiah was quiet. He thoughtfully caressed Emma's cheek.

"Please, Josiah--"

"Don't fret yerself, Emma. I ain't trying to get you to tussle with me." With a weary sigh, Josiah withdrew his hand.

"Did you see any signs of game?" asked Emma.

Josiah laughed softly. "If they're in the valley, God's doing a good job of keeping me from them." The firelight was playing with Emma's features again, making it nearly impossible for him to remove his gaze from her face. "I sure missed you, Emma."

Emma was cautiously silent. It was evident she didn't want to encourage him to lay down with her.

"It ain't what yer thinking," Josiah said with a small grin. "Emma, I can read yer face-- almost as easily as you can read that Bible of yers. I'm speaking of something else, altogether."

Emma looked puzzled.

"You and me was getting to be good friends, and I kinda miss that." Josiah studied her face with a wistful smile. "I surely do miss that."

Resting her head against the buffalo robes, Emma didn't say a word.

"Emma, when I was with that Shoshone woman, I wasn't trying to hurt you."

"Why did you do it, Josiah?"

Josiah hesitated. "Not too long ago, it was just me and the other trappers. Then you come along, and suddenly I have thoughts about turning Christian. And, as much as I'm ashamed to admit it, a little girl and a baby don't exactly make a man feel very free."

Tears formed in Emma's brown eyes and she struggled to get them under control.

"I wasn't trying to hurt you, Emma."

"Then will you promise to be faithful?"

"I can't."

"Why not? What's stopping you?"

"I know what I am. Even if I promised to be true, I'd only go whoring after other women again; it ain't no use pretending differently." Josiah wanted to dry Emma's tears, but was afraid of making them worse. "Can't you accept it?"

Emma shook her head. "I refuse to be treated like one of your whores. I'm your wife, and I won't share you with anyone else."

Sniffing back another sob, Emma sat up to look him straight in the eye. Josiah felt his insides quiver as she raised her hand to touch his cheek. He wondered if he was blushing the way she sometimes did, when he caressed her.

"You belong to me, Josiah."

He swallowed hard. "I reckon that's true enough."

"Then promise me."

"I can't, Emma."

Her bottom lip trembled, and her hand slipped from his face. This time, Emma's tears would not be stopped, and she fell back to the buffalo robes to drown her sorrow against the heavy fur.

Despair closed in around Josiah. He never felt more hopeless than he did at that very moment. In full retreat, he went to bed without eating any of the meat Mary and Emma had saved for him. Though his stomach hungered, there was a far greater hunger in his soul that no amount of meat could ever satisfy.

Josiah loathed himself. He couldn't even promise his own dear wife that he would be faithful. His sins came up before him in a long, seemingly never-ending succession of past misdeeds.

Throwing back the blankets, Josiah grabbed his rifle and coat, and then hurried from the shelter. He had often joked with friends of how he was going to be in hell before the rest of them, for he was the biggest hell-raiser in all the Rocky Mountains. He could sweet-talk a woman into anything, and his laughing brag had always been that there was no greater scoundrel than Josiah Brown.

Feeling himself slipping into the gaping mouth of hell, Josiah was no longer laughing.

A silvery moon shone through the thick clouds, giving Josiah just enough light to find a nearby cleft of rocks. Knocking off the snow, he seated himself on a cold boulder.

The question proposed itself to Josiah's mind: "Will you surrender?"

"No!" came his quick response. "Never!"

Josiah didn't care if he was speaking like a madman seeing phantoms. He had something to say, and he hoped God was listening.

"You've never cared about me before, but I've a gripe with you, God. Look what You've done to Emma! You knew I'd break her heart, and yet You gave her to me-- plopped her in my lap like a star falling from the heavens. Emma's a good woman. She didn't deserve me, and now she's crying!" Josiah stared at the moon, waiting for a response. "Didn't You hear me, God? Emma's crying! Don't You care?"

The only reply Josiah heard, was the whistle of the wind as it whipped past his hiding place in the rocks.

"Emma's all wrong about You! You don't care one whit about her, do You?"

Again, there was no reply. Josiah grinned bitterly. That's what he thought.

Somewhere in the recesses of Josiah's heart, he suddenly remembered, (of all things), a Bible verse Emma had once read out loud. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

There was a lump in Josiah's throat. He didn't dare say another word, for now he was certain he was in the presence of God. Did God really care about Emma? or even what happened to a lone mountain man with mixed blood? Josiah had heard about the cross where Jesus went to die for the sins of the world, and for the first time, it suddenly meant a lot to him. It meant God cared, and right there, beneath the large brilliant moon, Josiah knew God cared about Emma.

From what that verse had claimed, God also cared about Josiah Brown.

The revelation sank into Josiah's soul, until he heard the faint words once more: "Will you surrender?"

"What would I have to surrender?" asked Josiah. Immediately, his conscience bare witness against him. He was a self-confessed scoundrel, who was at this very moment breaking his wife's heart. "All right, God. I'll give up whoring. I'm going to need a powerful lot of help from You, though, fer that sin runs mighty deep. What else?"

Again, Josiah didn't have long to wait. Whether he had wanted to pay attention to those many times Emma read aloud from the Bible, or not, his memory was alive with God's words. Would he repent of *all* his sins, and believe on the name of Jesus? He recalled once more, "whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." God was making the offer, but Josiah needed to accept it, if he were to have that everlasting life the Bible spoke of.

"It's too late fer me, God. I reckon I've about broke every rule there is, and there ain't no saving my soul."

Whoever. That single word echoed in Josiah's heart with startling clarity. Whoever didn't mean someone else-- it meant HIM.

Wiping the wet collecting in his eyes, Josiah got down on his knees. "I surrender," he said in a hushed voice, "I surrender." In the clefts of the rocks, Josiah gave his heart to God.

Lifting his head from prayer, Josiah saw the clouds part even more to reveal an endless night sky. Treetops silhouetted against a large brilliant moon, while stars shimmered so brightly they stunned Josiah's eyes. He felt as though the scales of his former life were falling away from his vision, and he were seeing everything for the first time. How had he not noticed this, before? The raw majesty of the Creator's hand was plainly evident everywhere Josiah looked.

Overwhelmed with awe, Josiah sank back in the snow and wept.

It was some time later when Emma heard Josiah's return. She wasn't quite sure how long he had been gone, for she had cried herself to sleep, only to be roused by the sound of rustling cottonwood boughs as he crawled inside.

Keeping still so Josiah wouldn't know she was awake, Emma's heart burned within her. She yearned to go to him and tell him she would turn a blind eye to his future indiscretions, if only they could have some of the tenderness they shared before. It wasn't easy for Emma to take the stand she had with Josiah, and she longed for him with every fiber in her being.

The musky scent of leather and dried sweat greeted Emma's nose, and she could feel Josiah's presence as he again sat beside her bed. Even though her eyes were tightly closed, Emma could feel his gaze as he examined her to see if she were awake.

Emma hoped Josiah would leave her alone. She was tired, and temptation was taking advantage of her weakened state.

"Emma?" Josiah's hushed voice cut through the silence, and Emma could feel his breath on her face. "You awake, Emma?"

Emma lay completely still.

"I need to speak with you, Emma."

Emma didn't move.

"I know yer awake, Emma. You ain't breathing like yer sleeping."

A small groan escaped Emma's lips and she reluctantly opened her eyes. Long locks of Josiah's hair tickled her neck, and Emma pushed them back with a gulp in her throat. There was that eagle feather, taunting her with something she was beginning to think would never happen. Josiah would never be hers, and the thought forced another tear from Emma's already low reservoir.

"You still crying?" he asked.

Emma dried her cheek. "Please, Josiah, leave me alone. I'm not coming to bed with you."

"I ain't expecting you to."

"Then why are you here?"

"I hafta tell you something important."

Waiting for Josiah to speak, Emma hoped she could keep silent. She didn't want to give herself the chance to weaken.

Josiah straightened, and Emma heard him sigh. "Reckon I don't blame you any for not wanting to listen-- not after what I done. It was selfish of me to bed that woman without giving any thought to you or God, and I'm sorry, Emma. From now on, I'll be faithful to you. I might have to lash myself to a tree to do it, but I'll do whatever it takes to keep my promise."

Stunned, Emma looked up at him in wonderment. She saw the tear stains on his cheeks, and realized he had been crying.

Josiah rubbed his face against the sleeve of his hunting shirt. "I didn't think it showed," he said in a low voice. "I even wet my face down with snow afore I come in to talk to you."

Emma sat up in bed to get a better look at her husband. "Are you sincere?"

"I was out there on the mountain, telling God I was a sinner and bawling like a baby. I reckon that's about as sincere as I git."

Emma's eyebrows raised in surprise. "Sinner?"

Josiah stared at the ground before raising his eyes to hers. "I told God I repented of what I done. That Bible of yers said to believe on the Son of God, so that's what I'm trying to do. I ain't thinking so big of myself to expect you to fergive me right now, but do you reckon God will? If He don't fergive me, then does that mean I can't have everlasting life?"

Emma pinched her arm. She was truly awake, and Josiah was waiting for an answer.

"If you've truly repented, and are believing on the name of Jesus, then God has forgiven you, Josiah."

"How can you be so sure? Does it say so in that book?"

Under pressure, Emma suddenly couldn't remember the verse she needed. Then it came to her: "If we confess our sins, [Jesus] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

"Where does it say that?" asked Josiah.

"I think it's in First John somewhere," said Emma, feeling very much as though she had awakened into a dream.

"Can I see it?" he asked. "I ain't trying to question yer book learning, but this is important."

"Yes, of course," nodded Emma. She pulled out the large Bible, opening it to First John.

"I want to see where it says those EXACT words," said Josiah.

The trapper hovered over Emma's shoulder so closely, she had trouble turning the pages without him getting in the way. When he didn't move after a gentle hint, Emma finally offered him the Bible.

"Would you like to do this for yourself?"

Moving back a little, Josiah mumbled something Emma couldn't understand.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you," said Emma.

Josiah groaned. "I said, '*I can't read.*' And don't you go laughing at me, Emma."

"I won't laugh," said Emma. She turned her attention back to the Bible, rather than embarrass Josiah any further.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't go telling people."

"Not everyone can read," said Emma. "Some people just haven't had the opportunity for a proper schooling."

"It ain't that. I mean about me bawling like a baby. My friends will never let me hear the end of it, if they find out."

"I won't tell anyone," said Emma. She glanced up at Josiah and saw the look of vulnerability etched in his face.

"Just find the verse," he sighed.

Emma located the verse in question, and read it word for word to Josiah. He touched the page, as though to confirm in his own mind that the promise was truly there, and then nodded in satisfaction.

"Reckon you can go back to sleep and git yer rest," said Josiah, taking the Bible from Emma and then covering her with blankets. He put the Bible back where Emma kept it stored, and then turned to go.

"Josiah?"

He paused. "What?"

"I forgive you."

Turning his back to Emma, Josiah nodded brusquely. Without a word, he went to his bed.

Emma wondered if she had said something to offend Josiah. He was careful to keep his back to her as he laid down on his side and covered himself, and when his shoulders began to heave, Emma understood why.

Josiah was crying.

It didn't take long for Emma to make her decision. Crawling to the other side of the shelter, she climbed beneath Josiah's covers; he didn't seem to notice her until she lightly touched his shoulder to announce her presence.

Turning his head, Josiah looked at her with reddened eyes. Emma tried very hard not to stare at him.

"Are you moving back to my bed?" he asked, his voice breaking as he spoke.

"This is where I belong," Emma said softly.

"Oh, Emma!"

Turning over, Josiah slid down on the robes until his face buried in Emma's bosom and his blankets and moccasins stuck out the lodge entrance. He wrapped his arms around Emma, clinging to her while his frame shook with grief.

Tenderly stroking Josiah's head, Emma untangled his mass of shaggy curls until his sobs gradually quieted down. She listened to his stomach grumble with hunger, and felt the unnatural leanness of his body against hers. When he finally fell asleep, tears were still drying in his eyes.

Much went through Emma's mind as she held Josiah. The fatigue of strong emotion and lack of sleep prevented her from thinking too clearly, but one thing resounded in her heart more loudly than all else: "Thank you, God!"

Dawn peeked through the cracks of the shelter as Emma went to sleep.

Daylight was something Josiah couldn't easily ignore, especially when he knew he had two mouths to feed. Leaving Emma carefully tucked in bed, Josiah found Mary sitting by the fire. Picking up his flintlock, he sat down beside Mary to prepare for the day's hunt.

"Eaten breakfast, yit?" he asked.

Mary solemnly shook her head. "The last of the meat is for *you*."

"Fer *me*? What about *you*?"

"Ma and I had ours, yesterday."

"What about today?" asked Josiah, cleaning his flintlock while keeping an eye on Mary's brave features. "What are you going to do fer food?"

Mary quietly stared at his rifle, as though he were holding the answer.

"I'll be going hunting after I eat," said Josiah. "I'd be willing to part with some of my breakfast, though. Reckon you'll help me finish off that meat?"

Nodding eagerly, Mary's face broke into a smile for the first time that morning.

After laying aside his flintlock to divide up the last of the food, Josiah watched Mary bow her head to pray.

"Would you do yer praying out loud?" he asked.

Without asking why, Mary did as requested. In simple, childlike words, Mary thanked God for their breakfast. She offered no railing accusations as to why there was no more food, but sincerely thanked God for the small bit of meat her pa had given her to eat.

After hearing Mary's prayer, Josiah bit into his breakfast. Chuckling, he shook his head. "I was just recollecting what I said about God or me being the first to bring back meat. Reckon He put me in my place."

Mary smiled.

The shadow of a certain Blackfoot woman was visible in Mary's smile, and Josiah felt resentment welling inside his heart. Cruelty had come too easily in the past, and it frightened Josiah how strongly it tempted him even now.

"Did you..." Josiah hesitated. "Did you hear any of what yer ma and I said last night?"

Mary shook her head, "no."

"I apologized to yer ma fer being unfaithful."

"Is that why she slept in your bed, and not mine?"

Josiah nodded. "It is. I also did some repenting before God, and now I reckon I need to make things right with *you*."

Mary listened intently. It was clear she understood something big was happening.

"It ain't been easy fer me to take a strong liking to you. Yer the spiting image of yer ma-- the one that borned you-- and I don't have a lot of fond memories of her. Truth is, I look back at what I done with her, and I... I don't like myself." Josiah hesitated, wondering how much he should tell Mary. Would Emma be angry with him for using words like "seduced" and "adultery" to a five-year old?

"What I'm trying to say is, I'm sorry. Yer first ma suffered a great deal because of me, and so have you. I can't look back on what I done, without feeling shame." Josiah swallowed the lump in his throat. He was determined not to cry in front of Mary. "Do you think... maybe, you might fergive me?"

It only took Mary a moment's thought before nodding, "yes."

"I'm obliged to you."

Grinning, Mary resumed her meal.

After breakfast, Josiah cleaned and loaded Mary's pistol. Emma was still asleep, so Josiah was careful to keep quiet as he got out his snowshoes and a buffalo robe to leave.

"When will you be back?" asked Mary, following Josiah outside on hands and knees.

"That depends. You reckon God will help me?"

Mary's head bobbed up and down in an emphatic, "yes."

"You seem mighty confident. You reckon God answers prayer?"

Mary again nodded. "You are now a Christian, ain't you?"

Josiah chuckled. "Look after yer ma, and let her sleep as long as she wants. There ain't nothing to eat, anyway, so she might as well save her strength. Keep to the lodge, and I'll try to be back afore sundown." Closing his heavy coat, Josiah put on his fox skin cap and headed off toward the open valley.

Strong winds and a hidden sun kept Josiah cold well into the afternoon. He had hoped after all his repenting and trying to make things right, that food would suddenly appear in front of his gun sight. Wasn't God pleased with him? Josiah wasn't sure. How could he know if God wasn't still waiting for him to do more?

The center of the day came and went, and Josiah's empty stomach weakened his legs, dulled his judgment, and made his spirits even lower than before. It was difficult to believe God had forgiven him when starvation was staring his family in the face.

With staggering steps, Josiah talked into the air as though God were walking right beside him.

"I've surrendered my soul to You, so the only thing left to give is my life. If Yer needing it, then take it. I give it gladly. Only, save Emma and Mary. They ain't deserving to be left out here with no one to take care of them."

Josiah's breath labored, and his legs felt like dead weights. He didn't know how much further he could press forward without collapsing. He had come close to death before, but he never had so much to lose. The thought of Emma slowly wasting away from hunger kept prodding him to go on. When cold threatened to rob him of his consciousness, Josiah pictured Mary, pining for something to eat.

Sinking to his knees, Josiah stared up at the snowing heavens. "God, I reckon I'm at the end of my rope. I've bin all over this valley, and there ain't hide nor hair of any game. I could go farther, but I ain't got the strength. I don't mind dying so much, if it weren't fer Emma and Mary."

A chilling gust of wind forced Josiah to the cover of a nearby tree, and he hunkered down with his buffalo robe for some rest.

"Do with me what You want, God. I'm willing."

Exhaustion pulled at Josiah's eyelids, and he fought to keep them open. It would be easy to fall asleep in the cold, never to awaken. But until God told him to lay down and die, Josiah was going to continue fighting for life. He had no choice. God hadn't taken his life yet, so there was only one thing left to do: carry on.

Getting up, Josiah willed himself forward.

"I'm needing yer help, God. I can't do this without You."

A gust of wind knocked Josiah off his weakened feet, and he sprawled on the snow. So this was it. After all he had been through, he was going to die. Josiah closed his eyes, surrendering his fate to the hands of God.

Just then, Josiah heard a faint noise above the howling wind. He weakly lifted his head. There, in an open stand of trees, was a large mule deer. Busily eating twigs, the buck seemed unaware of Josiah's presence, for the wind had pushed Josiah to the ground just in time to conceal his presence from the animal. Josiah grinned. He would never speak of "mere luck" again. Mouthing a silent thanks to Heaven, Josiah slowly raised his rifle and then squeezed the trigger.

It didn't take long for Josiah to have the deer skinned and ready. He left nothing inedible. Eyes, heart, tongue, liver, kidneys-- anything and everything that had nutrition, he took. Bundling his harvest into the wet deerskin, Josiah hoisted the heavy load over his shoulder. Its weight caused him to sink in the snow, and Josiah had to put the burden down to eat. He had no strength to return on an empty stomach, and was too hungry to bother lighting a fire to cook food. As did many Indians, Josiah ate the meat raw. It was fresh kill, and he was famished.

Finishing just enough food to recover some strength, Josiah headed for his lodge by the foothills.

Waking from her slumber, Emma smiled when she saw Mary sitting by the entrance with her pistol.

"See any wolves?" she asked the child.

"No," came the glum response.

Crawling to the fire, Emma heard her stomach rumble with hunger. She had known hunger before, but now that she was with child, strength was harder to find. Fighting back panic, Emma prayed for food.

"Pa talked to me," said Mary, crawling into the entrance to sit beside Emma.

"He did? What about?"

"He said he was sorry."

Taking a deep breath, Emma nodded in affirmation. So it hadn't been a dream, after all. Her life truly *had* changed, for Josiah had changed.

"I am hungry, Ma."

"I know. So am I."

Hugging Mary, Emma kept warm by feeding dry wood into the fire.

Light was growing dim in the early evening sky when Emma heard the familiar crunch of Josiah's snowshoes. She and Mary scrambled out of the lodge, only to find Josiah loaded down with a buckskin full of food.

"Lookit what God provided!" Josiah laughed heartily. "I nearly missed this here buck, if God hadn't knocked me to the ground first!"

It felt strange to Emma's ears to hear Josiah speak of God without derision or anger in his voice. Once again, she thanked God for this remarkable change in Josiah.

"Git out yer kettle, Emma, and start boiling up some stew!"

"Meat! Meat!" Mary said happily.

The girls went inside to ready the kettle for supper, and Josiah shoved his bundle in after them.

Settling on the floor, he took off his coat to begin stripping branches for an indoor meat rack. Josiah tied the branches together and then placed his rack by the fire where meat could dry from the heat. The rack took up some room, leaving only the two beds and a place to sit while cooking.

His work finished, Josiah sat cross-legged on his buffalo robes, waiting for supper. He quietly studied the falling snow outside their entrance, the weave of cottonwood boughs lining the floor, the brightly colored pattern on Mary's Christmas doll's dress-- but not once did he look in Emma's direction.

"I was afraid you might have to camp outside, tonight," said Emma, trying to see if he would look at her.

Josiah harrumphed. He rubbed his arm, and then reclined on the bed with a tired sigh.

"Supper is almost ready," said Emma. "Shall we say grace before we eat?"

Sitting up, Josiah folded his hands in his lap, closed his eyes, and waited for Emma to pray. Following Josiah's example, Mary did likewise.

"Heavenly Father, thank you for sending us this food. Thank you for Your blessings, and thank you for not giving up on us. In Jesus' name, Amen."

"Amen," said Josiah. Still, he didn't meet Emma's gaze.

The smell of savory stew filled the lodge as Emma dipped their tin cup into the kettle. Mary was the first to eat, and she hungrily gulped down chunks of meat and broth like someone who hadn't seen food in days, and not just since breakfast.

Filling the cup again, Emma handed it to Josiah. Josiah, however, refused to go before her.

"You eat next, Emma."

Doing as she was told, Emma ate from the cup and then filled it for Josiah. The process was repeated until everyone had full bellies and broad, satisfied smiles.

While Emma leaned from the entrance to clean the kettle in the snow, Mary played with her doll, lovingly rocking it to sleep as though it were a baby. In a hushed lullaby, Mary quietly sang "Amazing Grace," her small voice filling the lodge with sweet melody.

Emma saw Josiah's eyes close. At first, she thought he had fallen asleep, but when a tear slid down Josiah's cheek, she knew he was listening to Mary's hymn.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

"'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed."

Josiah brushed something wet from his face as Mary finished her soft lullaby. Kissing her doll, Mary gently tucked it in bed and wished it goodnight.

"It's time you got in bed, yourself," Emma told Mary.

"But, I am not sleepy."

Leaning toward Mary, Emma whispered, "Your pa and I need some time to ourselves. I'll let you stay up late, tomorrow."

Disappointed, Mary bowed her head. "I sleep by myself?"

"Are you trying to make me feel guilty?" Emma chucked a finger under Mary's chin, and the girl smiled. "You'll have your doll to keep you company. Come, let me hear you say your bedtime prayer."

In her usual custom, Mary listed off her prayer requests. This time, instead of asking God to "save Pa's soul," Mary changed it to "thank you for making Ma smile again."

The prayer over, Emma kissed Mary's cheek. "Goodnight, Little One."

After stoking the fire so it would last the night, Emma crawled to Josiah's bed. He sat quietly staring into the flames, his face deep in thought.

"Would you move over to make room for me?" asked Emma, for he was in the middle of the bed.

Grunting, Josiah scooted against the wall of the lodge, giving Emma the warmer side next to the cozy fire. He didn't move as Emma climbed beneath the covers and made herself comfortable.

"Aren't you tired?" asked Emma.

"I reckon."

"Are you coming to bed?"

He looked at Emma's yellow braids as she took out her hairpins for the night. Avoiding Emma's eyes, he turned back to the fire.

"Josiah, are you all right?"

"Reckon so."

"I was hoping we could talk," said Emma.

"Ain't we doing that, already?"

"I meant..." Emma checked the small girl who was staring at them, "out of earshot of you-know-who."

Mary giggled.

After managing to get under the blankets he was sitting on, Josiah lay down with a yawn. Because there was no room for him to stretch his legs, he had to remain on his side. Emma, on the other hand, could fit just right, and had enough room to lay on her back without her feet poking through the lodge's entrance.

Even though facing Emma, Josiah didn't look directly at her, but promptly shut his eyes.

Emma was disappointed. "You aren't going to sleep, are you?"

"I'm awake, Emma. Go ahead and speak yer mind. I'll listen."

Lowering her voice, Emma hoped Mary couldn't overhear. "Are you doing all right? You've been quiet all evening."

Josiah didn't respond.

"Please, look at me, Josiah."

Two dark eyes trained on her face, and a faint smile tugged at the corners of Josiah's mouth. "Are you sure you don't want to sleep with Mary? I can wait until yer ready fer me, Emma."

"What are you talking about?"

Josiah sighed heavily. "I bruised yer trust something terrible. I got no right thinking you'll nestle with me like before."

"You made peace with God, Josiah. If He can forgive you, then so can I."

Propping himself up on an elbow, Josiah looked at Emma in earnest. "You don't want time to think it over?"

"I already have."

"And?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"What if it ain't safe fer you to trust me? I don't know, Emma. I ain't so sure. I aim to keep my promise to you, but until I have a chance to prove myself, maybe you should keep to Mary's side of the lodge."

Emma was dumbfounded. "This doesn't sound like the Josiah I know. Why, in the past, he coaxed and cajoled until he got his way."

"I'm knowing that, but a man can change."

"Even you?"

Josiah grinned. "Even me."

"How long do we have to wait, before you've been properly tested?"

"I'm serious, Emma."

"So am I. There aren't a lot of women around, Josiah."

"I know." With a groan, Josiah shook his head. "I still don't think it's right, me going back to the way things were as though nothing happened."

Noticing the ragged edge of his hunting shirt, Emma tried to straighten the few stray tassels of fringe still remaining. "I won't pretend things are the same, because they aren't. Every time you're around another woman, my trust will be tested."

"What should I do?" asked Josiah. The hint of desperation in his voice told Emma he was sincere.

"Choose me, Josiah. When temptation is strongest, actively choose me over anyone else. Do that, and I'll know you're staying faithful."

Caressing Emma's cheek with his finger, Josiah grinned as her skin blushed at his touch. "I knew it when you gave me that there eagle feather; you was claiming all of me fer yerself."

"Please, Josiah, choose me."

Drawing Emma's mouth to his, Josiah kissed her lips until Emma felt his passion weaken and he finally had to stop.

Wearily, Josiah dropped back on his side. "I'm dog-tired, Emma."

"Then we should stop talking, so you can sleep." Emma pulled the covers up under her chin. "Goodnight, Josiah."

"Ain't you going to kiss me goodnight?"

"What do you think we just did?"

"That weren't a goodnight kiss. It was more 'hello,' than 'see you later.'"

Laughing softly, Emma planted a kiss on Josiah's cheek. Then she prepared to go to sleep.

"Emma?"

"Yes?"

"I ain't too tired to nestle."

Beneath the warm blankets, Emma moved onto her side and then nestled her back against Josiah's chest. Pulling her even closer, Josiah hugged her tightly with a strong arm. A moan of contentment escaped his lips as his tired body slowly relaxed into deep rest.

Dreamily watching the soft firelight as it danced along the walls of the lodge, Emma felt her eyelids grow heavy. She hugged the muscular arm about her shoulders. Josiah had chosen her, and Emma's happiness filled the entire lodge until even little Mary was smiling in her sleep.

"Thus saith the LORD, The people which were left... found grace in the wilderness; even [Josiah], when I went to cause him to rest... Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee."

~ Jeremiah 31:2, 3 ~

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son [Jesus], that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

~ John 3:16 ~

Chapter Eleven
A Holiday for Emma

1837, South of Josiah's cabin, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"He [God] healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds."

~ Psalm 147:3 ~

(The name "Josiah" means, "whom Jehovah heals.")

When Emma awoke, everyone else still slept. Josiah's arm remained clamped about her shoulders, and Emma longed to stay for a little longer. However, she needed a trip outside, and with a twinge of regret, she loosened his hold.

Josiah gave a low unwilling moan as his arm moved from her shoulders. Thankful when he didn't wake up, she crawled from the bed to go find her shotgun.

Weapon in hand, Emma stole to the entrance of the lodge. Outside, an overcast sky blackened the night stars. She didn't know how soon morning would come, but Emma already knew she would be unable to lay down and get more sleep. Her mind was too awake.

After having relieved herself by the protection of some nearby trees, Emma made her way back to the lodge. Before she could get down on her hands and knees to crawl inside, a small face greeted her at the doorway.

"Ma, I need to go."

Emma smiled at the irony. "Come with me, then."

Looking a little frightened, Mary cast her eyes about the wild terrain before crawling outside.

"How long have you been afraid of the dark?" asked Emma, for this hadn't been the first time Emma had noticed.

Mary gave a slight shrug.

Taking Mary's small hand in hers, Emma led her to some trees. "Have you always been like this? You can tell me, Mary."

Emma heard a small sigh.

"Yes," the little voice admitted. "*Naahks* said I am a small mouse, afraid of the hunting owl. I do not like being the mouse, though."

For a moment, Emma remained puzzled, until she remembered *naahks* was the Blackfoot word for "grandmother."

"Perhaps it's time you became the owl."

Mary looked puzzled. "What do you mean, Ma?"

"I mean," said Emma, helping Mary smooth down her deerskin dress after the child had finished, "when you're busy trusting in God's protection, there's much less time for fear."

A small row of white teeth glittered in the semidarkness as Mary grinned broadly. "I know! You must have a promise! Tell me, Ma!" Mary's cold hand took Emma's, as they slowly made their way back to the lodge.

"What makes you think I have a promise?" asked Emma. She could almost hear Mary roll her eyes as the child let out an exasperated,

"Maaaa!"

Laughing, Emma remarked to herself that even though Mary had grown up amongst Indians, some things were the same no matter where you went.

"Very well," Emma smiled, "I find my courage in Psalms: 'The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? ... Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear.' Whenever I remember those words, I cannot help but find more courage."

Mary didn't look a bit surprised. "I will try to remember that, too."

The stout look on Mary's face made Emma smile. "For someone already so brave, I predict conquering the dark will be easier than you think."

Hearing this, Mary shook her head. "You are much braver than me; I did not shoot the wolf."

"No, but you were the one who told me how to skin it," said Emma, as Mary stooped to enter the lodge.

Yawning, Mary crawled into bed. She smiled at Emma, shut her eyes, and before long, fell back to sleep.

Not feeling the least bit sleepy, Emma sat beside the fire with a warm blanket about her body. When her finger felt a small rip in the heavy cloth, she held the blanket up before the light for a closer inspection. If she had a needle and thread, she could easily mend this. Emma sighed. She missed the cabin, and her sewing box, and the security of having four solid walls about her. This lodge of branches and buffalo hides created a warm enough shelter, but Emma missed the cabin.

Something stirred on the other side of the tiny dwelling, and Emma discovered Josiah staring at her.

"I didn't know you were awake," said Emma.

"I awoke, when you left me."

Emma raised her eyebrows in surprise. "You did?"

Josiah grinned. "I heard what you was telling Mary."

"Oh?"

Josiah's grin broadened. "You shot a wolf, huh?" He had been so famished and weak, he evidently hadn't noticed what he ate.

"Yes, but Mary helped."

"You're quite a woman, Emma."

"I told you, Mary helped."

"I heard you." His grin remaining, Josiah cast a curious glance to the small bed where Mary lay. "You awake?"

"I'm certainly not asleep," said Emma.

Josiah scowled. "I weren't talking to you." He inspected the sleeping child a moment longer before pulling off his hunting shirt. "Want to tussle, Emma? Mary's sleeping."

"Must you put it that way, Josiah?"

Unfazed, Josiah opened the blankets and patted the buffalo robes beside him.

Emma smiled and crawled into bed. She wanted to show Josiah how much she forgave him, but even so, his touch felt different. She struggled to reign in the painful thoughts that accosted her. Not long ago, another woman had filled these strong arms and drank from the same mouth that now smothered hers.

A large hand slipped behind Emma, coming to rest at the small of her back. Emma felt sick. Her stomach turned, and she scrambled from the robes.

Ignoring Josiah's concern, Emma crawled outside to lose her supper. By the time she finished, she looked up to find him nearby with his rifle.

"I'm all right," she said, returning to the warmth of the lodge before he could speak.

Josiah followed her inside, his bare chest flaked with freshly fallen snow. He shuddered from the sharp chill, and Emma wrapped him in a thick blanket.

"You feeling better?" he asked, his eyes large with concern.

"I suppose." Emma tried to shake off the question as though it didn't matter.

"Reckon it's the baby?"

"Perhaps."

Her one word answer seemed to preoccupy Josiah as he sat down on the bed with his blanket. Emma remained by the fire, still trying to rid herself of what she had felt while in his arms.

"Yer fixing to ask me something," said Josiah. "I can tell by that small crease on yer brow. When yer mind is busy working, I usually see that crease."

"I don't want to make you angry," said Emma.

The mountain man sat up straight on the buffalo robes. His chest stiffened, as though waiting for an expected blow. "I reckon you've a right to ask me anything you want." His words came out slow and full of caution, and Emma took a deep breath.

"Did you... did you hold that Shoshone woman the same way you hold me, when we tussle?"

The long quiet pause before Josiah's response felt like an eternity to Emma.

"I reckon I did," he said finally.

"Did you place your hand on the small of her back?" Emma knew it would be less painful if she didn't know, but she had to ask. She had always treated that one special touch as a sign of Josiah's affection.

"I can't be certain," Josiah said with obvious reluctance, "but I probably did."

Biting her lip, Emma came back to bed.

Josiah moved over so she could climb beneath the covers, though he made no attempts to resume where they had left off.

Emma felt the hot sting of tears, and she swiped them away before Josiah could notice. "Thank you for answering truthfully," she said in a choked voice. Rolling onto her side, Emma shut her eyes. She heard Josiah open his mouth to say something, but only silence followed.

The next morning, Josiah pulled some deer meat from the rack by the fire and then located his flintlock. Emma must've have drifted off sometime during the early morning hours, for her soft breathing told him she slept soundly.

Tearing off a bite of jerky, Josiah set aside the remainder of dried meat to tend to his rifle. His soul felt heavy, and it grieved him to know Emma had been crying.

Muttering beneath his breath, Josiah caught himself before he began to swear. He hadn't needed anyone to quote chapter and verse from the Bible to know he shouldn't say such things. His mother had always scolded him for taking the Lord's name in vain, but until now, he had never made the effort to mend his ways.

It wasn't easy to change.

Biting his tongue, Josiah asked God for patience. He would need a whole lot more than he had right now, if he weren't going to terribly disappoint God and Emma.

As he thought this over, Emma pushed back her covers and sat up in bed.

"Morning, Em."

Emma gave him a smile that made his insides feel warm.

He knew he probably grinned like a boy who had seen his first girl, but Josiah didn't care. He turned the rifle in his hands, as though it required his complete attention. "Reckon I'll be headed out to see if I can't find another deer. I'm sure hoping God will put one in my way, for that there buck I got yesterday, won't last us all winter."

"God won't forsake us," Emma said confidently.

"I'm admiring yer faith." Josiah looked up from his weapon. "I keep thinking I'll go out there, and won't find any game. I don't know," Josiah resumed his inspection, "maybe my spirits are low. I didn't sleep too good." He quickly looked back at Emma. "I ain't blaming you fer anything. I just had a bad sleep, that's all."

Getting on hands and knees, Emma came to his side. His heart skipped a beat as she rested her pretty head against his shoulder.

"I love you, Josiah."

Josiah's work came to a complete stop, and he looked down at his wife. "Yer just saying that to make me happy."

Emma peered up at him. "Is it working?"

Shaking his head with a harrumph, Josiah couldn't help but shower Emma with a grin. "I reckon it is."

Emma smiled, and a contented sigh filled Josiah's lungs. He soaked in the comfort of her tenderness, and suddenly, his spirits were no longer gloomy. He felt as though he could stalk the most elusive deer, and return to Emma successful. "If yer smiling, then God must be smiling, too," he said with a surge of hopefulness.

"That's hardly a good barometer," said Emma. "Live before God with a clean conscience and obey His words, and you can be sure God will be smiling."

"But it don't hurt none, if yer smiling, too."

Emma hugged his arm.

Nuzzling his face against the top of Emma's blonde head, Josiah inhaled her natural fragrance and closed his eyes. "Wish I didn't have to go out today. I surely do like it when yer with me, Emma."

The hold on his arm grew snugger, and Josiah fought to control himself from coaxing Emma into anything more. Then another thought, completely unrelated, occurred to him.

"Em? I'm wondering-- what's a *barometer*?"

The snow fell heavily as Josiah picked his way through the blanketed treetops and boulders. Having left Emma behind in the shelter, he struggled to keep his hopes high. There were no signs of game, and he felt as though they were purposefully hidden away from him.

Josiah looked up at the clouded heavens. "Help me have stronger faith, God. I sure am struggling right now." Rubbing the back of his neck, Josiah tried to remember the promise Emma had read to him from the Bible that morning. "I can't remember it all, God, but Emma said you was promising to help us. I'm just mentioning it, so no one here fergets anything important." Hoping God didn't take offense at this small reminder of His own promise, Josiah continued on his way.

At about the center of the day, Emma heard footsteps outside the lodge. She hadn't expected Josiah to return so soon, even though her faith had been constantly reminding God of his Word all morning long.

Mary quickly crawled to the entrance to peek outside. "It is Pa!"

Surprised, Emma followed Mary out the small doorway. Before them stood Josiah, a wet hide slung over his back.

"This here elk should make good eating," grinned Josiah, as he heaved his heavy burden onto the snow. "I reckon there ain't but a handful of mule deer and elk in these parts, but God's giving us enough food to get by. I can't ask fer much more than that." He surveyed the ground beside their lodge. "I'm thinking of building a second shelter for us to dry meat. Mary, go fetch my axe."

Shading her eyes from the harsh glare of the snow, Emma felt encouraged to hear Josiah's confidence in God.

Nodding as though he could guess her thoughts, Josiah grinned. "God is good, Emma. He's proving it to me, one day at a time."

The two girls helped gather the wood and branches Josiah chopped, and created a pile from which he could construct a second structure. When the cone-shaped shelter came near to completion, Josiah removed one of their buffalo robes from the main lodge. Cloaking the new lodge with the robe, Josiah made certain the smoke hole in the center remained open. After starting a good-sized fire inside, Josiah fashioned more meat racks.

His preparations complete, Josiah began cutting the meat into thin strips. The thinner he could cut, the quicker the meat would dry. This took much of the day, as it was a very large elk.

Supper time came, and Josiah swallowed his meal before plopping down on the buffalo robes to sleep. Emma could only crawl into bed beside him and make sure he kept warm.

When Emma awoke in the morning, she found Josiah sitting by the fire, eating breakfast.

"I ain't going hunting this morning, so I'll be here to keep watch over the campsite. You can go back to sleep, Emma."

"But, don't we need more food?"

"The snow's coming down too hard to do much tracking, but I ain't overly concerned. We've already got enough meat to last us a little while."

"How long is a 'little while'?" asked Emma.

"It's as long as it takes until we run out," Josiah said with a chuckle. "It won't last nearly as long as we'll want it to, but I reckon God knows best. When He wants us to have more, He'll send it."

"That sounds like faith speaking," Emma smiled.

Josiah shrugged. "Reckon I'm learning."

After getting a little more rest, Emma and Mary gathered wood for the two fires that had to be kept burning, night and day. The fire in the main lodge not only dried meat, but also kept them from freezing to death, so the girls were kept busy stoking the flames.

Outside, the snows were getting heavier, and though the cold grew worse, they remained relatively cozy in their snug little shelter. Throughout the day, Josiah cleaned weapons and molded bullets, while keeping a close eye on the skies for any signs of the storm letting up.

That night, Emma fell asleep as she waited for Josiah to come to bed. Before her eyes closed, she saw him sitting by the entrance, whittling away at some poor stick until nothing remained but splinters.

When morning came, Emma discovered Josiah slumped by the entrance, his knife sheathed at his belt. She moved ever so slightly, and the cottonwood boughs beneath her creaked.

Josiah's eyes opened. "Anything wrong?"

Emma shook her head "no."

Rubbing the sleep from his face, Josiah leaned through the entrance. "It's still snowing, though I'm thinking it ain't coming down so heavy now." He looked back at Emma and grinned. "Today, we make pemmican out of our jerky."

Pulling out their kettle, Josiah went outside to locate some flat stones. When he returned, he collected the deer meat and then instructed Emma to roast it until completely dry. While Emma roasted venison, Josiah and Mary pounded the deer's bones, until the marrow lay exposed. Tossing the shattered bones into a boiling kettle of water, Josiah started work pounding Emma's dried deer meat.

Soon, a layer of fat formed on the surface of the water, and after it had sufficiently cooled for handling, Josiah took the fat from the kettle.

"Wish I had me some chokeberries or even honey to make this pemmican sweet," Josiah said reluctantly, "but I reckon this will do."

After mixing bits of pounded meat with the fat, Josiah placed his concoction in a bladder of animal skins to let it turn solid.

The next day, they repeated the same process with the elk meat, until they had three bladders of aging pemmican. By the night of the second day of meat preparations, everyone went to sleep almost as soon as they climbed into their beds.

During her sleep that night, Emma had the vague feeling of being watched from a distance. Something tickled her face, and when she reached up to brush it away, the feel of someone's warm breath caressed her fingers.

With a startled gasp, Emma awoke in a confused daze. Had she been dreaming? She looked at Josiah, and found him sleeping beside her as usual.

Emma silently scolded herself. She had imagined the whole thing.

Rolling onto her side, away from Josiah, Emma had no trouble falling back to sleep. The rest of the night passed uneventfully, and the feeling of being watched withdrew from her dreams.

Morning came, and Emma didn't want to stir from bed. She felt warm, and for a moment, she couldn't think of any sensible reason to get up. Then the hushed sounds of people munching food greeted her ears, and Emma quickly found her reason: her empty stomach.

Pushing back the blankets, Emma stretched out. Her sore back protested against being straightened, and a small whimper tumbled from her lips.

A large bulking shadow came between her and the fire, and Emma looked up to see Josiah on his knees beside the bed.

"Is yer back hurting?" Remnants of breakfast stuck to his teeth, while his tongue worked pemmican from his gums. Josiah wiped a pair of greasy palms against his buckskins, as though preparing to do something requiring clean hands. "Roll onto yer stomach, Emma, and I'll rub yer back."

The gentle tone of Josiah's voice made Emma curious if he were trying to sweet-talk her into something more than just a back rub. It would be so like him, and Emma waited to see what would happen. To her surprise, his hands never strayed as he worked the tight muscles in her back.

Emma felt so relaxed, the world slowly grew dim and she fell asleep.

The second time Emma awoke, hunger demanded she eat. While Emma listened to the sounds of Josiah moving about outside, Mary handed her some pemmican. From the sober look on Mary's face, Emma realized the girl must've thought she were ill.

"Do you think I'm not feeling well?" Emma asked Mary, as the child settled beside her on the bed. Emma took a small bite of pemmican, and waited for Mary's answer.

"You look weak," the girl said in a soft, understanding voice. "Pa said we have been working you too hard."

"Nonsense!" Emma shook her head adamantly. "I just needed a little rest, that's all."

The sound of crunching snow stopping outside their lodge caused Emma to cease any further protestations about her health. A mass of hair and fox fur squeezed through the entrance, until the rest of Josiah came into view.

"I heard what you was saying," said Josiah, locating a vacant spot by the fire. Sitting cross-legged, he warmed his reddened hands before leveling two dark eyes at Emma. "Yer to take things easy. With all the work we've been doing to make pemmican, I reckon I didn't make allowances fer yer condition."

Emma harrumphed, and the tiniest of smiles tugged at the corners of Josiah's mouth. "My condition is just fine, thank you. All I needed was some rest and a little food, and now I'll be back to normal."

An odd sort of scowl crossed Josiah's face. "You'll do as I say, Emma. I want you to take things easy, until I tell you different."

"I think I'm the best judge of how I'm feeling," said Emma, "and I need to work. Mary and I must gather firewood, and then I must finish the deer hide--"

"Emma." Josiah's voice commanded her full attention. "My word is final."

Emma felt her chin jut out in defiance, but she remained silent. Finishing the last of her breakfast, she crawled beneath the blankets and stared at the lodge wall. Her back to the rest of the room, Emma overheard Josiah tell Mary to play with her doll until he could take her outside to do their chores. Then the rustle of cottonwood boughs announced Josiah's approach, and the buffalo robes tugged beneath her as he settled onto the bed.

"Emma." His voice gentle once more, he touched her shoulder with a large, rough hand. "You ain't crying, are you?"

"I'm not so helpless I can't work while I'm with child," said Emma, trying to shrug off his hand.

"You've been sleeping every chance you get, Emma. You can't see fer yerself, but Mary and I can, and you need rest."

"I do not!"

The hand withdrew, and for a moment, Emma thought she had won. She heard the sounds of someone rummaging around, and then a small shiny object passed over her arm and into her hands. It was a mirror.

"Take a look fer yerself, Emma."

Emma obeyed. The reflection staring back at her appeared to be a woman, but Emma thought surely that woman couldn't be *her*. The woman's face appeared weathered and dirty, with soot smudges smearing her cheeks; two soft brown eyes looked back, but they were as weary and tired as an old woman's; the blonde hair Emma kept arranging so carefully in pinned up braids, were in fact, untidy lengths of yellow rope with stray hair poking out this way and that.

Collapsing in one great sob, Emma buried her head against the robes. She couldn't look at her own reflection any longer.

"What's wrong, Emma? Is it yer back again?"

Emma couldn't speak.

"What's wrong with Ma?"

"I ain't knowing, Mary, but you best go back to yer doll and let me take care of her."

"Is she dying?"

"No, she ain't dying. Go back to yer doll."

Two hands squeezed Emma as Josiah rolled her onto her back. She gasped in dismay when his troubled face came into view.

"Oh, please, don't look at me, Josiah!"

"Why not? Emma, yer not making any sense."

"It's so awful! How can you stand to look at me?"

"What are you talking about? You look fine."

"*No, I don't!*" Emma turned her face away from his. Grabbing a blanket, she pulled the cover over her head.

"Emma, yer not making any sense." Josiah tried to pull the blanket down, but Emma held it firmly in place.

"Please, leave me alone, Josiah!"

"No, I won't-- not until you tell me what's got you crying."

"I look h-horrible! I'm s-so changed, I didn't even recognize myself!"

"You ain't changed, Emma. Why, except fer being so tired, this is *always* the way you've looked."

Emma renewed her sobs with more energy than before.

"Are you sure she ain't dying, Pa?"

"Mary, I told you to go back to yer doll!" Then Emma heard Josiah groan patiently. "No, Mary, she ain't dying."

Emma fully expected Josiah to yank the blanket off her head, but instead, she felt Josiah lay down beside her and then gather her into his arms. Through the heavy material, she heard Josiah's breathing.

"Emma, you ain't horrible looking." He caressed her, and pressed her close to his body. "There, there, Emma, please stop crying."

"It was so ugly, Josiah!"

"Stop saying that, Em. Yer purty, and I won't listen to you speaking against yerself. Mary, go back to yer doll."

"Am I frightening Mary?"

"Yer frightening both of us, Emma. Come now, and dry yer tears. Nothing's happened that's worth crying over."

Her well of tears near exhaustion, Emma dried her face with the blanket. After freeing herself from Josiah's arms, she pulled the cover from off her head. She hoped no one would laugh at her silliness.

"See, Mary, she ain't dying-- although I'll grant she sure sounded like it fer awhile."

Emma's bottom lip trembled, and Josiah pulled her back into his embrace. "Emma, you've got to calm down. Look at Mary. You've got her crying, too."

Brushing back fresh tears, Emma saw Mary sitting on her bed, hugging her doll while she softly cried. Emma opened her arms, and the child hurried to fill them.

"I'm all right, Mary," Emma sighed with regret. "I'm sorry I scared you."

"Are you sure you ain't hurt?" asked Mary, wetting Emma's dress with her own frightened tears.

"No, I'm not hurt." Emma smoothed Mary's braids, and then kissed the top of her small head. "I just had a fright, that's all."

Josiah patted Emma's head, his face much calmer than before. "It was because of the mirror, wasn't it? I never gave any thought to letting you see yer own reflection; most women like admiring themselves in those small trinkets, but none of them ever bawled over what they saw."

"Please, Josiah, don't tease me."

"I ain't, Emma. I'm just observing."

By now, Mary had stopped crying, though she didn't seem eager to leave Emma's comforting hug. Instead, the girl remained on Emma's lap, attentively listening to the adults as they talked.

"Now maybe you'll believe me, when I say yer needing more rest. If you hadn't been so overworked, this never would've happened."

"I'm strong enough to work, Josiah."

"No, you ain't, Emma."

Emma saw his jaw muscles working.

"Yer mine to do with as I want, and you'll rest when I tell you."

"Won't you even listen to reason, Josiah?"

Josiah harrumphed. "Yer a fine one to talk about reason, after what I just saw. This argument is over. The rest of today is a holiday, and if I've a mind to, I just might make tomorrow a holiday, as well."

Mary's face brightened. "A holiday?"

"Sure, why not?" asked Josiah.

"Because, we have too much work to do," said Emma.

"I'll be the one to decide that," said Josiah. He moved to the other side of the lodge, and then picked up his rifle. "Mary, look after yer Ma. I'll be back afore sundown."

Taking some pemmican, his snowshoes, a buffalo robe and an axe, Josiah disappeared out the entrance, headfirst.

Alone in the shelter, Emma looked down at the child in her lap.

Mary smiled.

Hugging Mary, Emma reached for her Bible. She could use some comfort from the Scriptures.

A few hours before dark, Josiah returned as promised. Mary ran out to meet him as he untied his snowshoes, and from inside the lodge, Emma could hear the child ply him with questions about their holiday. As she prepared supper, Emma strained to hear Josiah's responses. She, too, was curious about his plans-- if he indeed had any. Emma sighed. Josiah's notion of a family holiday probably consisted of sleeping in late and seeing who could hurl spit the furthest distance.

"When is our holiday, Pa?" Emma heard Mary ask Josiah as he shoved his snowshoes through the entrance.

"Day after tomorrow."

"Will there be a Christmas tree?"

"No, this ain't Christmas."

"Will there be a present?"

Josiah chuckled as his broad shoulders fit through the entrance. "You mean, will there be any present fer *you!*"

Mary followed him inside, her curiosity apparently not yet satisfied. "Will there be a present fer Ma?"

Josiah slanted Emma an uncomfortable look. "Yer asking too many questions, Mary."

Squatting down, Mary balanced on the balls of her feet as she watched Josiah pull off his bearskin coat.

Concealing her amusement, Emma remained silent as she tended the fire.

"Will we have fresh meat, Pa?"

"What do you think we've been eating? leather?"

Two brilliant eyes stared expectantly at Josiah, and the man groaned. "Emma, would you tell this bear cub to mind her business?" Though Josiah sounded annoyed, his face betrayed otherwise.

"Can I come with you, tomorrow?" asked Mary.

"What I've got to do, is best done alone."

"Please, Pa? I can help!"

"Ha! You don't even know what I'm doing," Josiah said with a laugh, "so how do you know if you can help, or not?"

"Please, I want to surprise Ma, too!"

When Josiah didn't respond, Emma paused her work. She looked at Josiah, and saw him smile kindly at Mary. It wasn't a teasing smile, or a jesting grin, but something much more tender.

"If yer Ma can spare you, then I reckon you can come with me, tomorrow."

Jumping up, Mary descended on Emma.

"Can I, Ma? Can I go?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Emma caught Josiah watching her intently, as though wondering what her answer would be. Not too long ago, Emma didn't trust him alone with Mary.

Taking a moment to think it over, Emma nodded to the eager girl. "You may go. But be sure you stay within sight of your pa, and don't go running off."

The shelter filled with excited war whoops as Mary celebrated.

"Settle down," said Emma. "Is that any way for a young lady to behave?"

Though Mary quieted down, she grinned so hard during supper Emma thought her face must surely ache.

After supper, when Mary had been tucked in bed with her doll, Emma tidied the shelter and put things back in their place for the next day. Already in bed, Josiah watched Emma go about her usual routine. He kept his thoughts to himself, though from Mary's questioning that evening, he hoped Emma hadn't been able to guess his entire secret.

Moving over to make room for Emma, Josiah watched as she crawled beneath the blankets and then collapsed.

"Thought I told you not to work so much."

Lightly touching her forehead, Emma sighed as though she had a headache. "I tried to rest today, but it's difficult to find the time when you've a family to care for."

Josiah smiled in spite of himself. At least she had tried to obey his wishes. Unpinned golden braids shifted against the robe as Emma turned to look at him. They were so close, they nearly touched noses. She said nothing, but her eyes glowed with an unspoken caress that nearly drove Josiah crazy. He'd made an undeclared promise not to touch Emma until she was ready. Did this look of hers mean what he hoped it did? Josiah couldn't be sure.

"Thank you fer trusting me enough to take Mary fer the day. You won't have to worry about her. I'll take good care of the little cub."

"I know you will, Josiah."

Josiah swallowed hard. He forced himself not to stare at Emma's lips, inviting though they looked. "I don't want you stepping out of this lodge tomorrow, unless you have to. Can't say I'm fond of leaving you alone."

Emma smiled. "You've done it before, and I've survived."

"That was because I had to. Promise me you'll stay inside, Emma. I'd feel better if you kept out of sight until I got back."

"Then, I promise."

"I'll be sure you have enough wood to last the day. I don't want you wandering about, looking for wood or a dry place to relieve yourself. Stay within easy eyesight of the lodge when you tend to your necessities."

"I will, Josiah."

Exhaling, Josiah moaned softly. "I sure do like the way you say my name, Emma."

Emma touched his face, and Josiah prayed with all his might she would kiss him. To his great disappointment, she didn't. Exhaustion pulled at her eyelids, and her hand slipped from his face. Soon, sleep washed over Emma, sinking his hopes for anything more that night.

A small tug awakened Emma. Struggling to open her eyes, Emma found Mary peering down at her with a wide awake, beaming smile.

"Is it morning, already?" Emma asked with a yawn.

"Pa and I gathered wood, so you do not have to," said Mary, pointing to a large pile of wood near the entrance.

Blurry-eyed, Emma strained to focus on any light filtering through the opening from outside. She found none, and realized the sun had not yet come up.

"Aren't you two leaving a little early?" asked Emma.

"We must," Mary said in a very serious tone. "We've got to--"

"Mary," Josiah stopped the child from finishing her thought out loud. "It's a secret, remember?"

Covering her mouth with shame, Mary timidly nodded. "I am sorry, Pa. I fergot."

"Don't let it happen again, or I'll leave you with Emma." The playfulness in Josiah's voice made Mary giggle, and the child eagerly nodded that she understood.

"When will you be back?" asked Emma, sitting up in bed to find Josiah dressed in his bearskin coat and bushy fox cap. Mary had been bundled into several blankets, so that only her eyes, hands, and the bridge of her nose could be seen.

"We'll be back fer supper," said Josiah, picking up his axe and snowshoes. "Mary, can you bring that buffalo robe, or is it too much fer you?"

"No, I can carry it," said Mary, her small frame struggling a bit to move with the heavy object in her arms.

Josiah gave Emma a confident nod. "Don't worry, I won't let her hurt herself. Remember what I told you about staying inside?"

"I remember," said Emma. She got out of bed, and crawled to Josiah. "God keep you safe, My Love." Emma kissed his cheek, and the mountain man grinned so broadly, she could see his gums.

"Me too! Me too!" said Mary, and she hurried to get her goodbye kiss from Emma.

Armed with a rifle, pistol, and two knives, Josiah and Mary crawled from the shelter. When Emma tried to see them off by coming outside, Josiah barred the entrance with his sturdy legs.

"You go back to sleep, Emma. I want to find you good and rested when me and Mary return."

"Very well, Josiah." Emma didn't think it useful to argue the point, for she *did* feel tired.

After saying a prayer for their safety, Emma watched as Josiah and Mary vanished into the early morning darkness. Emma lingered by the entrance, and then made her way back to bed.

Her shotgun had been cleaned and loaded by Josiah, and waited for her beside the buffalo robes. If trouble came, Josiah had made sure she would be protected.

Emma didn't know if fatigue kept her in bed, or sheer laziness. It felt strange not to stir when the sun ascended high in the sky, and the center of the day beckoned her to work. When she finally got up, Emma found her arms heavy, and knees weak. She had forgotten to eat breakfast, and the omission quickly caught up to her. Cutting off a small slice of solid pemmican, Emma tried to keep the food down. She had been intermittently experiencing nausea for days, and it appeared today would be no better. If anything, she felt worse.

After several bites, Emma's stomach lurched, and she scrambled to the entrance to vomit. The mess landed right outside the lodge, threatening to attract wild animals with an easy meal.

Taking a branch from the wood pile, Emma went outside and did her best to shovel the vomit away from the lodge.

As she worked, the mountains swirled about Emma, and she fought the urge to faint. Leaving the rest of the mess untouched, Emma struggled back to the lodge before she passed out in the snow. Just then, Emma realized she had forgotten to take her shotgun! Frightened by her vulnerability and her own forgetfulness, Emma hurried inside. She grabbed her shotgun, and clutching it to her breast, collapsed on the buffalo robes in a fit of exhaustion.

"Emma!"

Josiah's voice rang so loudly in Emma's ears, she winced in pain.

"Emma, wake up!"

Two rough hands rubbed her temples. Then a slap stung her cheek.

"Open yer eyes, woman!"

"Josiah?" When Emma heard her own voice, she shuddered at the weak sound she had just made.

"Emma, fer pity's sake, open yer eyes!"

Summoning her strength, Emma slowly obeyed. She blinked several times, as Josiah's sharp features came into view.

She rapidly found herself shoved against Josiah's chest, as a "Thank God!"

shook his frame and hers. After being crushed, Josiah let her back down on the bed, for she felt too weak to sit up.

"Have you been asleep all day?" he asked.

"No, just small naps," said Emma.

"Have you eaten?" Josiah looked at her pointedly, his eyes flashing displeasure. "I found wolves fighting over yer vomit outside the entrance. Have you eaten since then?"

"Where's Mary?" asked Emma.

Mary touched Emma's hand. "I am here, Ma."

"*Have you eaten?*" Josiah sounded angry.

Even in her condition, Emma stiffened with indignation. "No, I couldn't hold it down. And don't look at me like that, Josiah. I'm doing the best I can!"

To Emma's consternation, instead of looking reproved, Josiah grinned.

"That's more like it, Em. Now yer beginning to sound like yerself. Mary, fetch yer Ma some of that grouse we snared."

Cold wet grouse found its way into Emma's hands, just as her world grew dark once again.

When Emma's eyes opened, she was sitting up, and Josiah was forcing food into her mouth.

"Chew, Emma. You need yer strength."

The food tasted wonderful, but Emma's stomach rebelled. She leaned forward to vomit, but finally managed to keep the food down. More and more meat passed her lips, until Emma felt able to sit up on her own strength.

"I never should've left," Josiah kept muttering to himself.

"I'm all right," said Emma. "Could I have some water?"

Mary hurried to fill the tin cup with snow. After holding it over the fire to melt the ice, Mary placed the warm cup of water into Emma's trembling hands.

"Have you eaten, yet?" Emma asked them.

"You just ate our supper," said Josiah. "Mary and I set out some snares, hoping to surprise you with something besides pemmican for supper."

The cup paused before reaching Emma's mouth. "I ate raw grouse?"

"Of course, didn't you notice?"

"I thought it was just undercooked," said Emma, suddenly feeling her stomach turn.

"Now, there, Emma," Josiah's voice raised in caution, "I just got that food down you. Keep it there."

Taking a sip of water, Emma commanded her attention elsewhere. The grouse had tasted good--too good for raw meat.

Josiah gave pemmican to Mary, and the two started eating their supper.

"I'm sorry I ate your food," said Emma.

If Mary experienced disappointment at not having the expected meal of roasted grouse, she didn't let it show. Instead, she smiled at Emma.

"Do you feel better, Ma?"

"Yes, thank you. That bird is doing wonders for me."

Mary looked at her wide-eyed. "It is, Ma? Really?"

"It was Mary's snare that caught yer grouse," said Josiah.

"Well, that explains it then," said Emma. "My stomach must've known it was Mary's bird, and decided it was much too precious to lose."

For this, Emma received a hug from Mary. Then the child planted herself at Emma's side and remained there until bedtime. Emma had had the thought before, but especially now, as the girl clung to her dress, that Mary must've had a lonely childhood among the Blackfoot. Cora's love was evident in Mary's upbringing, but Emma witnessed enough clinging vines in Mary's

temperament, to sense the child had not enjoyed much love outside of her grandmother and great-grandfather.

Feeling too weak to crawl, Emma heard Mary's bedtime prayer and then kissed her goodnight without moving from the buffalo robes.

Politely refusing Mary's Christmas doll, Emma insisted she didn't need to take Mary's baby from her.

"I won't be alone," said Emma.

Mary looked thoughtful. "Pa?"

"What?"

"Do not make Ma cry, again. Best break the mirror."

Josiah tossed a handful of pine needles in Mary's direction, and the girl giggled.

"Quiet down and go to sleep," said Josiah.

"Pa?"

"What now?"

"Goodnight, Pa."

Josiah smiled. "Goodnight, Mary."

Feeling tired but happy, Emma reclined on the soft robes. Her eyelids felt heavy, but she remained conscious as Josiah took his usual place in bed. Lying on his side, he bent his knees so he would fit in the space their bedding occupied. Emma wanted to thank him for giving Mary such a good day, but words wouldn't come to her tired mind.

Giving Josiah a heartfelt smile, Emma fell asleep.

Morning sounds of breakfast stirred Emma's senses as she climbed out of bed. Josiah and Mary were eating, and as Emma accepted her meal from Josiah's hand, Emma realized they were going to let her sleep in again.

Emma sighed, and Josiah slanted her a look that challenged her to be silent. Emma knew she wouldn't be able to win any arguments concerning her need for more rest, especially after he had returned to find her so weak. She had little appetite for food, but from Josiah's hawk-like attentions, she knew he would not let her avoid breakfast.

As Emma began chewing the pemmican, Josiah seemed to relax.

Her eyes sparkling with an untold secret, Mary swallowed her food down, nearly without chewing.

Nibbling her solid pemmican, Emma eyed the two suspiciously. "What are you up to, Josiah? What are we doing for this holiday of yours?"

"It ain't my holiday," Josiah shook his head with a grin. "It's yers."

Emma looked to Mary for more information, but the girl burst into giggles and shook her head firmly.

"Pa said not to tell you!"

In spite of her curiosity, Emma struggled to finish her food. When she couldn't eat the last of her pemmican, Josiah growled something beneath his breath that Emma couldn't understand. She hoped he wasn't swearing again.

"Do you want me to toss you over my shoulder, Emma? If you don't eat, you won't have the strength to walk to our next campsite."

Emma looked at him in surprise. "We're moving camp?"

"As soon as yer able. Mary, start gathering things into a buffalo hide for the travois. Emma, eat that pemmican."

Resisting the temptation to hide the food from Josiah rather than eat, Emma willed herself to swallow the ground jerky whole. It went down better than if she had chewed.

After helping Emma outside and into her snowshoes and capote, Josiah gathered the buffalo robes from their bed and packed them onto his travois. Then he took down the snow covered hides draped over their shelter. All that remained of their snug little lodge were old boughs of cottonwood and fir and a blackened pit in the center where a fire had kept them warm.

"Emma, you ain't going to shed tears over leaving that pile of sticks, are you?"

Drying the wet collecting at the corners of her eyes, Emma said nothing. Afraid speech might bring on sobs, Emma remained silent as the small procession slowly made its way along the narrow valley floor.

Josiah led the way up front, while Emma trailed behind with Mary at her side. Emma noticed he kept a watchful eye, not only on their surroundings, but also on her. More than once, he stopped to insist she rest and catch her breath before they continued.

"Aren't you glad I made you eat that pemmican?" he asked with a grin, as they resumed their trip.

Emma saved her strength, and made no response but gave an affirming nod of her head.

The frigid air hurt Emma's lungs each time she inhaled. As she began to lag behind Josiah, she felt Mary tugging her forward.

"Ma, we must keep up," the girl encouraged her.

Nodding that she understood, Emma summoned her willpower and kept following Josiah's travois and snowshoe tracks.

Only a few footsteps before them, Emma noticed Josiah slowed his pace until she and Mary were at his side.

"Only a little more ways, Emma. You feeling all right? Do you need to stop fer awhile?"

"No, let's keep going," said Emma, a trail of vapor spilling from her mouth as she spoke. Ice had formed on her capote, and she longed to be warm. She shivered, and Josiah looked at her in concern. Shivering exhausted strength, and it wouldn't be long before she reached the end of her supply.

"Reckon its colder in these parts, than in the valley," said Josiah.

"Aren't we still in the valley?" Emma asked in surprise, for her poor eyesight hindered her from seeing things from a distance.

"No, we're heading up into the mountains," said Josiah, pointing forward with his chin. "This is on our route back to the cabin, but we're going to stop along the way fer awhile."

Mary grinned excitedly.

"Why?" Emma asked in a whimper. "Isn't going back to the cabin your surprise? Couldn't we go home, Josiah?"

Sighing, Josiah tenderly touched the hood of Emma's capote. "Hold on, Emma. You'll be warm soon enough."

"I'm so cold, Josiah." Emma hated the weakness in her voice, but the tears were coming, and if she didn't stop them soon, they would freeze and make her even colder.

Momentarily dropping the poles of the travois, Josiah stepped close to wrap his arms around Emma in a big bear hug. "I know it ain't easy, Emma, but I promise we're almost there. Just a little more, and you'll be warm. I promise."

With Mary holding fast to her capote, Emma again walked behind Josiah. Her snowshoes felt like leaden weights, but she kept her eyes down on the snow, and her concentration on the effort it took to raise each foot.

Josiah's voice called Emma to look up. "We're here, Emma."

Emma sighed in relief as she saw another shelter, similar to the one they had just left, ready and waiting for them. All it needed were more buffalo robes to keep out the wind, and a nice fire burning inside.

"Emma? What do you think?" asked Josiah.

"I think I want to go inside and get warm," smiled Emma.

Josiah frowned. So did Mary. They both looked like she were missing something important. Puzzled, Emma took a better look at her surroundings. They were on a mountainside with large snow covered boulders strewn everywhere, and little vegetation. It must've taken some good work hauling branches and wood to this location to build a shelter. Then it hit Emma. Why this location? What made here so special, that someone would take extra work to build a lodge where there were no trees?

Venturing a few steps forward, Emma noticed a curtain of steam rising from behind one of the massive rocks some distance away from the lodge. Curious, Emma made her way to the boulder.

Peering round the large rock, a pool of clear water greeted Emma's eyes. It hadn't frozen over in the winter cold, and by the steam rising from the water, she understood why.

Grinning, Josiah stood behind her with Mary at his side. "Dip yer hand in, Emma. It's safe."

Stooping down, Emma touched the water. "It's warm!"

"Can we go in *now*, Pa?" Mary looked up at Josiah pleadingly.

"Let me throw more buffalo robes over our lodge first, and get a good fire started so you won't freeze when you get out," said Josiah.

In sheer wonderment, Emma looked at Josiah. "Did I hear correctly? We can bathe?"

Josiah grinned. "Let me get the lodge ready, and then you and Mary can bathe to yer heart's content. I don't know why Mary's so eager, though. She probably hasn't been wet all over except fer accidentally falling in the creek."

"Pa, that is not true!"

Josiah laughed as he unpacked the travois, and then went to prepare their lodge.

Emma stared longingly at the clear water. She hadn't fully bathed in such a long time, she couldn't remember her last cleansing.

The crunch of snow announced Josiah's return as he tramped to the girls with a large blanket. His rifle hung from a strap at his side, and after giving Emma the blanket, he brought the flintlock up in a ready posture.

"I'll be keeping watch over by that rock," he said, pointing his chin to a high boulder veiled in a thick layer of snow. Everything surrounding the hot springs lay beneath a similar covering of white, for after the steam collected on the surface of the rocks, it froze into a protective layer of ice.

"Aren't you coming?" asked Emma.

Josiah looked at Emma hesitantly. "This is mainly fer the women-folk." He gave her a wistful grin, and then headed off for the large boulder.

As excited as Mary appeared to get into the water, she looked apprehensively at Josiah's boulder. He had cleared off the snow, perching himself high above the pool with his rifle; from the direction his head faced, Emma knew he was watching.

"Ma," Mary sighed heavily. "He can see."

"Josiah, would you please avert your eyes so Mary could undress?"

Even though Emma sensed he scowled at the request, Josiah moved himself about until his back faced the hot springs.

"There, now it's safe," said Emma, helping Mary off with her blankets. "Can you swim? Stay close to the edge and wade out slowly until you know how deep the water is."

"The water ain't deep on the east side," called out Josiah.

"Did you hear that, Mary? Stay on the east side."

"All right, Ma. Oh, the water is so warm!"

Emma noticed that when Josiah heard this, he turned to watch. His attention wasn't on Mary, though, but on *her*. Feeling terribly self-conscious, Emma took off her capote and then turned to Josiah. She gave him a pleading look, and she saw his large shoulders heave in a reluctant sigh. Moving about, he turned his back once more.

Warmth enveloped Emma as water lapped over her bare arms in the deep side of the hot springs. The water had turned silty, for Mary's playfulness stirred the fine silt at the bottom, so the water no longer appeared clear. It didn't matter to Emma. After being so cold, the soothing warmth made her feel relaxed and content.

"Can I look now?" Josiah asked over his back.

"Yes, thank you, Josiah."

He turned, and let the rifle rest in the crook of his arm. Emma couldn't see his features well enough to know what thoughts went through his mind, but she knew him well enough to guess. He hadn't touched her in passion for several nights, and she sensed his impatience.

Emma moved in the water, her feet hugging the slippery bottom of the pool. Josiah had changed. She hadn't asked him to keep his distance, and yet he did.

Emma looked back to the boulder, and saw Josiah still facing her direction. Did he smile? Emma wished she had her spectacles. Poor eyesight didn't get in her way so much in the close confines of a lodge, but out in the open, she simply couldn't see very well.

After some splashing about, Mary declared she had had enough of the water.

"Dry off with the blanket, and then warm yourself in the shelter," said Emma, not ready to leave her holiday just yet.

"Turn around, Pa!" Mary called to Josiah.

Closing her eyes, Emma let herself relax. She didn't have to think about the best places to find dry wood, where to draw drinking water, where they were going to find their next meal, or ways to keep warm when the sharp chill went through your moccasins and foot wraps to numb your toes. Emma reached out and grabbed a handful of warm water. It felt perfect-- not too hot to scald, and yet hot enough to relax tense muscles and make one feel liberated from the cares of daily life.

Some time later, the water swished near Emma and she opened her eyes. Josiah had pulled off his buckskins, and now enjoyed the hot springs with her. Emma glimpsed up at the boulder, and found Mary dried and dressed, keeping watchful guard with her pistol.

"She volunteered," said Josiah, taking a deep relaxing dip in the water. "Nice, ain't it? My pa showed me this place. Some springs ain't safe to enter, because the waters are too dangerous, but this one is always good fer a swim."

"It's heavenly," said Emma.

Josiah stretched out his arms, but carefully retracted them when his hand grazed her side.

"I think I could stay here forever," said Emma.

"Thought you'd like it," grinned Josiah.

Emma braced herself, half wanting Josiah to hold her, and yet, hoping he wouldn't unless asked.

He moved about in the water, quickly seeming to grow tired of the novelty.

"I'm leaving, Emma. When yer ready, I left a blanket fer you by the rock over yonder. I'll set a kettle of water to warming, so you can rinse all this silt from yer skin."

"Thank you, Josiah."

He paused before going, his eyes locking with hers. Her thanks had a double meaning, and Josiah seemed to understand.

"Stay in the water fer as long as you like, Emma. I won't rush you."

She closed her eyes as he climbed out of the pool, and quietly promised herself to stay for as long as she could. Long after he left, Josiah's words echoed in Emma's heart. "I won't rush you." He *had* changed.

When Emma looked up at the boulder again, Josiah sat there with his rifle. Mary played by the banks, studiously fashioning a miniature Blackfoot lodge with snow and small rocks.

It had to be nearing lunch time, and Emma heard her stomach growl with hunger.

"Josiah, I'm ready to dry off now."

"All right," he said, turning his back to the pool.

Mary helped Emma wrap the dry blankets around her body before she froze, and then the girls hurried to the lodge where a comfortable fire awaited them.

Settling beside the fire, Emma warmed her cold hands as Josiah crawled in. He removed the kettle from over the flames, and then carried the hot container outside where Emma saw him add snow so the water would be comfortable to the touch.

"Emma," he said, kneeling down to look inside as his rifle swung across his chest, "the water is ready fer you to do some bathing. If yer wanting, I'll wait elsewhere while you and Mary clean yerselves. Just keep yer weapons handy, fer the hot springs attracts animals."

Emma nodded in understanding, and the trapper left.

Crawling outside, Emma lightly rinsed her body with warm water while trying not to get her blanket wet. After telling Mary to undress, Emma rinsed the silt from Mary's skin. With the remaining water, Emma undid Mary's braids to wash her hair. While Mary rushed inside to dry

by the fire, Emma washed her own dirty locks. It felt good to be clean, or at least, as clean as one could get without soap.

A short while later, Josiah ventured back. As he sat down on the buffalo robes to eat lunch, Emma could feel his eyes as she dried her long blonde hair by the open flames. He said nothing, but his intent gaze spoke volumes.

Lunch went down without incident, and Emma thanked God for the abatement in her nausea so she could regain some much needed strength.

After lunch, Emma sat Mary on her lap to untangle the girl's long dark hair, using her fingers as a comb.

"You have your father's hair," Emma told a smiling Mary. "His mane keeps tangling, but at least yours remains tidy in braids."

As Emma brushed, it reminded her of a long prayed-for wish. "In my girlhood, I dreamed of my future husband, and the children we would have. I planned for eight children-- four boys to help my husband with his work, and four girls to dress up and brush their hair and read stories to."

Josiah raised his eyebrows. "Eight?"

Emma smiled as she continued to brush Mary's hair. "Ma had such trouble giving birth to me, she never could have more babies. She had always wanted a large family, so that was what I wanted, too."

Josiah was quiet.

"I want eight babies, too," said Mary, getting up so she could now brush Emma's long tresses.

"She had a hard time birthing you, Emma?" Josiah's brow knit in thought.

"Yes, but I'm much stronger than Ma. With God's help, I should have an easier birthing than hers."

"This is yer first babe, and its already giving you a hard time with all yer vomiting," said Josiah.

Emma sighed, realizing she had made Josiah worry. "I know, but there's little else I can do but pray. I'm in God's hands, Josiah."

When Emma's hair hung in soft glossy waves, she started gathering them into braids. Halfway through her work, Emma hesitated. Josiah still looked troubled by their talk of difficult births, and she wanted to give him a pleasant distraction. Letting her hair hang loose, Emma lowered her head to whisper something into Mary's ear.

"It's not seemly to wear your hair unbound in the presence of men, but since the only man here is your father, it's perfectly decent to let out your braids once in a while. I'm only telling you this, so you know how to behave when you're older, and among others."

"I will remember, Ma."

Emma gave Mary a quick hug and a small pat, and then reached for their Bible. Opening the old pages, Emma read a passage from Psalms while Josiah and Mary listened. From over her book, Emma noticed Josiah's eyes continually wandering to her loose hair.

Afterward, Mary lay down for a mid-day nap. As the girl slipped into her rest, Emma added more wood to the fire to keep the chill from taking over their lodge.

By the entrance, Josiah sat with his knife and a whittling stick. He still looked thoughtful, though from his frequent side glances, Emma knew his mind now preoccupied with other things besides giving birth.

When Emma heard Mary's soft snore, Emma decided the timing couldn't be more perfect. Crawling to where Josiah sat by the entrance, Emma found a seat at his side.

"You feeling all right?" he asked, as Emma rested her head against his shoulder. "I noticed you ate yer lunch without any trouble."

"Please lower your voice, Josiah, or you'll awaken Mary."

Josiah looked at Mary, and then at Emma. "I hadn't noticed she'd nodded off. I reckon she got all tuckered out from playing in the water."

"Yes, I expect so." Emma touched Josiah's hand, and she heard him inhale sharply.

"Emma, tell me now if yer not wanting to tussle. I don't want you vomiting again, because of *me*."

"It wasn't completely you," said Emma. "At the time, my stomach was upset."

"How's it feeling, now?"

Emma smiled. "It's fine."

With a disbelieving grunt, Josiah continued with his whittling. He looked angry, but not with her. "I bedded Mary's ma, and the woman died after giving birth. I've bedded you, and now I expect the same thing will happen; yer ma had a hard time, and so are you."

"I pray all will go well," said Emma, "but if God decides another fate, then I must accept it."

Josiah stared at Emma. "You trust God that completely, Emma?"

"Yes, I do."

"But, yer carrying my child. Women seem to fare badly when they're carrying my children."

"How many children have you had, Josiah?"

"Counting yers-- two."

"Then I would wait until we have more children, before making such a pronouncement. I've been having nausea, and though it's sometimes rather severe, I haven't miscarried or died. I have a stronger constitution than my mother's, and I don't think I'll have her difficulties." Emma placed her hand on Josiah's chest. "Even so, whatever happens, give me to the Lord, Josiah."

Josiah swallowed hard.

"It's safe to trust God," said Emma. "'The Lord is good to all: and His tender mercies are over all His works.'" (Psalm 145:9)

Josiah looked at her in earnest. "Emma, if you died, I couldn't go on."

"If you're still living, you'd have to."

Sighing, Josiah nodded his consent. "Reckon so, but I sure wouldn't like it. I wouldn't like it one bit. What was that again? 'His tender mercies are over all His works?'" Josiah sighed heavily. "I'm already trusting God fer life, praying we won't starve from day to day, so I might as well trust Him fer everything else. I just don't like thinking about yer demise, Emma. It puts a knot in my stomach, bigger than my fist. Reckon I'd rather lose my traps, than think about this any longer. I'm giving you to God's keeping and I'm praying fer the best, but I'm done talking about it."

Cuddling her cheek against Josiah's hunting shirt, Emma touched his hand once more. "I left my hair down for you."

Emma heard Josiah grin. "I noticed." His knife had stopped working, but his hands were still poised for more whittling.

"Josiah?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you waiting for me to throw myself at your feet? Mary won't sleep all day."

The knife slipped into its sheath, and the whittling stick landed in the fire. They crawled to the buffalo robes, and then Josiah pulled off his hunting shirt as Emma climbed beneath the covers.

Snuggled side by side, Josiah took Emma into his arms. When she noticed he carefully kept his hand from her back, Emma took his large hand in hers, and placed it where it belonged.

"I love you, Emma," his voice whispered into her ear, sending little shivers down her back. "I've held other women, but I've never held them in my heart like you. Can you be happy knowing that, Emma? Is it enough?"

Emma answered with a kiss, her hand tugging the heavy blankets over their heads for privacy.

"I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine."

~ Song of Solomon 6:3 ~

Chapter Twelve

These Wild Mountains

1837, South of Josiah's cabin, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. Selah."

~ Psalm 46:1-3 ~

The rustle of tree boughs awoke Josiah from his slumber. Daylight filtered through the small opening of the lodge, silhouetting the small figure sitting by his bed. Awake from her nap, Mary sat cross-legged by the blanket that covered him and Emma, evidently waiting for them to get up.

Josiah yawned, and Mary's head bobbed up from where she had been drawing patterns in the fur of a buffalo robe. The girl smiled at him, her eyes going to the bare shoulders of the woman sleeping on his chest.

"Mind yer business," Josiah said in a low voice.

Faintly smiling, Mary stared at him thoughtfully. "Will I ever have a husband, Pa?"

"I reckon-- when yer older. Keep yer voice down, Mary, or you'll wake yer ma."

"*When* will I have a husband?"

"When yer older. Now hush up, so you don't wake Emma."

"Pa?"

Josiah sighed heavily, then checked to see if he had disturbed Emma. He hadn't, and she continued to sleep soundly.

"Will my husband be white?"

Puzzled, Josiah stared at his daughter. "Why are you asking that?"

"Am I white or Blackfoot?"

"Yer both."

"Then will I live with the Blackfoot, or with the white man?"

Josiah scowled. "How should I know?"

As Josiah saw Mary's face deep in thought, he guessed the coming summer would be her sixth. He had known Mary's mother in autumn, so the child would have been born in mid-summer. By the looks of Mary's studied expression, there was a lot of thought swirling around in that small head.

"Yer grandma'am wants you to live with the white man," said Josiah, "but as long as you marry a Christian, I won't make you go one way or the other."

Mary kept silent for a long while before finally looking at him with serious eyes. "I want to live in a white man's cabin and have eight babies, like Ma."

Josiah chuckled softly.

"Pa?"

In spite of Mary's thoughtful questions, Josiah felt a little anxious about awakening Emma. "I'll answer one more question, Mary, then I want you to keep quiet."

"Is Ma cold?" Mary lifted the deerskin dress Emma had left beside the buffalo robes.

From where he lay amongst thick buffalo hides, blankets, and the contact of Emma in his arms, Josiah smiled. "No, Ma ain't cold."

With a small groan, Emma stirred long enough to raise her head and kiss him. Concealing themselves from Mary's view, Josiah pulled the blanket back over their heads.

In the darkness of their tent, Josiah felt Emma's breath against his face as she spoke in a hushed whisper. "Is Mary awake?"

The nape of Emma's neck felt good to Josiah's lips, and he hated to tell her the truth. "She's awake."

"We'd better stop, Josiah."

"Let me kiss you awhile longer, Emma, and then I'll let you go." Josiah didn't wait for Emma's answer, and the two kissed beneath the blankets while they heard Mary eat her supper.

By the time the two came out of hiding, Mary had finished her meal. She looked at them with a happy smile, and Josiah felt relief when she didn't bother him with more questions about being white or red, or what kind of a husband she would have.

Supper slid down Emma's throat without much trouble, and Josiah thanked God when it stayed in her stomach.

The skies grew dark with the onset of night, and the snows began to fall more heavily than before. Their fire stoked against the cold, Josiah pulled Emma close to his side as wind whipped past their entrance. Here in these rocks, the wind made a hauntingly mournful sound as it passed over the mountainside on its way to wherever the wind travels.

Everyone had difficulty finding sleep that night, and Josiah heard Mary's whimpers from the other side of the fire where she lay tucked in bed.

"Josiah," Emma tugged at his sleeve, "couldn't she sleep with us, tonight?"

Josiah groaned as the wind howled over their shelter.

"Please, Josiah?"

Lifting his head to see how Mary fared, Josiah saw the girl huddled beneath her blankets with her doll clutched in a tight hug. "Mary," he asked, hoping the child would turn him down, "do you want to sleep over here, with me and Emma?"

"Yes!" Mary kicked off her blankets and hurried to the buffalo robes before Josiah had a chance to talk her into staying put.

"Stop and wait a moment," said Josiah, as Mary tried to squeeze between him and Emma, "you sleep on the other side of yer ma. This side is mine."

"Josiah, that's hardly any way to speak to a frightened child," said Emma, as Mary squirmed her way beneath the heavy blankets beside Emma.

A strong gust of wind buffeted the lodge until it rattled violently, causing Mary to whimper.

"There, there," Josiah heard Emma soothe Mary.

The low gentle tones of Emma's comforting voice made Josiah feel as though he were beside the fire with the flames warming his face. The wind wailed something fierce, but he didn't give it much notice. The warmth of Emma's body and the sunshine in her voice filled his senses, so that he moved even closer to his wife. He tucked her head under his chin, grinning when they fit together perfectly.

"Oh, Em," he breathed, "on a night like this, I could believe we're the only ones in all these mountains." He moved until Emma's face came into view, reflections of firelight dancing in the liquid depths of her eyes. "There ain't no white man's world, and there ain't no Blackfoot world-- just this lodge with you tucked beside me. I ain't never been so peaceful than I am right now." He claimed Emma's mouth, moaning his satisfaction until Emma breathlessly pulled away.

"Mary's with us," said Emma, her voice sounding a gentle warning.

"So she is," grinned Josiah. He tried to kiss Emma, but she resisted and he finally had to settle with staring into her face from his close vantage.

A gust of wind blew through the entrance, fighting with their night fire and threatening to extinguish its flames.

Mary whimpered.

"All right," sighed Josiah, "if you want to sleep between me and yer ma, I won't stop you."

With a small shout of victory, Mary scrambled over Emma until she wedged herself between the two adults.

Something with the texture of cloth found its way into Josiah's face, and he swiped it away to find Mary's Christmas doll.

"I ain't sharing my bed with no child's doll. Mary, toss it aside."

Emma touched his hand. "Please, Josiah, its her baby."

Reluctantly stuffing the doll beneath the blankets beside Mary, Josiah saw the girl smile happily.

"I tell you, Emma, things is falling apart in a bad way, when a man's forced to share his space with little girl things."

"Oh, hush up," smiled Emma, "you've never been so peaceful, as you just finished telling me, yourself."

"That was before the doll."

As Josiah spoke, something sounded in the wind-- something that hadn't been there before. Josiah sat up in bed, his hand instinctively reaching for his rifle. He strained to hear more clearly but found it impossible to do against the loud wind.

"What is it?" asked Emma.

"I ain't knowing yet," Josiah said in a low voice. "Did you hear it, Emma?"

"Hear what?"

"Mary, how about you?" he asked. "Did you hear anything different just now?"

"No, Pa."

Tossing aside the blankets, Josiah crawled to the entrance. The sound had disappeared now, but something made his gut tighten.

"Josiah?"

Slightly turning his head toward Emma, he found her sitting up in bed and staring at him in concern. "You're scaring me, Josiah."

"You sure you didn't hear it, Emma?"

Emma shook her head. "I can't hear anything but you and Mary and this terrible wind."

"I could've swore I heard--" Josiah left his thought unfinished. It wouldn't do to scare the girls, especially when he couldn't be certain. "I'm coming back to bed, so you women better scoot over and make some room fer me."

The next morning, after instructing Emma to keep her and Mary inside, Josiah left the shelter with his rifle. Last night's sound had come from the North-- the same direction as his cabin. He felt no anxiety over the cabin, but a feeling in his gut told him something had happened last night.

Hiking over the deep snow, Josiah tried to calm the unsettling sensation creeping up his spine. He had a vague sense of unease, and then it suddenly occurred to him: there were no birds in the sky. Josiah halted. He didn't remember hearing a single bird the entire morning.

Pulling off his cap, Josiah squatted down on his snowshoes. He brought his rifle across his lap, giving himself a chance to feel out his surroundings.

"I ain't liking this, God," he mumbled into the air. Sunlight glinted off the snow until his eyes hurt, but Josiah saw nothing out of place.

Straightening, the mountain man resumed his pace. He pulled some pemmican from the pouch at his belt, all the while keeping his senses trained on the way before him.

Then the report of a rifle pierced the air, causing Josiah to scramble for cover. The gunshot echoed off the mountainsides, and Josiah nervously looked up at the snow packed summit above him. Another shot like that, and it might start an avalanche.

Josiah eyed the terrain, but saw no one. The gunshot had come from the North, and Josiah guessed he hadn't been the target. Venturing forward, he kept a ready lookout for trouble. If someone shared this mountain with him, Josiah wanted to know.

Coming to a narrow precipice, Josiah picked his way through the snow and rocks. As he cautiously found safe footing, the report of a second gunshot filled the air. An earsplitting crack sounded above him! Driven by sheer instinct and something that quickened his spirit as well as his feet, Josiah leaped from the precipice to take shelter below the overhang. A split second later, a wall of solid white flooded past his shelter, sucking the air from his lungs.

Josiah didn't know how he managed to take in more air, but he did and held it for as long as he could before pulling in another breath. He squeezed his back against the mountain, waiting for the worst of the avalanche to be over. This cleft in the rocks proved to be a godsend to Josiah, for as the avalanche finished spilling from overhead, he realized he had come through it unscathed.

But Josiah had little time to thank God for his safety, for another sound greeted his ears. They were the cries of a man.

Feeling a great sense of urgency, Josiah sprang into the snow, jumping from one foot to the other as he hurried with snowshoes strapped to his feet.

"Help me!" the voice pleaded at the top of his lungs in perfect English. "*Please, God, help me!*"

Following the sound of the cries, Josiah half climbed and half slid down the mountain through the loose snow.

"Will!" cried the voice, "where are you?"

As the man's voice grew near, Josiah knew he didn't have far to go. Instead of blindly rushing forward, Josiah slowed his pace; only a fool rushed in blindly, when he should've been careful.

At the bottom of the mountain, Josiah saw the top half of a man sticking out from the snow. He had been caught in the avalanche, his waist and legs hidden in packed ice.

"Will? That you, Will?" asked the man, squinting against the sun. "No, it can't be," the man muttered to himself. "Will's not that tall, and he's--" As though suddenly coming to the realization that Josiah wasn't Will, the man frantically began searching about for something.

Josiah guessed he looked for his rifle.

As Josiah approached, he saw the man's slender face and a sparse beard that betrayed youth. The sash of his half open capote flapped wildly in the breeze, but the man made no move to secure the sash and close his coat. He stared at Josiah, as if already frozen. The wind ripped back the hood of his capote, revealing a thick mop of brown hair. Josiah groaned. Why, this man was still a boy!

The man looked about once more, and as Josiah followed his gaze, they both saw the barrel of a rifle protruding from the snow. The young man lunged for his weapon; snow buried him to his waist, and he whimpered helplessly when he couldn't reach far enough for the rifle.

"If you're going to kill me," the man breathed in panicked spasms, "be merciful and get it over with quickly!"

"I ain't going to kill you," said Josiah, surveying the man's predicament with a knowing eye. "You need to get yerself dug out of that ice real soon, afore you freeze to death."

The man said nothing, but continued to stare at Josiah.

Shouldering the strap of his flintlock, Josiah took off his snowshoes. Using a snowshoe like a shovel, Josiah dropped to his knees to dig the man out. All too soon, Josiah heard the loud chatter of teeth as cold permeated the man's body.

The snow had packed him in hard, and Josiah wished for something more solid than his snowshoes to use for digging. Battered into pieces until useless, the snowshoes disintegrated one by one.

"I think I'm dying," the young man said finally.

"Who are you?" asked Josiah.

"G-George," he answered through violently chattering teeth.

"You got a last name to go with that?" Josiah threw away the last bits of his snowshoes to dig with his knife. "Keep talking, youngster."

"Y-youngster?" George gasped in indignation. "L-look who's t-talking! You c-can't be m-much older."

"I'm a sight older than you," chuckled Josiah. "I reckon yer not yet twenty. That makes me at least ten winters wiser than you. I'm thinking even a child would know better than to set off an avalanche. At the rate yer going, you'll be doing good if this winter ain't yer last."

When Josiah didn't hear a response, he paused to shake George by the shoulder to keep him awake.

"What's yer last name?" asked Josiah, resuming his frantic digging.

"I c-can't remember," chattered the young man. Then, after a moment's thought, he finally answered, "Hughes. My name's Hughes."

"I almost got you free," said Josiah, sheathing his knife as he stepped around George. Hooking his arms under the man's shoulders, Josiah lifted him from his living tomb of ice and snow.

The young man shivered on the ground in his wet clothes, and Josiah quickly hauled him from the shadows and into the full sunlight. After pulling off the unfortunate man's wet clothing, Josiah hurried out of his own bearskin coat to give it to George.

Then Josiah sat down and moved George onto his lap to insulate him from the frozen ground. Wrapping his arms about the shivering man, he let his body warm the bearskin coat.

"Let's have a look at yer feet and see if frostbite got to any of yer toes," said Josiah, tugging off the man's store bought boots. "I know they ain't much to look at right now, but you ain't hurt too much. You should've seen a few of my toes some winters back. They got to rotting so badly, I severed them with my knife, rather than let the gangrene finish me off."

George looked faint, and Josiah quickly braced him with his arm.

"You ain't got much starch in you, to rattle so easily. Get a hold of yerself, and gather yer wits. Yer doing better than you should, so you've got no call to act like this."

"Will--" the man said, his memory gradually returning to him as his temperature warmed, "I've got to go back for Will."

Josiah narrowed his eyes. He had thought all this talk of Will had been the delirium of a freezing man.

"He's back up the mountain somewhere. I promised I'd come back after I found help."

"Which way?" Josiah's eyes followed the direction George pointed. "By the by, did you fire yer rifle last night? I thought I heard something of an avalanche."

George nodded. "I hoped it might attract attention."

Josiah chuckled, but not from jest. "You'd be minus a scalp if the Blackfoot had been nearby."

Fear swept across George's face. "Blackfoot! This is Blackfoot country? Heaven help us! I didn't think we were *this* far North!" He suspiciously looked Josiah over, as if to discern his loyalties. "Are you going to help my friend?"

"How many others are there? Yer trappers, ain't you? I know the faces of many of the mountain men in these parts, but I ain't familiar with yers."

"It's just me and Will Shaw," said George. "This is our first season trapping. We heard tales that the beaver were so plentiful in the North, they made men rich in pelts."

Josiah harrumphed. "Beaver ain't so plentiful, anymore."

"We hoped to winter near good hunting grounds," said George, "to start our spring trapping before everyone else."

Standing George on his feet, Josiah stretched himself to his full height. It came as no surprise to Josiah when George's head only came to his chin, for very few were as tall as him.

Bringing his rifle around, Josiah automatically checked its priming. "Not many white men visit these mountains and live to tell about it."

"My friend--"

"I'll help him, but then you have to leave. I ain't exactly on good terms with the Blackfoot, and if they find white men with me..." Josiah hesitated. "I reckon I've already had my last warning. As soon as yer clothes are dry, we'll set out."

The sun shone high above their heads as Josiah followed the young man up the mountain. Their progress slowed when they reached snow so deep it came to their knees, and it required great effort to take each step.

Every so often, George cast a wary glance over his shoulder, as if unsure what would happen if he took his eyes off Josiah for very long.

Finally, after several minutes, George broke the silence. "Are you--" he stammered awkwardly, "are you an--"

"An Indian?" finished Josiah. He had been preparing for just such a question. "My ma is Blackfoot, but my pa was white."

The young man's shoulders stiffened. "A half-breed," he mumbled, "and a Blackfoot one, at that."

They went on in silence, and Josiah braced himself for some kind of disparaging remark about his mixed heritage. The hesitant glance that told him he couldn't be entirely trusted, the haughty brow that put him in his place-- subtle and not-so subtle clues that he didn't quite fit in, didn't belong. How would this man, this George Hughes, accept his presence? Josiah didn't know.

"I've never met a--" George hesitated, then proceeded very cautiously, "someone like you before."

Josiah didn't respond. He could sense George's unease, and both men continued on their way without another word on the subject.

High on the mountainside, they came to a pile of windblown rocks. George scanned their surroundings, and then helplessly looked to Josiah for guidance. "I got all turned about in the blizzard, and I don't know where I left Will."

Groaning, Josiah rested his flintlock in the crook of his arm. "What are you looking at me fer? If you don't know where you left him, how should I?"

George stared at him blankly, obviously not knowing what to say.

Josiah shook his head. He asked a few questions to mine the young man's memory, and then took the lead position with George following at his back.

The sun threatened to sink behind the Rocky Mountains just as the small entrance to a snow cave caught Josiah's eye. Tracks led to and from the opening, but he saw no one.

"Will's leg is hurt," said George, hurrying past Josiah. "I made him a bed, and he's resting as much as possible."

"That you, George?" called a voice from within the snow cave.

Getting down on all fours, George crawled inside. "I brought help, Will!"

Crouching by the narrow opening, Josiah peered into the shelter. A disheveled man with a thickly whiskered face lay bundled in a buffalo robe. He had raven black hair peppered with some white, and he looked much older than young George. Josiah judged this man to be about his ma's age, about fifty.

When he saw Josiah, a shotgun suddenly appeared from the buffalo robe.

"Don't, Will!" said George. "He's all right!"

"That's not likely," said Will, his voice steeled with distrust. "Just look at him, George." Will motioned to Josiah with his shotgun. "Let me see your hands, stranger."

Josiah didn't budge.

"He's here to help," said George.

Will spat at the snow. "I'll be the judge of that. Let's see your hands, stranger, or I'll blow a hole through your middle big enough to see sky."

Slowly, Josiah moved his rifle to his lap.

"Give me that flintlock," said Will.

Grinning broadly until his teeth were barred, Josiah's hands locked around the rifle in his lap. "Only a fool'd give up his weapon, when he don't have to."

"You're forgetting something, stranger. I have a rifle trained on you."

Josiah took his time before speaking. "Yer friend looks to be in fine shape, George. I'll be going now."

"Wait!" George grabbed at Josiah's arm.

In one small movement, Josiah leveled his flintlock at George's belly. Josiah heard both hammers cock on Will's shotgun, and everyone froze where they were.

"George, I wouldn't do such things if you want to go on living," said Josiah, slowly lowering his weapon. "A man's likely to get himself kilt, surprising someone with a loaded rifle that way."

With an anguished face, George implored Josiah for help. "Please, Will's leg is broken and now it's turning color!"

The wind expelled from Josiah's lungs. He looked back to Will, who still had a cocked shotgun aimed in his direction. Will no longer looked as ready to pull the trigger as he had a few moments before, but fear still flashed in his eyes.

"Are you wanting my help?" asked Josiah. "If you do, lay aside yer weapon. I got kin waiting on me, and they'll worry if I ain't home by dark."

Distrust of Indians must've run deep in Will, for he didn't move. Not one inch.

"Go back to your kin," Will said finally, keeping his rifle trained on Josiah. "I'm obliged for your offer, but I'll take my chances with George."

Josiah sighed heavily. Turning his head, he saw the retreating light over the Rockies. "It'll be yer death," said Josiah, looking back to the man in the buffalo robe. "You ain't got much chance of living without me. Put down that shotgun."

Will shook his head. "How do I know you won't lift my scalp the moment I'm unarmed?"

Visibly disappointed, George took a desperate measure. He placed a hand on Will's leg.

A howl of pain filled the air! Will's rifle harmlessly fell on his lap as he went to remove George's hand from his injured leg.

Not wasting his opportunity, George picked up the shotgun. He gave both Will's rifle, and his own, to Josiah. "Will you help us?" George asked Josiah.

The gesture of trust made Josiah smile. "You can keep yer weapon, but I'll take his."

"What'd you go and do that for, George?" Face reddened with pain, Will glared at his young friend. "Now we're *both* gonners!" Then he saw George still had his rifle. The confused man turned his gaze on Josiah. "Pain must be playing tricks with my eyes, or I must be nearer Heaven's gates than I thought."

"You'll be a lot closer to those gates, if you don't take care of that leg," said Josiah. "George, crawl out of there so I can fit myself in."

With a thankful grin, the young man obeyed and crawled from the snow cave.

The entrance was very narrow, and Josiah's shoulders were very broad. Unable to fit himself through the opening, Josiah dug at the snow to make it wider.

Will cautiously stared at Josiah as he knelt beside him.

"Let's have a look at yer leg," said Josiah, first placing the rifles safely out of Will's reach. Leaning over, Josiah pulled back the robe. The stench of rotting flesh filled the shelter.

"It's even worse than the last time I checked," Will said in despair. "I had a feeling these mountains would be the death of me."

"You ain't dead-- at least, not yet." Josiah sat on his heels, his eyes on the gaping wound.

"Let me have a look," said George, his head peering over Josiah's shoulder. When George saw the wound, the color rushed from his face and Josiah put out a steadying hand to keep him from fainting.

Will groaned heavily. "Go sit outside, George. Let me talk to the Indian, alone."

Josiah slanted Will an amused look. This white man probably couldn't tell one tribe from another, let alone recognize a half-breed when he stared him full in the face. And he was.

With George safely out of the way, Josiah spoke in a low voice so he wouldn't be overheard. "Yer leg has to come off."

Will swallowed hard. "I figured as much."

"The bone ain't broke-- it's shattered," said Josiah. "There ain't no mending a shattered leg, even if the gangrene hadn't gotten to yer flesh."

"I suppose this way it makes things easier," Will chuckled darkly. "I have to lose my leg, and there's nothing else to be done."

"I ain't got nothing but my knife," said Josiah, lowering his voice even more. "It's sharp, but it won't cut through the bone too good."

"We've got something that might help," said Will. "George," he asked in a loud voice, "where's that axe?"

Instead of answering, Josiah and Will heard a thump in the snow.

George had passed out.

From inside their warm shelter, Emma looked up at the darkened sky once more. She prayed to see Josiah coming over the rise, grinning as he usually did upon seeing her face after a journey.

At Emma's side sat Mary, her pistol resting in her lap in case of trouble. Emma smiled in spite of the situation, knowing where Mary had learned her posturing. It was so like Josiah.

Once more, the girl's sharp eyesight and steady voice assured Emma that she saw no one, and once more, Emma prayed as hard as she could for Josiah's safety. Earlier that morning, they had

heard the loud sounds of what Mary had thought had been an avalanche, and it took every scrap of Emma's faith not to go searching for her husband.

Hours later, when the skies had grown dark with night, Emma wrestled with anxiety. She prayed Josiah's absence had nothing to do with being buried alive.

"It's snowing again," said Mary, her voice dull with disappointment.

Closing her eyes, Emma prayed with Mary. "God, help Josiah to be safe and warm right now. Cause him to return to us, tomorrow."

A long night lay ahead Josiah. When morning at last forced its way into the clouded sky, its dim light found Josiah slumped against the wall of a snow cave. His eyes flickered open. Will lay beside him, wrapped in a buffalo robe, a single booted foot sticking out at the other end.

A yawn behind Josiah's back told him George would soon be asking the same question he had asked over and over the night before.

"Is he alive, Josiah?"

Touching his hand to Will's neck, Josiah grunted. "He's alive."

"Do you think he'll die?"

"I reckon he'll make it," said Josiah, nudging George out of the entrance where the young man had slept with a buffalo robe. Stretching his long legs, Josiah looked out over the mountainside. More snow had fallen during the night, and from the sky, more would soon come. Warming his hands over the fire outside the cave, Josiah felt hunger nagging at his belly.

"I thought the night would never end," sighed George, his face still pale from exhaustion.

"When's the last time you had anything to eat?" asked Josiah.

"I haven't had anything since Will got hurt," said George, keeping the buffalo robe tightly about his frame.

That's what Josiah had thought. His fingers dug into the small bag at his belt, producing a clump of pemmican. Taking his blackened knife, Josiah divided it in two. He handed the larger half to George, and the young man ate without question.

"My knife's ruint," said Josiah, returning the dull blade to the sheath at his side. He had used it to cauterize the stump of Will's leg, and now it had no edge.

"I can replace your knife with mine," said George, his hand going to his boot where he evidently had a knife hidden.

"No, keep it," said Josiah. "I weren't asking for a replacement."

"I wish there was something I could do to thank you," said George, his mouth full of pemmican. "You saved Will's life, as well as mine. Would you take my compass?"

Josiah chuckled. "Keep yer things, George. I ain't expecting any thanks."

"Please," said George, thrusting the brass compass toward Josiah, "I want you to have it."

"I don't need such trinkets to tell me which way I need to go," said Josiah. "Yer needing that-- not me. Put it away, George. There's things we need to talk over afore Will wakes up."

Finishing his pemmican, George sat in the snow, huddled in his buffalo robe.

"Yer still a youngster," said Josiah, holding up a hand to quiet George's objection. "Without Will to keep you fed, you'll be in a bad way. So will he. It'll take time fer his leg to mend, and he won't be able to do any hunting or keep you out of trouble if Blackfoot shows up."

George didn't say anything, his face deep in thought.

"When I'm able, I'll build you a proper shelter where the trees can protect you from the wind and hide you from Indians. I don't have much food to spare, but I'll give you what I can until you're able to catch something more."

"I can hunt," said George. "I'm not a great shot, but I can manage on my own."

A strong gust of icy wind whipped past them, and George's bravado faded. Behind those grownup eyes, Josiah saw a very frightened boy.

"I'll be thankful for some shelter," said George, his face relaxing a little at the thought. "Except for that tiny snow cave, we've been living under our buffalo robes all winter, and sleeping by an open fire."

"I've passed many nights the same way," smiled Josiah. "Ain't no shame in that. The Indians stay the warmest, though, in their hide lodges. If you had yerself a squaw--" Josiah caught himself falling into an old habit, and quickly changed the subject. "I'll look at Will's leg afore I leave. You lost yer snowshoes in the avalanche, didn't you? What about Will's? He still have his? It'll be a long walk, trying to get back to my kin without snowshoes."

"You can use Will's," nodded George. "You'll come back, though?" As if realizing how desperate he must've sounded, George straightened his shoulders. "Snowshoes are hard to come by."

Emma had not been able to find much sleep the night before, with waking and praying for Josiah's safety every time her eyes popped open. This morning had been even harder, and there were several times Emma had talked herself into going to search for Josiah. If only she hadn't heard yesterday's avalanche, her nerves would be so much quieter.

By midday, Emma's silent prayers consumed every waking minute. Why hadn't he returned? Josiah had only said he would take a look around and maybe hunt more game before they moved on to the cabin. Maybe, instead of food, he had met up with trouble. Maybe he lay beneath tons of ice and snow. Emma scolded herself for dwelling on fear, and prayed for more faith.

The sound of crunching snow came as a welcome interruption to Emma's prayers. Grabbing her shotgun, she peered from the shelter with Mary at her side.

A buckskinned man with a weary face grinned at Emma. "Hi, Em. Hope I didn't worry you too much."

Dropping her rifle, Emma crawled out on hands and knees. Straightening, she did her best to hurry through the deep snow, and into those strong welcoming arms.

"You're safe, thank God you're safe," she breathed, as Josiah hugged her tightly. "I prayed you hadn't been caught in that avalanche, and my prayers are answered!"

"You heard that?" Josiah pulled Emma back and she saw the concern in his eyes. "I'd hoped you hadn't. It must've given you a hard night."

Weariness had etched itself deep into Josiah's face, and it concerned Emma. "It looks as though you've had an even harder time. What happened, Josiah? Is that fresh blood on your trousers? Did you go hunting?"

By now, Mary had joined them, and she hugged Josiah's leg until he bent down to pick her up.

"Let me eat first, Emma, and then I tell you everything. You been keeping watch fer me, Mary?"

Eager to please Josiah, Mary nodded happily.

"Has yer Ma had her meals like she should?"

"She did not eat any lunch," said Mary.

Emma sighed. She felt Josiah's disapproving eyes probe her for an explanation. "I intended to eat later today. Now Josiah," Emma's voice rose in defense as he groaned loudly, "I wasn't hungry."

"Yer eating as soon as we get inside, Emma." Giving Mary a pat on the head, he set the child down. "Good girl," he smiled at Mary.

Little Mary glowed at Josiah's praise. "Ma did not eat much supper, either," she quickly added.

"Mary, I ate what I usually do for an evening meal," said Emma, "and I'd appreciate you not stretching the truth just to please your father. If you *must* give him a report, make sure it's fair and truthful."

"Yes, Ma."

Josiah tugged at Mary's braid. "Listen to yer ma. I don't want to be yelling at her, if she's been behaving."

"Oh, I'm outnumbered!" laughed Emma, swatting Josiah's arm before she ducked inside. It felt good to have him back.

With a tired moan, Josiah let himself down on the buffalo robe. He pulled at his bearskin coat, and then at the straps on his feet.

"Where are your snowshoes, Josiah?" Emma hadn't noticed them before now, but they weren't Josiah's.

"Give me pemmican first, and then I'll talk," said Josiah. He accepted food from Emma, but didn't pray over his meal until he saw that Emma had taken some food for herself. "I'm meaning it, Emma, I want you to eat."

"I know, I know," she sighed. She stared at her pemmican, trying to work up an appetite. After saying grace, she took a small nibble, and then waited for Josiah to keep his promise to talk.

"We ain't alone on the mountain," said Josiah, speaking with a mouthful of food. If those words hadn't captured Emma's full attention, she would've lost what little she had in her stomach at the sight of pemmican rolling around in Josiah's mouth.

"We aren't alone? Who is it, Josiah? Blackfoot?"

"No, these two ain't Indians." Josiah looked at her hesitantly. "They're trappers."

"White trappers? Here?" Emma didn't know what to think of this news, except to note the odd pained look on Josiah's face. Emma didn't understand. Wouldn't he be happy for the company of other mountain men? For men like himself?

"One of them's hurt, and I had to take his leg afore gangrene finished him off."

"Take his leg'?" asked Emma. Then she realized what he had meant. "Will he live?"

"How'd you know that's his name?" Josiah asked in surprise.

"I don't understand," said Emma.

"That's his name," said Josiah.

"What is?" asked Emma.

"Will."

"Will what?"

"I think it's Shaw, but I ain't sure I'm remembering it rightly."

Emma sighed patiently. She was getting nowhere. "What about his leg? Is the man going to die?"

"I reckon he'll live."

Then Josiah told them of last night's operation, and Emma felt her stomach turn. She learned Will had been the injured trapper's name, and that a second man named George had held Will

down while Josiah worked on the leg. When Josiah began to relate the cauterization, Emma stopped him flat.

"Please, Josiah, my stomach is already upset."

Josiah scowled at her disbelievingly. "You've done as much for my back, when I need it, and you didn't turn squeamish, then."

"My stomach wasn't upset then," said Emma, taking another nibble of food. "It must've been terrible for you, Josiah. It explains why you're so exhausted."

He shrugged lightly. "Will had a harder time of it than me. I even felt sorry for George, when all the screaming started." Josiah looked at her thoughtfully. "They'll need my help, if they're going to survive."

"It'll be dangerous for everyone if the Blackfoot find out," said Emma.

"I reckon so."

He sighed, rubbed the back of his neck with a broad hand, and then turned his frowning face to the fire. He looked as though his thoughts disturbed him.

"Are you afraid the Blackfoot are nearby?" asked Emma.

"No, there ain't any buffaler around."

Something else bothered Josiah, and Emma quickly ran out of guesses. She had a feeling the Blackfoot, though a potentially dangerous situation, didn't overly worry him. Not right now, as his dark eyes raised to stare at her so quietly. His rough night, though exhausting and difficult, didn't appear to be foremost in his thoughts, either.

"What's wrong, Josiah? Did I do something to make you unhappy?"

Josiah smiled sadly, and shook his head. "No, I reckon I'm happy enough. Did you stay inside the lodge when I was gone?"

"We only went out for necessities," said Emma. "Won't you talk to me, Josiah?"

He gave her a small grin. "What do you think I'm doing?" The twinkle in his eye told her he understood what she had meant. "Maybe I'll talk about it later-- when you've finished yer meal."

Emma smiled. "Promise?"

The small grin playing around Josiah's mouth faded a little, and he sighed heavily. "We'll see," he said, shaking off his troubles with a new grin. "Afore I take you women on to the cabin, how's about another dip in the hot springs?"

"I go first!" said Mary, her face lighting up with smiles and excitement. "Ma and I go first!"

Josiah laughed, but to Emma, his laughter sounded strained.

With Josiah seated high on the boulder overlooking the hot springs, Emma and Mary splashed about in the warm, silty water. After the girl had had enough play, she shouted up at the rock,

"Look away, Pa! I am coming out!"

Emma smiled as she imagined Josiah's scowl when he turned his back to the springs.

After drying off, Mary took her place on the rock, and Josiah entered the water.

"How about talking, now?" Emma asked him.

"Now?" he asked. "I'm trying to relax."

"You'll feel more relaxed, after you've told me what's on your mind."

A playful swat of water did little to stop Emma.

"Please, Josiah?"

Groaning, Josiah gazed at Emma with a wistful grin. "Did you finish that pemmican?"

"I did." She felt some satisfaction telling him that, for now he had to talk.

Instead, Josiah splashed water over his shoulders, and then closed his eyes as the water lapped at his chest.

"Josiah, you promised!"

One eye opened, and it looked at her reproachfully. "I did not."

Disappointed, Emma looked at him pleadingly. "Please, don't tease me, Josiah. I'm serious."

Moving toward her in the water, Josiah pulled Emma to his side with a strong arm. He pressed her head against his shoulder, and each time she opened her mouth to talk, he covered it with a kiss. Emma had to admit, if he didn't want to talk, this was a good way to keep her quiet.

After supper that night, when Mary quieted down long enough to be tucked into bed, Emma stoked the fire to make sure the flames wouldn't die before morning. She had hoped Josiah would pull off his hunting shirt, so she could tease his worries from him, but he didn't. He lay down fully clothed, and before Emma could stop him, his loud snores filled the shelter. The exhaustion of the night before had caught up to him, and Emma decided to let him rest.

As she lay beside Josiah while he slept, Emma contemplated his pained expression when he had told her there were trappers on the mountain.

"Ma?" a small voice whispered from across the fire. "I can not sleep."

Quietly getting up, Emma made sure Josiah kept warm with a heavy blanket about his shoulders. Then she crossed to the other side of the small shelter to lay down beside Mary.

"I can't sleep, either," Emma whispered to Mary. The girl snuggled happily beside her as Josiah continued to snore.

Mary wrinkled her nose. "He is very loud."

"He is very tired," smiled Emma, giving Mary a small hug. "Your pa has had a harder time than he likes to admit, and deserves his rest."

"Ma?" Mary looked up at Emma with serious dark eyes. "Am I white or red?"

The question caught Emma off guard. "You're both, Mary. You're half Blackfoot and half white, which means you're twice as blessed as someone who's just one color."

"Is Pa the same as me?"

"Yes, he is," said Emma.

Mary looked thoughtful. "Where does Pa live?"

"What do you mean?" asked Emma.

"Pa does not live with the Blackfoot, and he does not live with the white man."

"He has white friends, and I expect he lives mostly with them," said Emma.

The answer must've satisfied Mary, for she drifted off to sleep.

It was then that Emma realized she didn't hear Josiah snoring. She raised her head, and found him staring at her from over the flames.

He smiled as their gaze met.

Leaving Mary, Emma tucked the child in without awakening her.

Josiah moved over as Emma lay down beside him.

"I heard what you was saying to Mary," he whispered.

"I'm sorry we woke you," sighed Emma. "You needed the sleep."

The same pained thoughtful expression that had perplexed Emma, again crossed Josiah's features and Emma felt helpless to guess its cause. She could only assume it had something to do with the two trappers.

"Emma, when you look at me, what do you see?"

The question mystified her. "I see my husband."

Josiah frowned. "I mean, what do you see-- an Indian, or a white man?"

Emma considered her answer carefully. "I see both."

Looking frustrated, Josiah shook his head. "People see one thing, and not both when they look at me. I'm a white man to the Blackfoot, and a Blackfoot to the white man. I'm never just me."

"What's got you thinking like this?" asked Emma. "Is it because of the trappers?"

"The trappers are what set me off, but Mary's the one who got me to thinking. She was asking what color husband she'd be marrying, and where she'd be living. I couldn't answer her one way or the other. I just told her to be sure she married a Christian."

"It's a good answer, Josiah."

"But it isn't any answer at all," sighed Josiah. "I got two sides tugging at me, and I always wind up not belonging to either one when the dust settles. Emma, even my trapper friends treat me different, like I'm not really one of them. The only time I ever feel I belong somewhere, is when I'm alone in these here mountains."

"You're no longer alone," said Emma, brushing back his thick mane. "Mary and I are with you, and we're a family now. We belong together."

"That's not what those two trappers are going to say. They're going to say I stole you, and even though yer with child, they still might say I should return you to your people. I'm telling you right now, I'm never doing that. Yer mine, and I'm keeping you."

"Calm yourself, Josiah. No one's making you do anything. They're only trappers."

"Yer mine," he said again, his expression softening as he gazed at her intently.

"And you're mine, so don't you forget it," she whispered.

"I ain't fergetting."

Emma sighed happily, in spite of learning of Josiah's fears. "I'm so glad you're confiding in me, Josiah. It makes me feel as though you need me."

"I do need you, Emma. That's the trouble. I'm never letting them take you from me. Ever."

"Hush," said Emma, touching her finger to his lips, "no one's going anywhere."

"If I thought you'd be better off with yer own people..." Josiah looked conflicted. "Is it selfish of me to keep you, Emma? Would it be better if you went back to yer own people?"

The words had greatly pained Josiah, for Emma saw him tremble. As his face leaned above hers, a large tear squeezed from the corner of his eye. It slipped down his chiseled features before splashing onto her forehead. She touched his cheek, and he moved his lips to the palm of her hand.

"I'm already with my people," she said softly.

Josiah's mouth lightly touched hers, as if to ask for tenderness. Answering his need, Emma kissed him with all the comfort she could summon.

Whatever worlds Josiah felt caught between, Emma knew her place was with her husband. Their lives were intertwined as completely as two eddies of water, swirling together until they became one. Emma stroked Josiah's head, and she smiled when he moaned in utter contentment.

As she felt him relax into sleep, her own troubling thoughts quietly surfaced. Emma had assumed their first experience with the white world would come when Josiah returned to his friends in the spring. It hadn't occurred to her that these two mountain men would be their first true test.

Her fears of what polite society would say about someone like Josiah and his illegitimate daughter, had long remained unexplored in Emma's mind. She already knew what her neighbors back in Indiana would've said, and such thoughts were too painful to contemplate for very long.

But if those two trappers were anything like Josiah, they wouldn't be considered polite society by anyone. Josiah didn't often speak of his friends, and Emma could only assume what he left out. She imagined them to be a crude and illiterate bunch, ignorant of anything except hunting and weaponry and animal hides. And willing women.

Thinking this over, Emma reasoned there was no need for great concern. She would only need a loaded shotgun to keep the two men at a comfortable distance, and that would be all. These men would not be gossiping neighbors, speaking polite things to your face but whispering cruel words behind your back.

Civilization felt distant and far removed from where Emma lay with Josiah, cozied together on the buffalo robes in their small shelter. Curling the end of a long strand of Josiah's sun-streaked hair about her finger, Emma slowly released the tension from her body. She had no need to fear. Polite society was too far away, to reach these wild mountains.

Before falling asleep, Emma communed with God. She placed her family in His hands, and then closed her eyes in undisturbed rest.

Emma's prayer: "Draw me not away with the wicked, and with the workers of iniquity, which speak peace to their neighbours, but mischief is in their hearts."
~ Psalm 28:3 ~

"Lay not wait, O wicked man, against the dwelling of the righteous; spoil not [our] resting place."
~ Proverbs 24:15 ~

Chapter Thirteen

Love Thy Neighbors

1837, South of Josiah's cabin, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

~ Romans 13:10 ~

To Josiah's delight, he awoke the next morning with his head on Emma's bosom. He rubbed his cheek against her deerskin dress, clinging to her shamelessly like a child needing comfort from its mother. Since Emma still slept, no one could see his weakness, and Josiah could derive as much comfort as he needed in his darling's slumbering arms.

And Josiah needed comfort. Emma's kisses last night had helped, but what he felt the most grateful for, were those five wonderful words she had given him so reassuringly, as though she had read his heart: "I'm already with my people." Those simple words echoed in Josiah's mind, until they reverberated in every recess of his soul. Let others say what they might, Emma had said he was her people.

Protective of his treasure, Josiah clung to Emma all the tighter. He dug his hand under Emma's side, making his way between buffalo hide and deerskin dress until he found the small of her back. With great care, he massaged her muscles, hoping to lessen the tightness she would probably feel upon waking up. Then he moved his hand to Emma's front, to feel the slight swell of her belly. You couldn't see that she was with child yet, not unless you felt for it. But there it was, right there beneath his hand, the swell of a baby growing inside Emma.

In the stillness of the lodge, Josiah returned his head to its resting place. A small sigh of contentment slid past his ear, and he didn't have to look up to know Emma had awakened, and that a smile was on her lips. Josiah nestled his wife, and her soft whisper caressed him.

"Kiss me," she said, her sweet voice more command than request.

Even though his heart summersaulted to obey, Josiah forced himself to respond coolly. "I will... when I feel like it." He smothered a grin as her tender fingers reached behind his neck.

"Do you feel like it *now*?" she asked, a hushed laugh dancing in her voice.

Unwilling to hesitate any longer, Josiah raised his head to smother Emma in a kiss. Then he pulled his mouth away, returning to his soft pillow for a little more rest before the day started.

Beneath him, Josiah felt Emma trying to stretch the night stiffness from her limbs. She tapped his shoulder, and he grunted in response.

"The morning must be growing late, Josiah. Shouldn't we get up?"

Grinning, Josiah cozied his cheek against Emma. "We'll get up when I'm good and ready."

"Oh, really?" she asked playfully. "And what if I want to get up before you're ready?"

Josiah harrumphed. "Try it, and see how far you git."

Something slipped beneath Josiah's armpit, and he exploded into laughter! He grabbed the tickling hand, pinning it to the buffalo robes while Emma's frantic laughter begged him not to retaliate.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't," he grinned.

He saw Emma search for an excuse, her face lighting up when she finally found one. "Mary's awake and will want breakfast!"

"Mary," he called over his shoulder, "you know where to find the pemmican." He grinned down at Emma. "Now where was I?"

Emma laughed uncontrollably, and Josiah enjoyed his advantage until she suddenly grew still. "I have to get up," said Emma, her voice filled with urgency. "Josiah, get off me."

Not needing an explanation, Josiah rolled off Emma to let her crawl outside with her shotgun. When she returned to the lodge, she looked very much relieved.

"I nearly made you laugh too hard," grinned Josiah, as Emma sat beside the fire to get breakfast. She ignored his observation with a faint blush, and then quietly said a prayer over their meal. Biting into his food, Josiah watched to see if Emma would eat. She did, although very slowly.

Tossing a dry branch into the fire, Josiah nodded to Emma. "After you finish eating that pemmican, we're packing up and heading fer the cabin."

Clouds blanketed the morning sky, shedding white flakes to the already deep layer of snow covering the ground. Digging his travois out from under the snow, Josiah loaded their

belongings into its leather netting and then started off with his family back toward his pa's cabin.

Each step they took also brought them a little closer to where Josiah had left the two mountaineers in their snow cave. Apprehensively, Josiah glanced at Emma. She didn't look concerned, but Josiah knew she had no idea how close they were to the trappers. He guessed they weren't too far from the men now, and decided to take a slightly longer route back to the cabin to avoid a chance meeting with George.

After Josiah had gotten some distance between themselves and the snow cave, he told the girls to stop so they could rest and catch their breath. As usual, Emma needed more rest than Mary.

Leaning against a boulder, Josiah's thoughts bothered him. He knew George hoped he would come sometime today, to check on Will. Josiah mulled it over, and then came to a decision.

"Emma," he said, taking up his rifle into the crook of his arm, "I want you and Mary to wait for me while I go see how Will's faring. I'll be back in a short while."

Josiah recognized a glimmer of curiosity in Emma's face, as she realized how close they must be to the trappers' camp. She said nothing about coming with him, and neither did he. Mary, however, couldn't contain her curiosity so easily.

"Pa," she asked, tugging at his coat to get his attention, "take me with you!"

Josiah looked down at his daughter. "Why should I?"

"I have never seen a white man before," she said with an excited grin. "Please, Pa?"

Josiah frowned. "What are you meaning? You see *me* every day, and *I'm* white."

Mary blinked at him with puzzled dark eyes.

"Never mind," Josiah said brusquely, "stay here with Emma."

"But, Pa--"

"Do as I say!" Josiah bit off the words with a sharpness he quickly regretted. "Mary," he sighed, squatting down to Mary's level, "I'm sorry I yelled. You best stay here with Emma, and look after things, all right?"

"Please, Pa?"

"Didn't you just hear what I said, Little Cub? Yer staying put with yer ma, and that's final."

Unused to seeing disobedience from Mary, Josiah watched as her brow knit together in defiance and her chin came up. "I will *not* stay. After you go, I will follow."

"Mary!" Emma said in surprise. "Apologize this very minute!"

Without taking his eyes off Mary, Josiah called to Emma over his shoulder. "Stay quiet, Emma. This is between me and Mary. Cub, I'll give you a chance to take those words back, but if you don't, I reckon I'll hafta punish you."

Mary swallowed hard, but stubbornly remained silent.

"So be it," said Josiah, sitting down on the ground to take Mary over his knee. He spanked Mary's bottom as hard as he dared without damaging her, and on his fourth swat, Mary burst into tears. Josiah didn't stop, however, until he had reached the end of the punishment. Mary's spanking over, Josiah stood the crying child on her feet, his face level with hers as he sat in the snow.

Sniffing, Mary dried her tears with one of her blankets.

"I didn't like punishing you, Mary, but I'll do it again if you ever disobey me or yer ma. Do we understand each other?"

Mary nodded, more tears slipping down her cheeks. "I am sorry," she said in a very small voice. She looked at him repentantly, and Josiah took her into his arms for a loving hug. She felt small but not fragile, and the thought went through his mind that this child, this little girl, was his very own.

"If I didn't love you," he told Mary, "I'd never have punished you. Do you understand, Cub?"

Mary nodded, and to his pleasant surprise, gave him a peck on the cheek. "Sorry, Pa."

"Yer forgiven, daughter." He pulled Mary away, and smiled when he noticed the pleased grin on her face. He had called her daughter.

Standing, Josiah checked his rifle. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the quiet approval in Emma's face. She hadn't thought his punishment had been too rough, and it made the last flicker

of doubt fade from Josiah's heart. He had done the right thing. Feeling better, he easily swung the flintlock over his shoulder. "You women stay put. I'll be back afore lunch." He waited until Emma came forward with his goodbye kiss, and then set off in the direction of the trappers' snow cave.

The cave opening not yet within eyesight, Josiah heard crunching snow and the heavy breathing of someone moving through the deep drifts at a fast pace. Before long, George appeared with his rifle, his knuckles white from clutching the weapon so tightly.

The young man stooped to catch his breath before speaking. "I thought... I thought you might not come," he said between gasps of air. He straightened, took a steadying breath to contain his obvious relief, and then fell into step beside Josiah.

Josiah couldn't help but grin. "How's Will?" he asked.

"Not good," said George. "He refuses to eat or drink, and won't even speak to me. Hasn't said a word since... since that night. Do you have any food, Josiah? I saved some of the food you gave us for Will, for when he changes his mind and wants to eat, but I've already finished mine."

Josiah dug into the pouch at his belt for more pemmican. He silently rebuked himself for not thinking to bring enough to last them for a month or two. Because he hadn't, it would mean another trip, and Josiah wasn't looking for any excuses to come back.

While George ate, Josiah unfastened his snowshoes and crawled inside the snow cave. Wrapped in a thick buffalo hide, he found Will, awake and deathly pale. The trapper stared at Josiah as though he were an intruder, but Josiah ignored the insult. He touched Will's forehead and frowned.

"Yer running a fever, Will. That ain't good."

Will remained silent.

"George tells me you ain't eating or drinking. If you don't git something in yer belly, you won't have the strength to git better." Josiah harrumphed. He sounded like he did when talking to Emma. He dug into his pouch and pulled out the last bite of pemmican. "Eat this," said Josiah, shoving the morsel of food into Will's mouth.

Will stared at him, and Josiah recognized the hatred in his eyes. It hadn't been there the first time he had met Will, but it was there now. It had been there ever since that night. That night he lost his leg.

"Swallow that afore I make you," said Josiah, giving full weight to each word as he spoke.

Instead of obeying, Will spat the food onto the snow.

If Will had been a child, and not a full grown man nearly twenty seasons older than himself, Josiah would've spanked Will. But this man was no child, and that loaded shotgun he weakly clutched to his chest was no plaything.

"You fixing to die?" asked Josiah. "If you won't eat or drink, that's what'll happen."

Will smiled ever so faintly.

"So that's it, yer wanting to die," said Josiah. "Very well, I can't stop you-- you having that weapon so handy. But what about yer friend? What about George? What'll happen to him if you ain't here to help him?"

Will said nothing, his face betraying little more than hopelessness and flashes of hatred.

"I ain't God, and I ain't George," said Josiah, "so I can't take personal offense at you murdering yerself or running out on yer friend." Leaning forward, Josiah glared at Will. "But what *does* offend me, is that there pemmican you spat up. I took it out of the mouths of my kinfolk, just so you could eat." Josiah tightened his jaw. "Yer going to eat it, if it's the last thing that ever passes yer lips."

Will said nothing. He just stared at Josiah, daring him to go for his weapon and finish him off.

Feigning to back down, Josiah surprised Will by cracking him over the head with the butt of Josiah's already battered flintlock. The shotgun in Will's hands went off, discharging into the ceiling. Snow fell through the opening, and Josiah saw daylight.

"What happened?" asked George, dropping down to the entrance to peer inside.

Ignoring George, Josiah pulled the shotgun from its unconscious owner. "Will, wake up. You and I have unfinished business." Josiah slapped Will until the man's eyes opened.

Will frantically searched for his shotgun, only to find Josiah had placed it well out of his reach.

Shoving the pemmican into Will's mouth, Josiah ordered him to eat. Will tried to spit, but Josiah clamped his jaw shut with both hands. A wrestling match ensued, and for a weakened man, Will put up a tough fight.

The pemmican at last forced down his throat, Will licked his bloody lip, for he had bitten himself in his wild struggle.

Breathless but victorious, Josiah sat on his heels feeling quite pleased with himself. In spite of his small win, however, Josiah knew he hadn't broken Will's desire to die. Josiah had had enough fighting. All he wanted now was to go back to Emma and Mary. After finding his hastily set aside flintlock, Josiah gathered Will's shotgun, and then fit himself through the entrance.

When Josiah got to his feet, he found George gaping at him in horror.

In his usual headlong manner, Josiah met George's indignant gaze without hesitation.

The young man took a quick awkward step back.

"If you've got something to say, say it," said Josiah.

George swallowed hard. "You had no right to treat him that way. You're overstepping yourself, and forgetting that you're just a --"

"A *what?*" Josiah asked evenly.

George shrank in his capote.

"Well? I'm waiting fer you to finish what you were saying."

Silence filled the air as George slowly shook his head. He wouldn't finish his statement, and Josiah knew it. Not now, and hopefully, not ever again.

"Best hang onto this," said Josiah, thrusting Will's shotgun at George. He wasn't about to make any apologies. Food meant life and death to more than himself, and these newcomers needed to respect that -- even if they didn't respect *him*.

For several long moments, indignation replaced grief as George studied Will's weapon with something akin to nostalgia. He ran his hand along its smooth barrel, his voice subdued and sorrowful. "Will's been a good friend to me," George said in a choked voice. "When others

wouldn't let me trap with them, he did, and told me I was welcome. I wouldn't be here right now without Will. He's one of the best friends I've ever had."

Josiah grunted. He looked to the sky, wanting to get back to his family before lunchtime. The sun hadn't yet reached midday, so he still had a little time left before Emma would start worrying.

Impatient to get moving, Josiah looked back to George. He didn't like what he found. The young man softly cried into his sleeve, while his shoulders heaved in quiet, delicate sobs. Josiah scowled. George acted like a sniveling girl, instead of a man nearly full grown!

"Git control of yerself, youngster." Josiah felt the growl in his voice, but did nothing to stop it.

Instead of objecting at being called a child, George obediently did as he was told. He swiped at his tears with the sleeve of his capote, and then pulled out a handkerchief to blow his nose. "Maybe he'll eat," said George, struggling to sound hopeful but failing miserably. "He might, if you forced him."

"That ain't likely," said Josiah. "He's given up."

A boyishly innocent face looked at Josiah, his eyes rimmed with tears. "But why? Why won't he even try?"

Josiah rubbed his jaw in an effort to lessen the tension he felt building in his muscles. "I ain't rightly knowing, but if I hafta guess, I reckon he thinks life ain't worth living without his leg. He didn't feel that way afore we cut it off, but he sure feels that way now."

"What am I going to do?" asked George. His voice came out in a whimper, and Josiah cringed. Didn't this man have any self-respect? Instead of berating him, however, as his own pa would've done, Josiah forced the disdain from his throat before answering.

"You'll do what you have to, just like the rest of us. I'm leaving now, but I'll return to make that shelter I promised."

George halfheartedly nodded, as though not really believing him.

"You just keep fighting to live," said Josiah. "Survive this, and it'll make a man out of you yet."

Emma stood up as she saw Josiah approach. From his grim expression, she knew his meeting with the trappers hadn't gone well.

"That Will," Josiah spat at the snow in disgust. "He's doing his best to die, and doesn't care if he takes George with him. I've a good mind to let him sit there and rot as he wants, but I reckon God wouldn't like it." Josiah slanted her a questioning look. "Would He?"

"He wouldn't," said Emma.

With a heavy sigh, Josiah nodded knowingly. "That's what I thought."

Getting in front of the travois, Josiah dragged the make-shift sled behind him. He kept a quick and unrelenting pace, until Emma called out for him to slow down. Towing Mary at her side, Emma hurriedly waddled in her snowshoes until she caught up to Josiah.

He looked at her apologetically. "Reckon I have a lot on my mind."

Lunchtime came, and they stopped long enough to eat before resuming their trip. Snow came down heavily as the afternoon grew long, partially obscuring the way before them. When Emma relayed her concern about getting lost to Josiah, he only grinned and told her to keep pace at his side. His quiet confidence bolstered her, and she didn't mention getting lost again.

Before long, a familiar sight towered above Emma. Ole' Hollowtop's flattened peak greeted her tired eyes, and she knew the cabin must be nearby. A flutter of joy traveled through Emma. They were almost home!

Behind the trees, out of plain view, nestled their tiny cabin. Emma thought she had never seen such a beautiful sight in all her life.

Instead of rushing inside, Josiah cautiously checked the lodge for intruders. Announcing all was clear, he climbed onto the roof to knock off the snow that had accumulated while they were gone.

Emma had known she'd missed the cabin, but she didn't know how much until she stepped inside and saw the cold fireplace, waiting for flames to bring it to life. She felt her eyes moisten with joy.

When Josiah came inside, Emma heard him chuckle. "You ain't going to start crying, are you, Emma?" He looked at her uncertainly, shaking his head with a grin as she dried the tear on her cheek.

"I'm just so happy to be home," smiled Emma. Her gaze fell on the sewing shelf beneath the shuttered windows, and another tear rolled down her face. Soon, she could resume her sewing.

With a low chuckle, Josiah came from behind Emma and wrapped his arms about her waist. She tilted her head against his shoulder as they watched Mary make her bed beside the fireplace. The girl smiled broadly as she took down her Indian doll from off the table, reuniting her two "babies" with childlike glee.

Emma heard Josiah smile. "I wish I didn't have to go so soon," he breathed quietly. He propped his chin on Emma's head, and she felt a gust of wind as he exhaled. "I promised George to make them that shelter, and I'm thinking I shouldn't wait too long to get it done."

Wistfully touching the large hand at her waist, Emma caressed his fingers. "When will you be back?"

"Tomorrow, most likely, so if I ain't home by sundown tonight, don't wait up fer me." He planted a kiss on her hair. "Don't fret about me, Emma. I can take care of myself."

"Stay warm, Josiah." She closed her eyes, relishing his hold on her for a little longer. "I'll miss you, tonight."

"Have Mary sleep beside you," Josiah said with a grin in his voice. "You won't git too lonely." With a reluctant sigh, he released Emma and she turned to look into his face. "Don't leave the cabin unless you have to, and keep yer shotgun handy."

For the first time in awhile, Emma heard herself laugh as though she didn't have a care in the world. "There's no need to tell me what I already know!"

"I'm just reminding you," he grinned.

After checking Emma's shotgun and Mary's pistol, Josiah gathered his axe, two buffalo hides, and a bladder of pemmican for George and Will. He strapped the snowshoes back on, received his goodbye kiss, and then headed out the door.

Emma watched his figure disappear beyond the line of trees surrounding their cabin, and noted the already darkening sky. With such a late start, she knew he wouldn't be returning tonight.

Before darkness fell, Josiah made camp in the new shelter he had built for the trappers. Ironically, he wasn't far from the cabin, for Josiah didn't want to make long trips back and forth just to check on the two men. Even though he could've returned to sleep the night through with Emma, he instead chose to remain at the new campsite. Four walls and a roof had a way of making him feel confined, and restless to find his freedom.

But not Emma.

Josiah sighed heavily. Emma loved that lodge, built thick and strong with logs that kept a man in one place. During the trapping season, when he wasn't holed up somewhere for the winter, his life took him all across the Rockies, hunting and trapping wherever he could to make a living. This was his life, and he didn't know of any other.

Frowning, Josiah tossed another branch into the flames before settling back in his robe. Having looked at the dark side of things long enough, he felt ready for a happier perspective. Emma would never leave his side simply because he slept beneath an open sky and went from place to place until winter made travel difficult. Given enough time, she would learn to love these mountains as he did. She had no choice, just as he had no choice. He must continue living the way he had been raised, and do what he had been taught since childhood. His pa was a trapper, and so was he.

Even with this comforting thought, it saddened Josiah to recall Emma's tears of joy upon returning to their small shambles of a cabin.

The biting wind nipped at Josiah's nose, and he pulled the robe over his face for protection. He had to stop thinking of such things. He had enough to pray about, without bothering himself too much over the future. Josiah thought of the two trappers, and let those concerns pull him back to the present.

"God, help me," he prayed out loud.

Feeling a great deal of responsibility, Josiah tried to find comfort from the warmth gathering in his buffalo robe. His best earthly source for comfort, however, cuddled with Mary back at the cabin.

Josiah smiled grimly. He missed Emma.

The next morning, Josiah awoke to a sky filled with snow. He ate his breakfast, then started off for the snow cave to bring Will and George to their new camp.

Even before he saw the cave, Josiah had an uneasy feeling. Something didn't feel right. He knew it in his gut. Instinctively checking his priming, Josiah waited a moment before proceeding. Soon, he expected to hear George rushing forward to greet him. Cautiously going forward, the entrance came into view. Josiah hesitated. He heard nothing, but the sound of wind as it whipped past his fox cap.

"George, that you?" a voice shouted from inside the cave.

"No, it's me," said Josiah, dropping to his knee to look inside.

Bundled in his buffalo robe, Will stared at Josiah in disappointment. "Thought you were George," he said almost resentfully.

"Where is he?" asked Josiah.

"He said he was going hunting," said Will. "I told him not to, for he doesn't know much about the wilderness and keeping himself alive." Will looked at Josiah expectantly, but said nothing more.

"You're wanting me to go after him?" asked Josiah. If that's what Will wanted, he'd have to come right out and ask.

"Do what suits you, Indian. I'm obliged for your help, but I'm not asking for any more favors. One was enough."

Josiah harrumphed. He looked over his shoulder at the snowy heavens. "When'd he leave?"

"Early this morning."

"His tracks will be covered over by now," said Josiah, untying the snowshoes at his feet. "If he ain't back by lunchtime, I'll go looking fer him."

Will said nothing. He said nothing as Josiah crawled inside, set down his axe and robes, and he said nothing when Josiah talked of food.

"I brung you some pemmican," said Josiah, opening a bladder and showing Will its contents. "If you ain't wanting any, give yers to George."

Will made no response, but closed his eyes for sleep. Josiah noted the empty cup at Will's side, and realized George had been wrong-- Will *had* been drinking water, though from the gaunt look of the trapper, he wasn't eating.

"How's yer fever?" asked Josiah, not caring if he disturbed Will's rest.

Will said nothing, so Josiah touched his hand to the man's forehead. "Yer still burning up."

"I don't care," said Will, not bothering to open his eyes.

Even though the terse comment angered Josiah, Josiah kept silent. Withdrawing himself to the far side of the tiny cave, Josiah wrapped his robe around his shoulders to wait for George. If that young man didn't show up mighty soon, Josiah wouldn't wait for lunchtime to go looking for him.

A short while later, George hadn't shown up. Josiah crawled outside, and turned his face into the wind. That feeling of apprehension hadn't left him, and every nerve in his body told him George was in trouble.

"You going to look for him?" asked a voice from inside the cave.

"I am," said Josiah.

"He went hunting because of *me*," said Will.

Josiah stooped to look into the snow cave and saw the guilt on Will's face. "George said he thought maybe the reason I didn't eat, was because I was saving the food for him. He said he'd go hunting, so there'd be enough for both of us."

Josiah groaned. He should've thought to tell George he was bringing more food today.

"Can you track him?" asked Will. "Snow's coming down heavy."

"I'll manage," said Josiah. "Meanwhile, you can do George a favor and start eating."

Will's features hardened, and Josiah backed off. If the man wanted to slowly kill himself, Josiah couldn't stop him.

Without a word, Josiah climbed to a high precipice where he could get a good vantage of his surroundings. He trained his sharp eyes to the distance, smiling when he found a thin column of

smoke near the bottom of the mountain. Hopefully, that smoke meant George. If it didn't... Josiah would approach cautiously, before revealing his presence to whoever had started the fire.

Stealth came easily to Josiah, having grown up among Indians and seasoned mountain men. He effortlessly found the source of the smoke, and without a sound, surprised the freezing young man huddled close to the flames.

"Josiah, am I glad to see you!" George jumped to his feet and would have hugged Josiah, had Josiah not pinned George back with a withering stare.

"Where's yer buffalo hide?" asked Josiah, for George shivered noticeably from exposure to the cold.

"I didn't think I needed it," said George. "I only intended to be gone for a short while."

Josiah spoke with authority. "Never leave without a robe. It ain't safe."

George sighed glumly, but made no argument.

"Will said you left early this morning to go hunting," said Josiah. "He didn't exactly say it, but I think you worried him when you didn't show up."

"I would've come back sooner," George said apologetically, "but I got lost when the snow covered over my tracks."

A heavy feeling settled in the pit of Josiah's stomach. "You got lost? You ain't but down the mountain from yer own camp, and you got lost?"

George's face turned bright crimson. "I thought I'd gone further."

Shaking his head at the young man's inexperience, Josiah kicked snow into the fire and the flames extinguished with a hiss. "At least you remembered to take yer rifle," said Josiah. "When we git back, I'm moving you and Will to the new shelter."

"It's ready?" George's eyes brightened.

"Keep close, so you don't git lost," Josiah said dryly, as they started back up the mountain.

When George answered with humiliated silence, Josiah winced. He wished he hadn't rubbed it in.

Upon their return to the snow cave, Josiah noticed Will's relief when he saw George was all right.

"I knew you'd get yourself into trouble," said Will, as his young friend opened the bladder of pemmican to eat. "Serves me right, for bringing a boy to do a man's work."

Though George looked hurt, he didn't retaliate. His shoulders slumped, and his mouth worked slower as he chewed his pemmican. "I'll do better, Will."

Will snorted, and Josiah recognized the helpless way Will thrust about his one leg, trying to get comfortable in his robe. "You should've let me bleed to death, Indian. I'm worse than useless like this. Not good for anything, but being a burden to those who can't even look after themselves-- let alone me."

"My name's Josiah Brown."

Will looked at Josiah with wary consideration. "So George told me. An Indian with a white man's name. Mighty peculiar, if you ask me."

Josiah grunted. "No one asked you."

"I guess they didn't." Grinning, Will leaned his back against the wall. "Seems to me that name sounds familiar," said Will. "I wasn't in these parts but a few days, when I heard that name come up during a talk I had with some wild looking men. Called themselves free trappers. Would they be friends of yours?"

"Depends." Josiah rested his rifle in his lap. "Some of them I'd call friends."

"And some you'd call enemies?" With a snorting laugh, Will slapped his knee. "Thought as much! One man in particular, didn't have any nice words to say about you. Said you'd cheated him in poker, and took all his trading goods." Will leaned forward to emphasize his words. "Said he'd be looking for you at rendezvous, this summer."

With an easy smile, Josiah shrugged. "Henry never did know when to leave well enough alone."

"What's rendezvous?" asked George.

"It's when trappers meet with the fur companies to sell their animal hides and buy provisions for the coming season," said Will. When Will saw the look of surprise that must've been evident on Josiah's face, Will grinned. "I've spent a few years trapping further South of here. Never came this far North, though."

"Josiah?" George's curious face peered over the edge of a buffalo robe. "Did you do it? Did you cheat at poker?"

"I've cheated," said Josiah, "but not that time. Henry lost, fair and square."

"Ha!" Will leveled a disbelieving gaze at Josiah. "I've never met an Indian yet, who wasn't a thief and a liar."

From his seat in the entrance, Josiah caged his contempt and finally managed a slow smile. "Then you haven't met many Indians."

At this, George chuckled. He quickly went silent, however, when Will gave him a harsh stare.

Cocking his head at George, Josiah asked him a question. "Do you believe me, George? Do you believe I didn't cheat Henry in that poker game?"

The young man looked ready and willing to say he believed Josiah, but when he saw Will's disapproving glare, he hunkered in his robe and remained silent.

"That's my boy," Will said with a wheezing laugh.

Silently, George hung his head. He looked ashamed.

Slicing off a chunk of pemmican, Josiah ate his lunch in thoughtful silence. Will wasn't eating, and even now, as Will closed his eyes, Josiah saw the pallor of Will's skin and knew the man was dying. Josiah thought himself a prime fool for helping these men survive, when by all rights, they should be dead by now.

But something held Josiah back. An unspoken code of the mountain men to help each other in times of trouble, might've been reason enough. Still, Josiah had gotten into bloody fist fights with fellow trappers over less. Liar? Thief? Josiah could feel anger boil in his veins, and forced himself to cool down. No, he wouldn't lose his temper over an ignorant man who thought he understood Indians. God wouldn't like it, and neither would Emma.

After lunch, Josiah built a stretcher for Will. The injured man resisted being moved to a new location, and did everything short of brandishing a weapon to stop it from happening. Of course, Will had no weapon, for George obeyed Josiah's order and refused to give the shotgun back to Will.

With Will on the stretcher, and Josiah and George on either end, the three slowly made their way across the mountain. Deep snow hampered their progress, but by late afternoon they arrived at the new shelter.

The lodge appeared small, but still a sight larger and warmer than the snow cave they had just come from. Josiah could sense George's gratitude, even though the young trapper had no courage to say it in front of Will.

As Josiah helped George carry Will into the shelter, George remembered the belongings they had left behind at the cave. "I should go back," said George.

"You stay put," said Josiah, not ready to have George get lost twice in one day. "I'll get yer stuff. Don't you go wandering off. When I git back, I want to find you right here. Do I have yer word on it?"

"You have my word," said George.

Will grumbled something about Josiah stealing their traps while they weren't looking, but said it in such a careless tone everyone there knew he didn't mean it. Ignoring Will's foul mood, Josiah returned to the cave to retrieve the trappers' things.

When Josiah came back, he found George by the fire where he had left him. Will had fallen asleep, so Josiah motioned George outside to talk.

"You've got food to last you awhile," said Josiah, "but tomorrow, when I come back, we'll do some hunting and I'll show you how to git fresh meat."

In appreciation, George offered his hand to Josiah.

Josiah stared at the hand a moment, taken aback by the gesture of friendship. When he finally accepted, the young man heartily shook Josiah's hand.

"Thank you for everything," George said in a quiet voice, for he obviously didn't want to awaken Will. "You've been a real Godsend, and I appreciate all you've done."

Josiah nodded, reaching to check the flintlock rifle hanging from the strap at his shoulder. "God's a good One to have on yer side, here in these mountains. I've learnt that the hard way."

"You have?" George looked surprised. "I hadn't expected someone like you--" George caught himself, stared at the ground uneasily, shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and then waved a hand to erase the invisible words between them. "I hadn't expected to find anyone with much religion in this wilderness."

"My religion, as you put it, is a recent event," said Josiah. "It's been long overdue, but I finally made peace with my Maker."

"Good for you," George said awkwardly, and Josiah sensed the young man couldn't say as much for himself.

"Keep the fire burning through the night," said Josiah, preparing to leave before the sun plunged the Rockies into darkness. "I'll be back, tomorrow."

Tramping through the snow in Will's old snowshoes, Josiah said one of the very first prayers he ever uttered for someone else's soul. He prayed for George. And after he finished, Josiah said a prayer for his unsaved grandpap.

The shaft of chimney smoke rising above the treetops brought a smile to Josiah's lips. After spending a day with Will and George, the thought of seeing Emma and Mary again did his soul good. The heavy door opened before he had a chance to announce his return, and Emma filled his arms before he had a chance to untie his snowshoes or shrug off his bearskin coat.

"Miss me?" he grinned, as Emma hugged him tightly. She only looked up at him and smiled, the tender expression on her face speaking more loudly than any words ever could. Josiah breathed in her scent and brought her head to rest against his chest. "Never stop looking at me that way, Emma. Never."

"Pa," said Mary, tugging at his coat with a bright smile, "can I go with you tomorrow?"

With an amused chuckle, Josiah peered down at his little girl. "What makes you think I'm going back?"

"You are, ain't you?" asked Mary.

A muffled sigh rose from Emma. "Please, Mary, don't say 'ain't.'"

"Please, Pa?"

Josiah hesitated, taking into account what he knew of the two trappers. He didn't think any trouble would arise from their seeing Mary, but still Josiah resisted any intrusions. His family was the most prized possession he had, and Josiah didn't want the outside world tampering with them until he had no choice. "No," he finally said, "I think it's best you stay here with yer ma."

"But, why, Pa?"

"Because I said so."

A determined look crossed Mary's face, but didn't stay there for very long. Mary nodded glumly, obviously not liking his verdict, but willing to obey it anyway.

"How is Will?" asked Emma, as Josiah released his wife to unfasten his snowshoes.

"Not too good. With any luck, he won't last much longer." Josiah heard Emma's shocked gasp. "Reckon I shouldn't say such things," he sighed, "but it sure is hard not to. Will's venting his frustrations on anyone who'll stand still, and it's a struggle to work up enough Christian charity to pray fer him. I expect God wants me to, though?" Josiah slanted Emma a questioning look, and sighed heavily when she gave him an affirming nod. "Thought as much. I tell you, Emma, God sure expects a lot from a man. I ain't none too sure I can do it."

"Do not say 'ain't,'" said Mary.

"I'll say whatever I want," said Josiah, as they entered the cabin.

Mary sighed as she hung up his heavy coat. "That is not fair, Pa."

"I'll be the judge of that." Josiah sat on the robe before the fireplace to rid himself of the chill that permeated his weary muscles. Smiling, he accepted the hot cup of water Emma handed him. "After a day like today, it does my heart good to see yer face, Emma." He pulled her down to the robes to sit beside him, then slowly drank the warming drink until his insides felt warm.

Little Mary took a seat next to Emma, her sullen face declaring her disagreement.

Josiah gave the child a firm look. "I'm yer pa, and it's up to me to do what's best. You'll git to meet them trappers soon enough."

"If I can not say 'ain't,'" sighed Mary, "then *you* should not, either."

"I'm grown up, and past any new learning," said Josiah, as Emma leaned her head against his shoulder. "My ways are set, but yers ain't. Yer ma's trying to teach you proper manners, manners you'll need in the white man's world. You best heed her while yer young and have the chance fer change."

Mary didn't look as though she fully understood, but nodded her compliance with a small, resigned sigh.

"She's right," Emma said quietly, just loud enough for Josiah to hear, "you should try to improve yourself."

"I got me a gentle woman, and I expect that's all the improvement I can tolerate," chuckled Josiah.

Emma lightly squeezed his arm. "I'm serious, Josiah. You're not too old to make some changes."

"Don't go and try to change me too much, Emma. It won't work."

Emma hugged his arm, and said nothing more.

The crackle of the fire calmed Josiah, and he let himself relax. Mary played with her dolls, her quiet chatter filling the background of Josiah's mind.

"You know, Emma," he said thoughtfully, "Will said today that he never met an Indian who wasn't a liar or a thief. And do you know what? I defended the Indians. What Will said ain't true, but I ain't exactly known fer kind words about the Indians, myself."

"I've noticed that in the past," said Emma. "I haven't gotten the impression you like them very much, especially the Blackfoot."

"Reckon I don't," said Josiah. "Funny, ain't it? Me looking like one of them red hide Indians, and not being one on the inside. I took myself by surprise today, when I stood up fer them the way I did."

"Why don't you like them?"

Josiah shrugged. "Reckon I got it from my pa. He never thought much about Indians. Even though he had himself a Blackfoot wife, he treated Ma like she wasn't worth much. She was just 'one of them filthy Blackfoot,' and that was all."

"Is that how he treated you, as well?" asked Emma.

"I learned to accept it," Josiah said in an easy manner. "It weren't a big deal. Besides, it wasn't like I was all Blackfoot. I *am* half white."

"You shouldn't say that," said Emma. "You sound like your father."

Josiah chuckled morbidly. "Old habits are hard to break."

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't break them."

His jaw tightened, and Josiah felt the muscles in his chest grow tense. "Let it slide, Emma. I'm tired, and I ain't wanting to talk about it anymore."

Emma's silence annoyed Josiah, but he clamped his mouth shut, determined to keep his own word. He put an arm around her, possessively pressing her to his side until she relaxed. Josiah hadn't talked this much about his past in a long while, and didn't like thinking about what had been. The future didn't seem all that encouraging, either, leaving Josiah with only the present to contend with. He clutched Emma to his body.

He would make this refuge last for as long as he could.

That night, while Josiah slept beside her, Emma couldn't forget his words. If he felt that way about Indians, then he felt that way about himself. It angered Emma that his father had taught Josiah such hateful prejudice, for in teaching Josiah to hate Indians, he had also taught Josiah to hate himself.

With a low moan, Josiah stirred long enough to pull Emma closer to his chest. Lightly touching his buckskin shirt, Emma's thoughts went to the child sleeping on the other side of the fireplace.

Something crystalized in Emma's mind-- something that had, in the past, been simply an uneasy feeling. Not only had Mary reminded Josiah of his own guilt, but Mary had also been guilty of being a Blackfoot. It wasn't a pleasant thought, and Emma quickly comforted herself in the affection Josiah now showed his daughter.

She hadn't even met the two trappers, and they had already revealed things about Josiah that Emma hadn't expected. She understood her husband a little better, and with that knowledge, came hope. These discoveries were nothing to be proud of, but Emma had hope that Josiah could change. She knew he bristled at that word-- change-- but she also new he had already done a lot of it, since they first met.

After Emma felt confident Josiah had gotten some rest and had calmed down, she gently nudged his biceps. He moaned, nuzzled her ear, and would have dropped off to sleep if Emma hadn't whispered,

"Josiah, we need to talk."

His dark eyes slowly opened, and a low, tired sigh blew through his lips. "Emma, it's in the middle of the night. Couldn't this wait until morning?"

"Please, Josiah, this is important."

"Emma, I'm tired."

Before he could escape and go back to sleep, Emma kissed him, letting her fingers comb through his hair. She came up for air, and found his eyes half open with dream-like pleasure.

Josiah breathed in sharply. "You sure know how to git my attention, Emma. Reckon I'm awake now, so what is it yer wanting?"

Sitting up, Emma reached for the large Bible.

"Yer wanting to read?" Josiah asked with a tired laugh. "I'm all fer the Bible, and all, but in the middle of the night?"

"Please, don't go back to sleep," said Emma, turning the pages until she came to the passage she wanted. "This is from Mark, chapter twelve: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.'"

Josiah blinked to keep his eyes open. "I'm listening, Emma. Say yer piece."

"I don't have a 'piece,'" said Emma, "except this: Treat others the way you would want to be treated. That's what it means to love your neighbor as yourself."

With a broad grin, Josiah tugged at Emma's arm, drawing her back to his side before she could put the Bible down. "This is one neighbor I surely love," he said playfully.

"Josiah, this is important." She looked at him with an intent gaze. "Love your neighbor, whether they have white skin, or red."

The playfulness vanished a little from Josiah's face. "Is that what this is about? The Indians?"

"Josiah, would you answer me truthfully?" Emma touched his chin with a finger, and a smile slowly unfolded across his mouth. "Would you love me, if I were a Blackfoot?"

His smile disappeared. "What kind of a question is that?"

"Would you?"

"I reckon." He looked uncomfortable, until Emma leaned over him and touched her lips to his cheek.

"I love the Blackfoot in you, as well as the white," she said softly. "I love you for your gentleness, even when I know it doesn't come easily--"

"Emma, don't--"

"I love you for your willingness to do what's right," said Emma, stroking his temple, letting her fingers tangle in his thick mane. "And I love you for loving Mary."

Josiah swallowed hard. "You make it hard fer a man to speak, Emma."

Emma smiled. "I know you're trying to do the right thing, Josiah. Just don't stop trying."

Nodding that he finally understood, Josiah put his arm around Emma as she snuggled against his shoulder. "I hear you, Emma. I hear you."

A strong but gentle hand rubbed the small of her back, and though Josiah was the one giving the massage, Emma heard him sigh peacefully. "Do you know what, Emma? No one has ever said they loved me fer being a Blackfoot." He tenderly pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Not until you."

All night long, Josiah rested in Emma's encouragement. He knew he would need it. When the sun rose high above the mountains, he would take George hunting and his family's secluded refuge would be interrupted.

It had been inevitable, though Josiah wished he could think of a way around it. Someone had to keep an eye on Will while they went hunting. Josiah had no choice. In spite of what he had told Mary, the child would get her wish and would finally get to see her first non-mixed white man.

Josiah's biggest concern wasn't the trappers seeing Mary, however, but the woman who would be standing beside her.

"All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."
~ Galations 5:14 ~

Chapter Fourteen

The White Woman

1837, Josiah's cabin, southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God."

~ Psalm 42:11 ~

Morning came all too soon for Josiah. Unwilling to spoil their peace any sooner than necessary, he waited until breakfast before speaking to Emma.

When she began eating, Josiah knew his time had come.

"Yer to watch Will, today." Josiah's words were straight and to the point. "George and I are going hunting, and I ain't wanting to leave Will alone fer too long. He might do something to himself."

Except for Emma's momentary surprise at the announcement, Josiah couldn't see any concern in her expression. She only nodded her willingness to help, and continued to struggle down pemmican.

Mary, on the other hand, was a different matter. Her face shone like a little Christmas tree, her eyes flickering excitement. "Me too, Pa? Can I come, too?"

"You, too," said Josiah. He felt no excitement, and wished he could muster as much enthusiasm for the day as Mary. He swallowed his meal, not bothering to chew. Work had to be done before he could go hunting. Rifles needed to be cleaned and loaded, and that day's food needed to be packed for travel.

While Josiah busied himself, Mary jumped about the lodge with wild war whoops and prancing feet.

"Quiet down, Little One," said Emma, "that's no way for a young lady to behave. Don't you want those men to think you're a proper young lady?"

The whooping immediately stopped. "I want to be proper," she said eagerly. Mary dropped beside Emma, and Josiah heard the girl ask, "Ma, what does proper mean?"

"It means you should not behave like a rambunctious schoolboy, but conduct yourself in a quiet, ladylike fashion. These men are just trappers, but I think today is a good opportunity for you to practice your manners."

Even with his head bent over his work, Josiah couldn't help but notice how quietly Mary finished her breakfast.

His flintlock ready, Josiah checked Emma's shotgun and then Mary's pistol. Emma bundled Mary in blankets, and gathered two buffalo robes to prepare against the bitter cold that lay on the other side of their cabin door.

Snowshoes fastened, coats buttoned and sashes closed, Josiah and his family stepped out into the winter. Taking lead, Josiah started the procession around to the back of their lodge. Even though he heard Emma's heavy breathing as she struggled to keep up, Josiah made no attempts to slacken his pace. There was no need. The small shelter he had built for the trappers wasn't far from the cabin.

Hidden among the trees, Josiah glimpsed a small column of smoke ascending from a hide-covered dwelling. "Hello, in the lodge!" he called.

George's head appeared in the entrance, quickly followed by his shoulders and then a pair of woolen trousers and store bought shoes. He got to his feet, grinning expectantly. "I'm ready to go hunting!" he said, raising his rifle in salute. Then the young man's face grew sober as the women behind Josiah finally caught up.

"This here's my kin," said Josiah. "They come to look after Will while we're gone."

Stunned, George blinked at Emma. He swallowed, fumbled to straighten his capote, and then stared at Josiah as though expecting something to happen. When nothing did, George cleared his throat as if trying to give a subtle hint.

"Are you waiting fer something?" asked Josiah.

Emma tugged at Josiah's sleeve, and he turned to see her looking somewhat embarrassed. "Introduce us," she whispered.

Josiah gritted his teeth. So that was it. White man's etiquette. He had no use for such formalities, but jerked his thumb at Emma by way of an introduction. "She's my wife." Then, pointing his chin at the trapper, he muttered, "This here's George."

"George Hughes," smiled George, bowing politely to Emma.

Emma curtsied, her smile betraying a trace of panic; she obviously hadn't expected to find any manners in these mountains, and certainly not in these trappers.

Josiah motioned to the entrance. "Git inside, Emma. You too, Mary."

"I'm afraid it's untidy," George stammered in alarm. "We weren't expecting guests."

"They won't mind," said Josiah, hunching down to follow the girls into the small shelter. There was considerably more space here than in the snow cave, and everyone fit nicely. Josiah warmed his hands over the fire in the center of the lodge, while Emma kept at his side.

Clutching Emma's hand, Mary gaped at George in wide-eyed wonderment. When he noticed her, Mary shyly hid her face against Emma's capote.

On the far side of the circular shelter, Will lay in his buffalo robe, fast asleep.

"He had a difficult night," said George, keeping his voice hushed so he wouldn't awaken his friend. "I think he's looking better, though."

Josiah didn't agree, but kept his mouth shut.

"Have you had breakfast, Mrs. Brown?" George offered Emma some pemmican, and she politely turned it down.

"They've already eaten," Josiah said gruffly.

"Oh." George laid aside the food. His eyes strayed back to Emma, as though not quite ready to believe what he saw. A white woman. Here in their shelter, and married to--

Josiah stopped trying to read George's face, not liking any of the conclusions he reached. George would have to accept the way things were, just like everyone else.

"We'd best git going," said Josiah, preparing to leave with a buffalo robe Emma had brought; in an emergency, a thick hide made for a good shelter against the snow.

"Is that a pistol?" asked George, his gaze fixed on the weapon at Mary's belt.

Pleased at having been noticed for her weapon, Mary pulled out the pistol. She held it in her small hands, letting George see it from a distance.

George shook his head in wonderment. "I've never seen such a thing."

Mary grinned proudly.

"A little girl with a loaded gun," he murmured.

Mary's smile evaporated. She returned the pistol to her belt, and with folded arms, met George's amazement with obvious indignation.

Taken aback by Mary's boldness, George fumbled for his rifle. "I'm ready whenever you are, Josiah."

"Come then." Josiah moved to the entrance, but paused for his good-bye kiss from Emma. He hadn't needed to remind her, for she already leaned forward to peck his lips.

"Keep safe," she said, smiling the smile that always filled him with sunshine.

Josiah grinned broadly. He stuffed himself through the entrance, hoping George had seen the way she had smiled at her husband. Emma loved him, and Josiah wanted these trappers to know that.

Once the two hunters were outside, Josiah made sure George's shotgun had been cleaned and made ready for use. They were taking Will's rifle along, mostly to keep it from him, but also to give them the added advantage of another weapon.

From the awkward way George had of evading Josiah's direct stare whenever Josiah spoke to him, it became apparent that Emma's presence had not been forgotten. George's smile wasn't as friendly now, as it had been in the past, and Josiah knew the young man disapproved of his having a white woman for a wife.

Uneasily, Josiah swallowed his spit. From the looks of things, this would be a long day. Silently praying Emma would fare better than himself, Josiah started down the mountain, his long strides easily outstripping George's shorter ones.

The loud snores of the sleeping man filled Emma's ears as she took off Mary's blankets and then unfolded a buffalo robe to make themselves comfortable by the fire. She felt awkward being

there with a stranger, and experienced not a little gratitude when he continued to sleep, undisturbed by their presence.

It didn't take Mary long to become fidgety, the excitement of seeing two white men wearing off. Emma allowed her to sit in the entrance to keep a lookout for trouble, and so she could be the first to see Josiah when he returned. It gave Mary something to do, besides sit there and stare at a man with an unkempt beard.

Emma wondered how much she could tell about a man, by simply observing his head while he slept. She knew it probably wouldn't be much, but from her few simple observations of George, and now Will, Emma had a feeling she had underestimated these trappers.

From the white showing in his black hair, Will appeared considerably older than his friend, and by his weathered face, Emma guessed he felt at ease in the outdoors without a hat. Even so, he didn't look like the rowdy mountaineer she had expected. The collar of a store bought shirt peered beneath his heavily bearded chin, reminding Emma of the civilization she had left behind. It felt like ages since she had seen cloth on a man, for Josiah only wore animal skins. Emma looked down at her deerskin dress. None of the women in the settlements dressed like this-- no one but the Indians.

A pang of self-consciousness tugged at Emma, and she quickly brushed it aside. She turned her eyes back to the sleeping man. He looked so ordinary, it unnerved her. Emma hadn't precisely known what she had been expecting, but it wasn't men like George or this man with the linen shirt. They could've been her neighbors, or storekeepers and clerks, or even clergy, for besides Will's unkempt beard, they didn't look wild at all. In fact, by comparison, Emma felt she looked more wild than either of them.

Movement by the entrance interrupted Emma's thoughts. Mary wanted one of her blankets back, for she was getting cold. Wrapping a blanket around Mary, Emma gave the child a squeezing hug. Thankful for this sweet reminder of where she belonged, Emma released the child only when Mary squirmed to get free.

Mary returned to her watch, and Emma to her observation of Will. He wasn't a large man, as far as weight was concerned, but the robes expanded across his chest, suggesting a broad shouldered man. Then her eyes fell on a single booted foot, and Emma shuddered. She didn't know if she would've had the courage to face such an operation, let alone live with its aftermath. With God it would've been possible, but Emma sighed in gratitude that she had never had the necessity to endure such a terrible trial.

Without warning, the buffalo robes stirred, and two blue eyes stared at Emma. They were a clear shade of blue, like the color of the sky on an unclouded day. The eyes blinked, and then they blinked again, as though their owner didn't quite trust what he saw.

The gentle appearance of the man shocked Emma. From Josiah's accounts, Will's temperament had been anything but gentle.

"Excuse me, Ma'am, but am I in Heaven?" he finally asked. "Are you an angel?"

Emma smiled. "No, Mr. Shaw, I'm a mortal like you. I'm Mrs. Brown. My daughter and I are here to keep you company while my husband and Mr. Hughes are out hunting."

Will's brow furrowed in thought. "You're Josiah's woman?"

"I'm his wife." Emma spoke in self-defense, for by the tone of Will's voice, it had sounded more like an accusation than a question.

"That Indian has a white woman?"

"I'm his wife."

Those clear blue eyes Emma had only a moment ago admired, now pierced her with an unfamiliar sensation. For the first time in Emma's life, she felt shame; being teased because of poor eyesight was nothing compared to the embarrassment now welling within her.

Struggling to fight back anger, Emma held up her chin. "Josiah is my husband, and the sooner you get used to the idea, the better it will be for everyone."

"Who'd he kill to get you?"

"I don't appreciate the sound of your voice, Mr. Shaw."

"I'll wager you buried a husband, and maybe even a father or brother, for him to get a woman like you."

"My father is in Heaven, Mr. Shaw, but Josiah wasn't the man who sent him there." Emma glanced over her shoulder at Mary, the child's intent expression tracking every word, for Mary had never been told of how she had come to be Josiah's wife. Emma cleared her throat, careful of her words. "Josiah rescued me from the men who killed my father. He saved my life."

"So now he's forcing you to be his woman. Find my shotgun, Ma'am, and I'll see to it you escape." Then Will saw the rifle in her lap, and frowned. "You have a weapon?"

"I'm not being held against my will, Mr. Shaw. I choose to remain with my husband."

He spat in disgust but said nothing.

Emma tried her best to match Will's gaze without flinching, though it didn't come easily. She felt as though all of polite society were looking down at her for surviving, and worse, that she should be blamed for not wanting to leave Josiah now that escape had been offered.

Tension hung heavy in the air, and it frightened Mary. The girl crawled to Emma's side, hiding herself against Emma's arm.

"There, there," Emma whispered to the child, "it's all right."

"That your offspring?" asked Will.

Emma shot him a warning glare. He'd better not hurt Mary's feelings. "She's my daughter by marriage, Mr. Shaw."

"Not too late to escape, Ma'am."

"Mr. Shaw, I'm with child."

"*His* child?"

"Yes."

"You could say it was against your will. Everyone would believe you."

"It's no use, Mr. Shaw, I don't want to leave my family."

The deep, resigned sigh in his breath gave Emma a small measure of hope.

"Do you have family of your own, Mr. Shaw?"

Curious, Mary peered from around Emma's arm.

"I had a brother, but he died some years back."

"You never married?"

"No, Ma'am."

"Why not?"

Shifting somewhat self-consciously in his bed, Will scratched his chin. "Guess I'm not a man women take a fancy to. Unlike Josiah, I never had the good fortune to come across a beautiful woman in distress."

Amused by his answer, Emma felt at ease enough to smile. "A very pretty compliment, Mr. Shaw, but I'm not beautiful and I've the good sense to know it."

"No one ever told you that?" Will slanted her a look that hinted with something of friendliness. "If you'll excuse my saying so, but you're a mighty fine looking woman."

Emma hoped she didn't blush, but when Mary looked up at her and giggled, Emma knew she had.

"I'll lay odds your husband has already told you something of the sort," said Will. He leaned forward an inch or two. "From your pretty glow, I'm guessing you didn't believe him, either."

In spite of her annoyance at all this attention to her looks, Emma's heart lightened just a bit. Will had called Josiah her husband.

"No, I didn't believe him," admitted Emma.

Will laughed. "I expect you think he's desperate enough to believe any white woman that's his own, is more beautiful than she really is." Will scratched his chin, and Emma guessed it came from poor hygiene rather than deep thought. "I reckon there's some truth to that," he said, "but you'd do yourself a favor and start believing him when he pays you such compliments. Josiah may be an Indian, but he isn't blind."

Emma's smile faded, and Will cleared his throat, as though realizing he had just stepped on her feelings. With an apologetic shake of his head, Will continued,

"Don't pay any mind to this ornery tongue of mine, Mrs. Brown. Half the time, I never know what it's speaking, so don't you take to heart what it said. You've already got more than your fair share of grief, and I don't want to be the cause of giving you more."

Emma smiled politely, unsure of his meaning. Then she caught the look of pity in his face, and realized he felt sorry for her. She felt something hot sting her eyes, and blinked hard to keep the tears back. Suddenly, Emma desperately wanted to find someplace where she could cry in private.

"You're in a sad predicament, Mrs. Brown, and I'm sorry for opening my big mouth."

"Ma," Mary said, tugging at Emma's dress, "I am hungry."

Finding she had no voice, Emma shoved aside her tears to force her attention on lunch. With all her heart, she didn't want to frighten Mary, especially since Will's soothing tones had made the girl smile again.

Mary couldn't understand, and Emma didn't want her to.

Opening the small bag at her belt that Josiah had readied for today, Emma pulled out some pemmican. When the girls bowed their heads to pray, Mary interrupted with,

"He is not bowing his head, Ma." Mary pointed an accusing finger at Will, and he turned bright crimson with embarrassment.

"Mr. Shaw won't be eating, today," said Emma, coaxing Mary back to the prayer. Closing her eyes, Emma finished, "And please keep Josiah and Mr. Hughes safe while they find food. In Jesus' name, amen."

Emma couldn't help but notice the determined look on Mary's face as she gave the girl her measure of pemmican. Before she could stop Mary, the girl crawled to the other side of the shelter and approached Will.

"This is for you," said Mary, her innocent face staring at him expectantly. She held out the food to him, but he didn't move.

"Mary, Mr. Shaw isn't eating, today," said Emma, trying to call the girl back before anything bad happened. She remembered Josiah's wrestling incident with Will, and didn't want anything like that to happen to Mary.

Frowning, Mary examined Will's face. The trapper froze, looking very out of place around children.

"If I am hungry, then so are you," said Mary. When Will made no effort to take the pemmican from her hand, she sighed patiently. Undeterred, Mary boldly yanked at his chin hair, popping a morsel of pemmican into his mouth when it opened. "Now you must chew," she said soberly.

To Emma's surprise, Will obeyed. His features softened as Mary fed him bite after bite, until he had eaten all of Mary's pemmican.

"Thank you, little lady," he nodded to Mary. "I'm much obliged."

Mary grinned, her face strongly resembling Josiah's.

Trying to hide her relief, Emma coaxed Mary back to the other side of the shelter to eat her lunch.

After Mary's kind treatment, Will grew misty eyed and Emma saw him search about for something. When he pulled out a handkerchief to blow his nose, Emma wished she could take Mary and leave. She didn't know if she could take much more pity-- not when she had tears of her own threatening to give way.

With every look, every glance, every kind word, Emma felt herself being pitied. The poor woman was trapped. She thought herself not beautiful, and when an opportunistic half-breed of a mountain man came along and saved her life, she didn't want to leave him. And even if she did, she was with child and no man would want a mixed baby that wasn't his own. Emma didn't need to hear the words come from Will's mouth to know what he was thinking. She could read it in his eyes, just as though he had spoken the words out loud.

For now, Emma had no privacy to untangle her feelings. She had to keep smiling, all the while hoping for Josiah's soon return.

Snow fell from the cloudy heavens as Josiah made his way across the valley floor in search of wildlife. George trailed several paces behind, seemingly wanting the distance between himself and Josiah.

Dropping his eyes to the flintlock in his hands, Josiah doubled checked his weapon, a habit he did without even thinking. Even now, his attention wasn't on the rifle, but on the man behind him. George hadn't said a single word all morning, and Josiah wished the fellow would get it over with and speak his mind.

"You still back there?" Josiah called over his shoulder.

"I'm still here." The slight grin in George's response made Josiah chuckle.

"I was just checking. You've been mighty quiet this morning."

George made no reply.

"Reckon I know what yer thinking," said Josiah. "Do you want to get it off yer chest?"

When George remained silent, Josiah stopped in his tracks and turned to face George.

George looked at him, apprehension filling his eyes.

"Say it, and be done with it," said Josiah.

Biting his bottom lip, George cast his stare to the ground, unable to gather the courage to speak.

"Don't have the brass to tell me, huh?" Josiah harrumphed. "You've a lot to learn about being a man."

George's head snapped up, and for a fleeting moment, he looked ready to stand his ground and speak his mind. His boldness quickly vanished however, leaving a young man fearful of meeting resistance and willing to avoid it at any cost.

Josiah shook his head sadly. "Never mind, let's git moving again. We're wasting precious daylight, just standing here and doing nothing."

For quite some time after Josiah's reprimand, George remained downcast and mute. His spirits improved when Josiah spotted some elk, and even more when Josiah urged him to take aim and shoot. Successfully bringing down the largest of the animals, George grinned with a sense of accomplishment that would last for the remainder of the hunt.

When daylight began to fade from the skies, Josiah and George made their way back to the others, each carrying one end of a wet hide filled with cut elk meat. It had been a successful trip, and Josiah nearly felt as pleased as George looked. With a rifle in one hand and a fistful of wet hide in the other, George appeared quite pleased with himself.

As they neared the shelter where Josiah had left Emma and Mary, he wondered how their day had fared. He had felt poorly for leaving Will with Emma, but there had been little choice.

Josiah could only hope and pray things had gone well. He glanced at the man beside him, silencing a frustrated groan as he considered George's character. George was a coward, no two ways about it. The wilds of the Rocky Mountains had been an odd place to find someone afraid of facing trouble, but here George walked, plodding beside him with fresh kill dangling between them in the elk hide.

"Won't they be surprised to see this!" laughed George, looking down at his kill one more time. "I never thought fresh meat could look so good!"

"That's because you're the one who brought down that elk," Josiah said with an amused smile.

The hint of smoke in the air told Josiah the shelter couldn't be much farther. He looked forward to cooking some of this meat, and enjoying a meal with his family. Once again, his mind strayed back to Emma. She hadn't been far from his prayers all day long.

As the shelter came into sight, Josiah heard a child shout, "It is Pa!" Then his tired eyes clapped on two figures as they hurried from the entrance, moving as fast as they could to come meet him. He paused to admire the sight of Emma running across the snow in her capote and deerskin dress, the retreating light softly highlighting her flushed cheeks.

Shouldering his rifle strap, Josiah's free arm soon filled with an armful of Emma. She clung to him tightly, as though he had been gone for days, and not hours.

"I think you missed me," he said with a pleased grin. Then Josiah felt the tremor in Emma's embrace. "What's wrong, Emma?"

"Pa, you shot an elk!" said a delighted Mary, first hugging Josiah's leg and then going to admire the fresh meat. The girl's attention didn't stay on the meat for very long, for the young man holding one end of the hide stared at her as though she were a curiosity. Ducking behind Josiah's trousers, Mary peered shyly at George.

"Emma," Josiah pressed his lips to Emma's ear, "are you all right? What happened?"

"Are you back, George?" shouted a voice from inside the shelter. "You catch anything?"

"I shot an elk!" George said excitedly, his focus returning to his prize. He gathered both ends of the wet hide, and with a great deal of trouble, managed to struggle into the shelter with his elk.

"Emma, you ain't answering me," said Josiah, as she clung to his bearskin coat, her shotgun trembling against both of them. "Are you all right? Did Will say something to hurt you?"

"Please," she murmured quietly, "take me home."

Josiah looked down at the girl huddling in a blanket at his side. She seemed unwilling to go very far from either him or Emma. "Is yer ma all right?" he asked the child. "What happened?"

Mary gave him a puzzled shrug. She timidly looked at the entrance as loud sounds of Will laughing at the sight of the elk, filled the evening air.

"Please, I want to go home," said Emma, her voice on the brink of tears.

"All right, Em," Josiah hugged her as gently as he could. "Just answer me one thing: Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm not hurt," Emma said in a muffled voice.

He felt a stifled sob against his chest, and Josiah drew her closer. "We're leaving, Emma. Just let me go inside and get our things. You wait out here with Mary."

Letting go of Emma, Josiah unconsciously felt for the knife on his hip, his fingers wrapping about the handle until he noticed Emma's large frightened eyes.

Her hand grasped his wrist, as if trying to stay whatever he had been contemplating. "Promise me you won't get into a fight, Josiah."

Josiah would make no such promise. "Stay here," he said, ducking into the shelter to confront Will. If Will wanted to take out his hatred on someone, Josiah determined it would be directed at himself.

But not at Emma.

Outside, Emma heard Josiah's deep baritone demand something from Will that Emma couldn't quite make out. Will's loud reply cut through the walls of the shelter, letting Emma hear every word.

"This is between me and you, Indian! Take the women home, and then we'll talk!"

A higher pitched voice said something, and it was quickly silenced with,

"Stay out of this, George!"

Emma desperately wanted to leave, heartsick she had gotten Josiah so angry with the trappers. Mary became frightened, and hung to Emma's capote like a quiet mouse, her small face intently paying attention to every word coming from the shelter.

Suddenly, someone emerged through the entrance. It was George. His reddened face showed an emotion Emma couldn't quite place. Whether anger or frustration, she didn't know, only that he locked eyes with her for a moment before stalking away with his rifle.

The language in the shelter raised several octaves, words becoming indistinguishable as Josiah and Will shouted at each other. For a brief moment, Emma panicked Josiah would become embroiled in a knife fight, for he sounded in a great rage. Then, the voices came to a stop, and Josiah said something in a very low voice that was impossible for Emma to hear.

Josiah appeared head-first through the entrance, and when he gained his feet, he came to her side, his jaw hard as granite. "I'm taking you home so you won't have to hear," he said in a low growl.

Josiah's dark eyes flashed with a wildness that terrified Emma. She refused to budge when he tried to lead her away, back to their cabin.

"Josiah," she said, yanking free from his grasp, "I won't go-- not until you give me your word that you won't harm Will! He said some hurtful things, that's true, but he apologized."

"He did?" Josiah looked surprised. His excited breath came in huffs, and she could see he struggled to regain composure. "Emma, maybe he apologized to you, but he and I have a score to settle. I ain't waiting fer him to git a hold of his shotgun, fer him and me to come to an understanding. Now's as good a time as any to get it over with."

Emma gazed at Josiah soberly. "Tell me you won't kill him. I see that look in your eyes, Josiah, and it frightens me."

Josiah's teeth clamped together in frustration, but she could see the darkness in his expression release its hold. "I won't harm him." The words came at great cost to Josiah, and Emma sensed he hadn't made the promise lightly. "I give you my word, Emma, I won't hurt him."

She held out her hand. "Then give me your knife."

Without hesitation, Josiah unsheathed the weapon and handed it to Emma.

Clutching his knife, Emma let Josiah take her back to the cabin. She struggled through the snow, for unlike Josiah, she didn't have her snowshoes. They were still back at the shelter, along with the robe and the rest of Mary's blankets that Josiah had forgotten to bring.

After depositing Emma and Mary behind the safe log walls, Josiah left without a word. Emma saw the determined gleam in his eyes, and knew that for better or worse, Josiah and Will would have it out tonight.

The hours grew late, and Emma tucked Mary into bed with her dolls. When Emma heard the soft sounds of sleep coming from Mary's bed, Emma picked up her shotgun, gathered a robe, and quietly left the cabin.

Emma didn't intend to go far. She wanted to sit by some nearby trees to wait for Josiah, and to finally shed those tears she had bottled all those long hours. She didn't know if tears came easier because she was with child, or because she felt she had a legitimate right to cry, but the tears came so freely it amazed her.

With all her heart, Emma wished she hadn't greeted Josiah so desperately. She had excited his anger toward Will, and now she prayed nothing bad would come from their confrontation.

Scattered between her frantic sobs, Emma felt the sting of Will's pity, still sharp in her consciousness. Sinking to her knees, Emma wept with all her strength.

When Josiah returned to the trappers' camp, his temper had considerably died down. He had Emma to thank for that. Her fear of him harming Will, had had its effect, and now Josiah could think more clearly without rage choking at his insides.

Crawling through the entrance, Josiah noticed Will had done some calming down of his own. They regarded each other for several moments, and then Josiah took a seat before the fire, so that the men faced each other over the flames.

Josiah absently cast a loose twig into the blaze, giving himself a moment longer before speaking. "I don't know what you said to Emma that had her trembling in my arms, but she told me you apologized. Fer that, I'm grateful."

"I'm sorry I grieved her," said Will, exhaling a deep sigh. "The poor woman's had enough heartache, without my making it worse."

Josiah narrowed his eyes. "What heartache are you meaning?"

"After you saved her life," asked Will, "did you offer her freedom, or did she have no choice but to accept you as her husband?"

Josiah remained silent. He tried to wet his mouth but found he had no spit. He wondered how much Emma had told Will of that night.

"She remained fairly tightlipped about it," said Will, answering Josiah's unspoken question, "but I'm not stupid. I may be missing a leg, but there's nothing wrong with my eyes. A respectable woman like her, doesn't remain with someone like you, unless she feels she has no choice."

"Emma can leave whenever she wants," said Josiah, suddenly finding his voice.

"Have you told her that?" asked Will.

Josiah hesitated to answer, knowing full well he hadn't-- not really-- not in so many words. He'd always been too afraid she might take him up on the offer.

Will leaned forward, his eyes searching Josiah's face. "Did she have a choice in the matter when you took her to wife?"

"The situation didn't allow for it," said Josiah. "It was either me, or the two Blackfoot who killed her pa."

Will scratched his beard thoughtfully. "I have a peculiar feeling about you," he said, leveling a finger at Josiah. "I have the feeling you used those Indians to make her more willing to accept you. I don't know all the particulars, but you strike me as someone who saw a rare opportunity, and seized it with both hands."

Josiah remained quiet. How much had Emma told him?

"Tell me I'm wrong," challenged Will. "I'm thinking you gave her a choice of letting those Indians have their way with her, or her becoming your wife."

Josiah grunted. "You think too much."

"Maybe so," sighed Will, "but I didn't get to be my age without knowing which way the wind is blowing. And right now," he said, pinning Josiah with an accusing look, "I don't like the direction it's going. Everything points to a low down, dirty skunk."

Josiah didn't move a muscle, only stared at Will with a glare that dared him to continue.

Will readily obliged. "You know what I think? I think you're a scoundrel for using that poor woman the way you have, and I'm glad I've lived long enough to tell you so!"

"At last," Josiah smiled grimly, "you found a reason fer living."

"Tell me I've got it all wrong," said Will, his voice rising as he spoke. "Tell me you aren't the man I think you to be!"

Josiah felt his jaw muscles working. "I can't. I reckon yer right about me."

Nighttime had plunged the mountains into a silvery darkness where only the moon gave a faint cast on the snow. Emma hunkered beneath the heavy robe, trying to keep her tears from freezing on her cheeks. In the close, thick blackness of her cocoon, Emma continued to let herself cry. She wondered at her own bravery, sitting among the trees at night, by herself with her shotgun, pausing between sobs to listen for prowling animals and not shrinking at the smallest noise. Emma's ears had become attuned to the wilderness, and the whispers of the wind as it passed through the snow laden trees. The soft trot of a small animal moving through the deep snow, the hoot of an owl-- nothing gave her alarm. She could hear everything--

"Emma, how long've you been out here?"

Emma startled. Everything, but Josiah.

Fighting her way out of the robe, Emma looked up to find a large figure towering above her. Josiah was a tall man, and her neck had to crane all the way back, just to see his head.

"I wish you wouldn't stalk up on me like that," said Emma, hearing the squeaky sound of her own voice for the first time. "You gave me a fright!"

"I weren't stalking." Josiah squatted, leveling his eyes with her face. "You were so busy crying, I could've dragged my feet through the snow and you wouldn't have heard me." A rough finger brushed Emma's moist cheek. "How long have you been out here, Emma?"

"I don't know." Emma hated her shaky voice. "Is Will--"

"I didn't lay a hand on him," said Josiah, leaning his back against a tree with a weary groan. In the dimness of the night, Emma saw very little of Josiah's features, except the occasional glints of his eyes as they caught the moonlight just right. "Are you cold?" he asked. Emma could hear his breathing, as he waited for her response.

"I'm warm enough."

Josiah grunted, and Emma had a suspicion he didn't believe her. He stood up, and something dark unfurled on the ground beside her. Two strong arms lifted her onto the darkness, and then Emma felt the thick fur of buffalo beneath her hand.

"Now you'll be warm," he said, taking a seat against a tree opposite hers. The branches above him moved in the wind, knocking snow onto his lap with little warning. Josiah casually brushed the snow away, his face remaining hidden in the shadows. Even though she couldn't observe him, Emma knew he looked at her. She could feel his gaze. "Is Mary asleep?" he asked.

"Yes, I checked on her a little while ago."

Josiah grunted, and then a heavy silence filled the air.

Emma adjusted her feet, enjoying the warmth collecting in her moccasins now that they rested on a robe instead of the frozen ground.

"At a rendezvous some seasons back," said Josiah, his voice steeled with a roughness that surprised Emma, "someone brought two white whores to do some trading with the trappers. They did brisk business, but not with me. Those white women wouldn't let me come near them, unless it was out of sight where no one could see they were laying with a half-breed." Emma thought she could hear Josiah's jaw tighten as he spoke. "One of them said she liked tumbling with me, and like a fool, I asked her to marry me. I shouldn't have been surprised when she turned me down flat, but I was, and it hurt like someone had slugged me right in the chest. I was turned down by the white man's table scrapes, not even good enough fer whores."

Emma shuddered, though not from the coldness of the winter night. "Why are you telling me this, Josiah?"

"I'm a white man," he said, his fist thumping his chest so loud Emma thought he might hurt himself. "I wanted a white wife, so they'd have to accept me as one of them. That, and I..." Josiah

paused, "I was gitting kind of lonely. I hankered fer a woman of my own, and when yer pa said there was a white woman taken captive by Blackfoot, I couldn't believe my good luck."

Emma could hear her own breathing as she waited for Josiah to continue.

"When I came after you, all I kept thinking, was how to git you to accept me as yer husband. The two Blackfoot who took you, didn't think anyone was tracking them, and I could've jumped them easy enough in the dark, and surprised them before they saw me coming. But I entered their camp as plain as anything, and suggested to them that I wanted a wife. By the time I came to you behind that tree, I had it worked out in my mind to give you the choice of being used and killed by them, or marrying me."

A sob escaped Emma's lips, and she clapped her hand over her mouth to keep from weeping out loud.

Josiah remained where he was, sitting across from her in the shadows, his form quiet and still.

"Emma?" he asked, when she remained silent for some time. He waited, his breath making trails against the dim moonlight.

"I knew you'd taken advantage of the situation," said Emma, "but I hadn't known to what extent I'd been right."

Emma saw a glint of moonlight reflect in his eyes. She thought she saw something shimmer, but he moved, his eyes once more concealed in the darkness.

"Now that you know," he said, "I expect you'll go back to calling me Mr. Brown."

The measured roughness in his voice contrasted the gentle touch of his hand, for when he leaned forward to make sure she kept warm, he was unable to hide his concern. As Josiah rested against the tree, Emma knew what he was up to. He was trying to make it easier for her to let go. She waited for the words to come, bracing herself as she heard him draw breath.

"Do you want to leave me, Emma?"

The words were cold, and it sent another shiver down Emma's spine. She waited for the feeling to pass.

"*Emma?*" It hadn't taken long for Josiah to become frantic, for she didn't answer immediately.

"No, I don't want to leave you," said Emma, smiling in spite of her tears, for she heard the quick intake of Josiah's breath, and knew he felt great relief.

"Oh, Emma, my poor sweet Emma!" The words caught in Josiah's throat, and Emma heard the pain in his voice. All pretense of roughness had gone. She refused to leave, and now he could speak his heart. "That night I took you, I excused my decision 'cause I figured you owed me fer saving your life. But oh, Emma, I didn't even give one thought to you or how the white people would treat you. Not even one thought! When Will confronted me about what I'd done, I suddenly had no more excuses. He was right about me. I'm a no-good, stinking skunk!"

"No," said Emma, "don't say that. You're a changed man."

"I took advantage of you," he continued, "I let you think you had no choice."

"You aren't the same man you used to be," said Emma, trying to fight for their relationship. She dried her face with the palms of her hands, taking a moment to collect her thoughts. "If you hadn't changed, you'd never be so honest about the past. Even though the truth hurts, I'm grateful you told me."

When Josiah remained silent, Emma left the warmth of her wrap to crawl to his side.

"No, Emma, you'll git cold." With a firm hand, he took her back to the robes. When he tried to return to his seat, Emma clutched his arm and refused to let go. Reluctantly, he sat down beside her.

"I've been with you for some time," said Emma, "and trust me, you **HAVE** changed. You used to be a manipulator and scoundrel, that's true, but not anymore. You're a God-fearing man who's trying to do the right thing, and I love you with all my heart." She squeezed his hand, and the return pressure on her fingers said what his mouth could not. A shimmer slid down his cheek, and he hugged Emma close.

"I'm sorry, Emma," he said, his voice a ragged whisper. "Are you sure you don't want to leave me?"

"*Never*," said Emma, trying to hug him even tighter than he was hugging her, and finding it impossible to do. He had her so tight, she could feel his heartbeat and measure his smallest breath. She closed her eyes, hiding herself in the darkness with her husband.

"God gave me to you, Josiah. All those years I waited and prayed for a husband, Pa kept telling me that God had a purpose for everything in my life, and to be patient. One day, said Pa, my prayers would be answered, though maybe not in the way I had thought." Emma drew back, her

chin tilted to look into Josiah's face. She touched his wet cheek, gazing into those pooling reflections that told her he still wept. "I waited, and God brought you into my life," said Emma, her voice soft and thoughtful. "I think He must've saved me for you, Josiah. That's the only conclusion I can come to, for until I came into these mountains, I had the hardest time getting a man's attention."

Josiah chuckled, sorrow punctuating his hoarse laughter. Then his smile faded, and Emma heard him sniff back more tears.

"Do I get your attention, Josiah?" She flicked the eagle feather in his hair, and he quickly caught her hand.

"You know you do," he said, pressing a kiss against her fingers. "I love you, Emma. I love you more than I love my own life."

The sincerity of his words sunk deep into Emma's heart, and her moment of mirth dissolved into longing. The moon had sailed to a different position in the vast ocean of stars, bathing Josiah's face in a soft, silvery light. She saw him swallow hard, his eyes steadfastly holding hers in what seemed to Emma an eternity of time. All those years of waiting for a man to take notice of her, and offer her a home and a family of her own, had finally come true. It had taken nearly thirty years of her life, but God had answered her prayers in due season. God had given her to this man-- this man who gently held her, his warm tears mingling with hers as they kissed.

Josiah had been well worth the wait.

The trees went sideways as he lowered her against the buffalo robe.

"Tell me yer mine," he said, dropping his mouth to hers, his lips first grazing her mouth and then her cheek. "I need to hear it, Emma. Tell me now."

"I'm yours, Josiah." Emma tried to remain as calm as she could, for she felt the desperate way he held her and knew he needed reassurance. She understood his desperation, for in a way, she felt the same thing. All they had in the world were each other, their children, and God-- especially God, for without Him, they truly were alone.

"Tell me you ain't leaving me," he said, his breath warming Emma's face. "Tell me, Emma."

Tenderly, Emma caressed his shoulder. "I'm not leaving you. Please, My Love, calm down."

In an almost painful groan, Josiah clutched Emma, his face buried against her neck. "Thank you, God! She didn't take me up on my offer to let her go! I don't think my heart would've kept on beating, if she had left me."

"Don't say that, Josiah." Emma stroked his head, trying to settle her own heart, as well as his. "If something ever happened to me, God would give you the strength to go on. You know that's true, don't you?"

"I reckon," he said, pushing himself up to gaze into her face. "Just don't test me on it, Emma. I need you too much."

Before Emma could answer, Josiah covered her mouth with his in one of the gentlest kisses he had ever given her. All the troubles of the day melted into nothingness, and even the harshness of the winter night couldn't fight against the warmth of that one kiss. She felt his hand move to the small of her back, and Emma regained her senses.

"We can't stay out here all night, Josiah. Mary is by herself."

The low moan in her ear told Emma that Josiah had heard and agreed. He lingered for as long as he could, at last sitting up and calming the warm huffs of breath that trailed in the cold night air. He offered Emma a strong hand, pulling her upright.

"Did you remember to bring back my snowshoes and Mary's blankets?" asked Emma, straightening her deerskin dress.

Josiah chuckled. "Yer a wonder, Emma. Thinking of such things, after all that kissing."

"Did you remember?" she asked. "Tomorrow, I intend to pay Mr. Will Shaw a visit."

Even though she couldn't clearly see Josiah's face in the semi-darkness, Emma knew he was thinking.

"I remembered to fetch them," Josiah said finally, his chin pointing to a nearby bundle in the snow. "You'll go easy on Will, won't you?"

"What's this?" Emma smiled in spite of herself. "I thought you didn't like him."

Josiah shrugged. "I reckon he's growing on me. He seems to have taking a liking to you and Mary, so I can't fault him fer that." Josiah lightly touched Emma's hand as she prepared to get up.

"I don't know what you told Will about yer rescue, but you can git me into a heap of trouble by what you tell others. My life is in yer hands, Emma."

Emma smiled at the last comment, and she heard Josiah grin.

"You fixing to get me into trouble, Emma?"

The impulse to tease Josiah disappeared when she thought of what could happen to him, and she quickly shook her head, "no."

Josiah propped his forehead against hers. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came.

"I love you, too," Emma whispered, giving him one last kiss before leaving their hideaway among the trees.

Hand in hand, Emma and Josiah strolled to the cabin. When they closed their eyes for sleep that night, they were hidden in each other's arms. Their hearts already brimmed with love for each other, but their cup overflowed and love washed around them as they realized God's loving mercy in their lives.

He had given them each other.

"O taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man [and woman] that trusteth in Him."
~ Psalm 34:8 ~

Chapter Fifteen

Snowstorm in the Rockies

1837, Josiah's cabin, southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

God "sendeth forth His commandment upon earth: His word runneth very swiftly. He giveth snow like wool: He scattereth the hoarfrost like ashes. He casteth forth His ice like morsels: who can stand before His cold? He sendeth out His word, and melteth them: He causeth His wind to blow, and the waters flow."

~ Psalm 147:15-18 ~

A white mantle hung over the Rocky Mountains, obscuring their steep slopes from Emma's eyes. Closing the cabin door, she returned to the hearth where Josiah and Mary were finishing breakfast.

"It's snowing again," Emma said with a disappointed sigh. "I had hoped to see some blue in the heavens, this morning."

Drawing the back of his hand over his mouth, Josiah burped his satisfaction over the meal. "Reckon you won't be seeing any blue, today. Another storm's coming in."

"That won't stop us from visiting the trappers, will it?" asked Emma. "Their camp is close by."

Josiah grunted, although Emma didn't quite know if it were out of consent or disapproval. His face looked tired, his shoulders weary. He had held onto her through the night, even in his sleep, with a quiet frenzy that both settled and excited Emma's heart. She had never before felt so wanted or loved by Josiah.

He looked up, his gaze meeting hers. A half smile parted his lips, making Emma yearn for another of his gentle kisses. A small groan rumbled across the room to Emma, and she knew he had had a similar thought.

"You don't want to go see them trappers this early in the morning, do you, Emma? Whatever you've got to say to Will, can wait until later."

Emma could hear the plead in Josiah's voice, but steeled herself against it. "Waiting won't make anything better, Josiah."

"Well, it'd sure make *me* feel better." Reclining on the buffalo robes, Josiah folded his hands beneath his head, as though intending to remain right where he was.

His posturing didn't ruffle Emma. "The trappers' camp isn't that far, Josiah. I can go without you."

Josiah harrumphed, though Emma thought she detected a grin threatening to form around his mouth.

"Muleheaded, woman. I wouldn't put it past her." His head turned to Emma, and she could see a flicker of admiration in his eyes. "We'll go, after I've had my nap. And Emma," he said, his tone deepening as he spoke, "yer to wait until I get up. I don't want you going there without me."

"It's only up the mountain, Josiah."

"I'm meaning it, Emma. You stay put until I'm rested."

She wanted to argue he didn't need more sleep, having just awoke.

"And stop yer thinking, so I can git to sleep."

"I'll wait," Emma said, crossing her arms, "but I'd like to see you make me stop thinking."

When Josiah looked at her, she saw no lightheartedness in his gaze. He didn't feel playful.

"I won't go without you," she said quietly.

"Nestle with me, Emma?"

The hint of frantic desperation in his voice melted Emma even further. She crawled into bed, and he latched onto her, his heart thumping against her as he tried to sleep.

"Don't be frightened," Emma said, comforting Josiah with a soft caress that made him groan. "Everything will work out."

"I ain't frightened," he said in muffled protest, his face buried against her shoulder. He trembled, and Emma felt him quickly stiffen.

"Mary," Emma called to the child playing beside the fireplace, "would you fetch our Bible, please?"

A moment later, Mary lifted the heavy volume, resting it on Josiah's back. The girl saw her father hiding against Emma and giggled, not understanding his trouble.

At the sound of her childish laughter, Josiah hid his face deeper into Emma's dress.

"Mary," Emma gave her a sobering look, "your pa needs some compassion."

"He is not feeling well?" Mary asked, her amusement turning into concern. She squatted beside the bed, and gently stroked his hair.

"Make her go away, Emma," Josiah pleaded without looking up.

"He'll be fine," Emma said to the girl, motioning with her chin for Mary to leave.

Mary hesitated, her eyes now filled with worry.

"Go on, Little One. He'll be fine."

Reluctantly, Mary left the robes to go back to her place by the fire.

Outside their sturdy log walls, Emma could hear the wind howling and knew the storm had come in full force. Josiah moved slightly, checking over his shoulder to see if Mary watched him. She did, and he quickly turned his face back into Emma's dress.

Standing the Bible on end, Emma peered over his shoulder to read out loud from the Book of Psalms. "For Thou, LORD, wilt bless the righteous; with favour wilt Thou compass him as with a shield," Emma read quietly, her voice soft against the storm raging outside. "Did you hear that, Josiah? He will surround us with His favor, protecting us like a shield."

"I heard." Josiah took a deep, calming breath. "I weren't frightened though."

Emma nudged his shoulder. "You weren't?"

With a low groan, Josiah raised his head, his eyes locking with hers. "Maybe a little. But it don't come easy, Emma, me admitting my own weakness. A man likes to think he's stronger than this."

"You're strong enough, Josiah." She brushed back the hair falling in her face, those long wild tresses of a man unaccustomed to scissors.

"Emma," he sighed longingly, "I wish we didn't have to go back and face them trappers again. I wish we could stay in this lodge, and you'd never have to taste any of what I did, when I was talking to Will last night. He was angry with me for good reason, but he doesn't like Indians, and I'm fearful you'll git hurt again."

"We're going to have to trust in God's favor," Emma said with a brave smile.

Josiah touched her cheek, his face softening with tenderness. "Wish I had as much mettle as you, Emma. Yer quite a woman."

"Careful, Josiah, you keep saying that, and one one of these days, I'll believe you."

"I wish you would," he grinned. He caressed her face, seemingly content to stay there forever. "I'm sorry I got you into this," he said, exhaling a sigh. "Whatever happens Emma, I'm sorry."

"I thought you said Mr. Shaw took a liking to me," Emma smiled, patting Josiah's arm consolingly. "I'll do all right, Josiah."

"I don't like feeling this helpless, Emma. I don't like it one bit. Now that he knows, he can cause us a lot of trouble." Dropping his head back to her shoulder, Josiah clutched his wife even harder than before. "I've never felt so vulnerable in all my life."

"Favor, Josiah. Remember God's favor."

"If I get to squeezing you too tight, just holler," he said with a grin in his voice. "All right, Emma, let's go see Will and George, like yer wanting." He rolled off Emma, the Bible falling to the buffalo robes as he moved. Mary stepped forward, offering to put the Bible back; Emma watched the expression on Josiah's face, thinking she had never before seen him look so humbled. Avoiding Mary's gaze, Josiah handed her the Bible.

"Are you all right, Pa?"

Josiah grunted. "I reckon."

As though not quite convinced, Mary leaned forward to look directly into his face.

"Mary, I'm fine. Go on now, and put that Bible away."

"Pa?" Mary asked, shifting the heavy book in her small arms.

With a low groan, Josiah sat up, casting Emma a helpless glance before turning to look back at Mary. "What is it, Cub?"

"I love you, Pa."

The girl's words overcame Josiah, for when he answered, Emma heard the emotion in his voice. "I love you, too, Mary."

"Do you want me to hug you, too?" Mary asked.

Swiping at the wetness in his eyes, Josiah hugged his little girl. When he let her go, Josiah had difficulty meeting anyone's gaze as he moved about the cabin, preparing to leave.

"Josiah," Emma asked, as he shrugged on his heavy coat, "could I use that small mirror of yours?"

"What fer?" he asked, his eyes still avoiding hers.

"I'd like to see my likeness before we leave," said Emma.

A grin broke out on Josiah's face as he fastened the coat.

"I just want to see if my hair is tidy," Emma said a little defensively. "Josiah, if you start teasing me--"

"All right, Emma, I ain't going to tease," he said, going over to his belongings. After fishing around in a bag, he pulled out the small mirror. "I have a request, afore I give this to you, though."

"I only want it for a moment," said Emma.

"Yer not to cry because of what you see," said Josiah. "I can stand a lot of things, but when you cry... Emma, when you cry..." His voice drifted off in a great sigh, and Emma knew he remembered finding her weeping under the trees last night, alone, and in the dark.

"I won't shed a single tear," Emma said stoutly. "I promise."

"Then sit down," said Josiah, motioning for Emma to obey. "Mary, git over here. Yer Ma has need of you."

"Josiah, what on earth are you doing?" asked Emma, as he lifted the girl onto her lap.

Josiah grinned, his eyes daring to meet Emma's. "You don't cry so much, when you know Mary's watching. Here's yer mirror, Emma. You can keep it."

Emma accepted the mirror from her husband, feeling slightly ridiculous for his making such a big deal over her not crying. She knew she wasn't pretty, and seeing her reflection should come as no big shock. Holding the mirror before her face, Emma's heart sank as she saw the same dirty face as before, bleakly staring back at her with stringy blonde hair. Tears filled her eyes, and Josiah grunted, as though to remind her of her promise.

"Mary, give yer ma a hug."

The girl obeyed with a broad smile. "Ma, you always cry when you see your reflection."

"I'm not crying-- not yet," sighed Emma, returning the girl's hug. "There, I'm better now." Emma held the mirror out to Josiah.

"It's yers," he said, going back to the pegs on the wall for his fox cap. "Such trinkets are fer women, so that rightfully belongs to you."

In spite of her continual disappointment whenever she gazed into the looking glass, Emma smiled gratefully, for she didn't have many belongings of her own. "Thank you, Josiah."

He looked up at her as he sat on the floor, tying his snowshoes. That grin-- that broad, unabashed grin-- spread across his mouth, softening his chiseled features. "There's my sunshine," he said contentedly.

Tucking the mirror into the bag at her belt, Emma had a suspicion of how Josiah used such trinkets in the past. This was something a woman would like, and if she wanted it badly enough... Emma shuddered, pushing aside the unpleasant thought as completely as she could. This man belonged to *her*, and to no other woman.

"Afore we go, Emma," said Josiah, standing up in his snowshoes in the center of the cabin, "I want you to pray about today. Pray it goes well."

"Why don't you do it, yourself?" asked Emma, bundling the last of Mary's blankets about the girl.

"I ain't so good at such things," Josiah said reluctantly.

"The head of the family is usually the one who leads the others in prayer," said Emma.

Bowing his head when Emma and Mary were ready, Josiah talked to God. "Yer knowing I deserve whatever trouble comes my way because of what I've done," began Josiah, "but God, we both know Emma doesn't deserve any punishment. And Mary here, she's innocent, too. Fer their sakes, God, I'm asking fer some of that favor Emma read about this morning in the Bible. I sure could use it." Josiah awkwardly looked up from his prayer, unsure what came next. "Oh, in Jesus' name, Amen," he finished with a nod. "That's the best I can do fer now, Emma. Reckon it'll be enough?"

"God hears the prayers of His children, so I reckon it's enough," smiled Emma.

Josiah gave Emma a tight bear hug, and then had to give one to Mary, as well.

Everyone ready, Josiah opened the cabin door. The storm had become worse, snow blinding them from seeing anything but the closest trees near their home. Lifting an arm to shield his view, Josiah surveyed the mountain.

"Maybe we should wait," Emma said, struggling to be heard over the wind. "We could go some other time, Josiah."

Josiah shook his head. "I want to git this over with. Take hold of Mary's hand, and don't let go of my coat until we reach their camp."

Obedying, Emma gripped Mary, and then took hold of Josiah's bearskin coat; Emma linked the family together, so no one would become separated in the snowstorm.

The storm blew fierce, but the trappers' camp lay just beyond the trees, in back of the cabin, making it rather convenient to brave the elements for simply a visit. This time, Josiah didn't shout a greeting to the shelter, but quickly motioned for Emma and Mary to crawl inside.

In the dimness, on the other side of the room, Will lay in his buffalo robe, his eyes opening wide as Emma and her family gathered before the fire to shed snowshoes and blankets.

"George," Will kicked the young man with his booted leg, "wake up, we've got company!"

"What?" George yawned, his demeanor sobering when he saw Josiah.

"I see you've got the meat drying out," Josiah said, looking at the rack that had been set up near the fire. On it hung all the elk meat from yesterday's hunt.

"I followed your directions as best I could," George said, propping himself on an elbow but not bothering to sit up. "When the meat's done, you can take half."

"That ain't necessary," said Josiah, his face turning back to the flames as though he would rather stare at them than George. "You were the one who brought down that elk."

"Only because you gave me the shot," said George.

"I won't turn down meat when it's offered," said Josiah, slanting a look at Will out of the corners of his eyes.

Wanting to be the first to speak to Will, Emma put on her best company manners-- smile included. "How are you feeling today, Mr. Shaw? Is your fever any better?"

"Thank you for asking, Ma'am, I think it's gone." Will returned Emma's smile with as much genuine warmth as she could've hoped for. "I've been eating regularly, ever since your last visit, and I believe my strength is returning."

Josiah harrumphed, and Emma nudged him to keep silent.

"I'm very happy to hear it," Emma said with a smile. Secretly, she hoped to demonstrate to these trappers that her life with Josiah should not be pitied. She hoped an invitation might help. "Sometime when you feel up to it, you and Mr. Hughes should come to our cabin for a visit. You would be most welcome."

"That's very kind of you, Mrs. Brown," said Will, giving George another kick when the young man didn't readily accept the invitation, "we'd be happy to come."

A sigh came from George's direction, and he lay back down on his bed, as though wanting more sleep.

"You'll have to pardon George, Mrs. Brown, for even though he comes from a well-heeled family, he never learned his manners."

At this, George sat up, his face a scowl. "You don't have to make any excuses for me, Will. I can talk for myself, if you and Josiah will let me."

"Nobody's stopping you," said Will. "But mind your language. There's ladies present."

"What I've got to say can be said anywhere." George threw back his robe, sitting cross-legged before the fire, like Josiah. His eyes glittered against the flickering light, the sound of the storm howling through the entrance as he began to speak. "Josiah, Will told me of your talk last night. I don't know what's gotten into Will, but he seems to think you honorable, even though you captured one of our women and held her until it's nearly impossible for her to return to her family."

"*I am* her family," said Josiah, staring a hole straight through George. "She's got no one but me."

"Is that true, Ma'am?" George turned to Emma. "Do you have any family still living?"

"Besides those in this shelter, no, there is no one."

George remained silent a few moments, as though taking this into consideration. "Very well, I won't insist on her being returned--"

At the mere mention of Emma's being returned, Josiah's hand immediately went to the knife at his hip. Emma grabbed Josiah's wrist, and he slowly relaxed.

"Mr. Hughes, if you have more to say," sighed Emma, "I suggest you hurry."

In the background, Emma heard the muffled chuckles of Will, laughing at his friend's expense.

Having gone pale at the sight of Josiah's sheathed knife, George nervously cleared his throat. "Despite what it says in the Declaration of Independence, I don't believe all men are created equal. The races are not equal and never will be, no matter what the governing principals of our nation may claim, it's simply not true."

Narrowing his eyes at George, Josiah looked somewhat baffled. "Those are a lot of fancy words. Anyone here git what he said?"

"He's saying you're not his equal," said Will, a hint of disgust in his tone. "I may be an Indian hater, but at least it's for a better reason than George. Our horses, along with our pack mules, were taken by a thieving Indian who was supposed to be our guide. He left us to die in these mountains, and then you came along, Josiah, and took my limb. I suppose your being a half-breed just gave me an easy excuse to hate you."

"Thanks," Josiah said dryly. "I'll remember that the next time your life needs saving." With a tired groan, Josiah looked at Emma, and she hoped she gave him an encouraging smile. "You men may

not like me, or even approve of me, but come next spring, I'll do the best I can to git you both back to the nearest trading post, alive."

"Why?" asked Will. He stared at Josiah, straight in the face without flinching.

Josiah stared back. "God wouldn't like me to do otherwise, and neither would Emma."

Will furrowed his brows, though a smile formed at the corners of his mouth. "See what I mean, George? This wild buck's being tamed by a woman!"

Though Josiah looked insulted, he said nothing.

With an assessing stare in his blue eyes, Will grinned at Josiah. "I'd wager a great deal you haven't been like this for long. I've seen your friends, Josiah, and if you were half the wild men they are, then I'd say you've done some changing." Respect sounded in Will's voice, surprising Emma.

Then Will faced her, his expression open and friendly. "How long have you been with him, Mrs. Brown?"

The question caught Emma off guard. "I don't know," she said, trying to measure those nameless days but unable to give a number, "it was before the first snow. It's difficult to say, for other than the obvious fact this is winter, I don't even know today's date."

"You don't?" asked George. He pulled out a book, opening it to a page with handwritten words. "According to my journal, this is February 14th, 1837."

"February?" Emma felt numb. "And the day? What day of the week?"

"What day? Why, it's Tuesday, Ma'am."

"Tuesday." Emma put a hand over her mouth, quickly searching for the entrance.

"Em, what's wrong?" Josiah asked, as she unsuccessfully tried to get past him, for he sat by the entrance. "Are you hurt or something?"

Helpless to speak without tears, Emma shook her head, her hand still clamped over her mouth. When he saw the tears forming in her eyes, Josiah put his arm around her shoulders, letting her weep against his hunting shirt in private.

"What'd you do to her?" Will asked George angrily. "I told you to watch your language!"

"I did!" George said, defending himself as best he could. "I only gave her the date!"

Even though her face smothered against Josiah's chest, Emma could feel Josiah's muscles tighten, and sensed the glaring look he must be giving George at that very moment.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am," George stammered awkwardly, "I didn't mean to offend you."

Drying her tears, Emma emerged from Josiah's protective embrace. She had to show the men she was all right. "I'm not offended, Mr. Hughes-- at least, not by knowing the weekday. Thank you for giving it to me."

With a puzzled nod, George closed his journal and put it away.

"We've been holding Sunday service on every seventh day," explained Emma, "but I could only guess what day it really was. Please excuse my tears, it's only that it's been so long..." Emma's voice wavered, "so long since I've truly known the date." The strong arm about her wouldn't let go, and Emma happily rested against its owner's shirt. "It's Tuesday, Josiah. It's Tuesday."

"I'll be happy about it, after you've stopped crying," said Josiah. "Maybe we should leave."

"The snow's coming down heavy," Will said cautiously. "George and I wouldn't mind your company for a little longer. Would you stay for lunch? George shot an elk yesterday, and we'd be pleased to share a meal with you."

The "you" in Will's invitation had included the whole family, and since Emma felt inclined to eat, Josiah accepted. Before the meal, the Brown family bowed their heads, quietly saying a prayer over their food. To Emma's amazement, George bowed his head, too, though Emma felt it didn't have anything to do with being polite; he had probably been raised with some religion, and had bowed his head out of habit when in the presence of others who did.

The elk tasted good in Emma's mouth, and to her surprise, she finished off the meal with little effort. Tucked at her side sat Mary, munching meat, her face all attention as she listened to the talk of the grownups.

In the cabin, Josiah spoke little of his adventures, but here with these men, his talk filled with Indian weaponry, hunting tactics his father had taught him, and things he had learned from the Blackfoot as a boy. Will listened to every word, laughing and slapping his knee when Josiah told of his first meeting with a grizzly, and then the harrowing escape of another, when "a full grown man." As Emma rather expected, George showed incredulity when Josiah told of his scalp being

ripped back by the griz, and she hid her amusement when Josiah pulled back his hair to reveal the scars.

"Wish I could've been with you for that one," Will sighed with longing. "Sounds like a grand adventure, Josiah."

Grand? Emma shook her head, grateful *she* hadn't been there. She looked at Little Mary, the girl's mouth all proud smiles as Mary saw the reaction of Will and George to her pa's exploits.

The trappers' eyes grew wide as Josiah told them of the mountain men he knew-- men of great renown, such as Kit Carson.

"You know of him?" Will leaned forward in earnest. "Kit Carson?"

"I recollect a few seasons back, at rendezvous," said Josiah, "a bully of a Frenchman-- Shunar he was called-- made a terrible ruckus about how he could whip any man in camp. Shunar beat anyone he didn't like, which included just about everyone but himself, and on this day he'd already gotten riled and whipped two or three men. He said Frenchmen weren't any trouble to flog, and as fer Americans, there wasn't a man there who could take him. When Kit heard that, he decided he'd had enough of the braggart. Kit said he was the worst American there, and that many others could thrash Shunar, but were too afraid to do it. Kit said if Shunar didn't shut up, he'd rip his guts."

"Kit Carson said that?" asked George, his mouth open in astonishment.

"He did," said Josiah. "Shunar wouldn't back down, so Kit met the bully, each armed with a loaded weapon. The men fired at the same time, the report of their weapons combining into one explosion of gunpowder and smoke. Kit's shot hit the Frenchman's arm, while all Kit got was his hair cut a little closer than he liked. When Kit grabbed another loaded weapon, Shunar hollered surrender, and he didn't bully anyone else in camp fer the rest of Kit's stay. Fer all I know, Kit saved someone's life, taking that Frenchman the way he did."

"This is my first season in these parts, so I've yet to meet the man," said Will, leaning back with a longing groan. "I sure would've given a lot to see him whip that bully."

A quiet hush filled the shelter as Josiah spoke of lands far from here, of native peoples and their varied customs. Josiah had trekked up and down the Northern Rocky Mountains, seeing a great deal, and living as fully as he could. He had known giants of men-- Indian and white man alike-- men who honored their word and would give their life to keep it. As he spoke, Josiah's eyes

burned with a distant fire, as though seeing things the rest of them could not. These mountains were in his blood, as much a part of him as his own limbs.

"As many places as I've been," said Josiah, "this is the land of my mother's people. It always pulls me back, and when I am old, I will die here."

"You will never leave?" asked Will. Emma thought she detected a note of sadness in his voice. "This talk of the past is good, but times are changing, Josiah. Even now, beaver isn't worth as much as it used to. Fashionable gentlemen no longer require beaver to make their hats, but silk. I only came as far North as I did, to trap the last of the beaver; I had hopes it would be here in abundance." Will sighed, his thoughts evidently taking him somewhere he didn't like. "We wanted to come North, but didn't intend to wander into Blackfoot country. We've our Indian guide to thank for that."

"It pays to beware who you trust," said Josiah.

Will nodded in ready agreement. "I've learned my lesson the hard way. I'm through trusting any more full-blooded Indians."

When Josiah's teeth set on edge, Emma knew Will had taken Josiah's remark in a way that hadn't been intended.

"But what of the remaining beaver? Where are they?" asked George.

"There ain't many left, even up here," Josiah said in a low voice, his face furrowed in thought, his hands resting on his knees as he spoke. "It's harder to make a living the way my pa used to, that's fer certain."

"Then it's time to think of the future," said George. "I hear there's money in buffalo robes."

"Now those dumb creatures, I know," said Will. "I've shot plenty of buffalo in my day."

"It true there's money to be had in robes," said Josiah, "until they git to be as scarce as beaver. I remember the days when things were more plentiful than now, and what you said is true-- times is changing fast. But what's a man supposed to do? This is my home."

"Men of your caliber are rare," Will said thoughtfully. "You've spent your life in this wilderness, while the rest of us are just visitors-- even for all our brave talk, that's all we are-- visitors. I fear for you, Josiah. If you don't change with the times, I fear what will become of you."

"There's no need for such talk," Josiah smiled, absently rubbing his knees with the palms of his hands. "I'll make do. There's still elk and deer to hunt, peaks and rivers to explore, traps to set. These mountains will never be tamed, so I ain't overly worried."

With a steady gaze, Will looked at Josiah. "If you can be tamed, then so can these mountains."

Josiah's eyes narrowed, as though not in agreement. He said nothing, and for a long moment, the shelter lay completely silent.

"Ma?" Mary tugged at Emma's dress. The girl raised her mouth to Emma's ear, whispering, "I have to visit outside."

Not needing to be told what Mary had whispered, Josiah moved so the girls could pass through the entrance. "Keep close to the shelter, Emma," he said, as she strapped on her snowshoes, "the storm hasn't let up, yit."

Outside, frozen wind cut into Emma's face, forcing her to turn away from the horizon to keep from getting frostbitten. Snow filled the air everywhere she turned, and after taking several steps, Emma lost sight of the trappers' shelter.

It happened so quickly, it terrified her.

"Hurry," Emma told Mary, urging the child to relieve herself beside a tree. "We must hurry."

Squinting into the wind, Emma braved the frostbite to look for their tracks. There they were, faint impressions, filling with snow. Emma prayed for God's help, for when those tracks vanished, they would be lost.

As Emma contemplated her situation, a broad shouldered figure appeared through the snowstorm. Emma didn't need to see a face to know it was Josiah.

"Thought I'd best come," he said, shielding his eyes with the arm of his bearskin coat. "This storm ain't gitting any better. You about done, Mary?"

"Yes," Mary's small voice sounded like a faint whisper in the howling wind, but when her steady hand tucked inside Emma's, she showed no fright. "I am ready, Pa."

"Let's go home," said Josiah. He turned, needing no tracks to find his way, and Emma followed hard at his side all the way back to their cabin.

The door swung open and Mary rushed inside to build the fire they had left smoldering while gone. The grownups followed, Josiah helping Emma to take off her heavy capote and then her snowshoes. He didn't often do this, and Emma wondered at his thoughtfulness.

"Emma," he asked, taking off his bearskin garment, "did you lose yer way back there, afore I came to fetch you?"

Emma sighed. She had hoped to keep that from Josiah. "I suppose I did," she said, going to the hearth to warm herself before a cheery blaze. "I lost sight of the shelter, though I intended to follow my tracks back, so I suppose I wasn't truly lost." Standing, she looked over her shoulder at Josiah.

"Yer learning, Emma," he said with a grin, as though knowing she sought his approval. He came up behind her, wrapping his arms about her as they both faced the fire. "I reckon God gave us favor, Em. When I told Will we were leaving, he said he wanted to come visit us real soon. Oh, Em, I'm so tired."

Emma turned to see Josiah. He had gotten a lot of rest that morning, but that had been before talking with the trappers. Evening would soon darken the snowy skies even more, and Emma had to admit to some weariness, herself.

Josiah let go of her, and went to the door to put the bar on. "I know it's early yit," he said with an endearing grin, "but I've a mind to laze around the fire with my family. Let the mountainside blow itself to bits, I'm going to enjoy some peace and quiet with Emma and Mary." As if to make it official, Josiah pulled off his moccasins and then bent over to unwind the strips of cloth that insulated his feet against the snow. "Mary, I'm feeling in a generous mood-- do you want to sleep with yer ma and me, tonight?"

"Yes!" Mary jumped up to gather her dolls, while Josiah made a large bed before the fire.

When Josiah saw the dolls, he groaned, but made no protest. Instead, he sat down in the middle of the bed and stretched out, his mouth wide in a yawn. As Emma sat down on his right side, her mind tried to work out a measure of time, now that she knew for certain today's date.

Josiah had rescued her in Autumn, Emma guessing it had been sometime in September or October. She had no way of knowing for certain, but if she were correct, she had been with Josiah for about five months. Five months! Surely, that could not be all? Several lifetimes had passed within those five months, lifetimes filled with change and then more change.

"Emma, what are you thinking?" Josiah folded his arm beneath his head, his eyes peering at her inquisitively. "What's going on in that purty head of yers?"

"Josiah," Emma said in awe, "I think I've only been with you for five months."

The look in Josiah's face puzzled her, for he didn't seem a bit surprised.

"And?" he asked, as though waiting for her to finish the thought.

"Five months, Josiah! It hasn't been that long!"

"I could've told you that," he said with a slight shrug.

"It didn't surprise you when George said this was February?"

"I can't say it ever crossed my mind," said Josiah, as Mary sat down on his left side with some pemmican. "I can read the seasons well enough without having to know which month it is. Mary, git some pemmican fer yer ma."

"I'm not hungry," said Emma, rubbing a sore foot that had bothered her on the way home. "I had a big lunch, and don't need any supper. Truly, Josiah, you weren't surprised over the date?"

"If I start seeing any more weight fall off you," said Josiah, an edge of warning in his tone, "then you'll eat when I tell you to, without any argument." A large hand pulled her by the ankle, drawing her foot close for inspection.

"What's *wrong* with my weight?" Emma asked indignantly. "Ouch! let go!"

Josiah frowned. "Tender, is it?"

"Only when you grip it so tightly," Emma said with a whimper, drawing her foot back to safety, out of his grasp. "I thought my weight was about right, for a woman in my condition."

"If it starts to swelling, let me know." Josiah closed his eyes as though ready for sleep.

"Josiah?" Emma nudged his shoulder. "About my weight-- I'm not too thin for your liking, am I?"

An eye opened, and he smiled at her. "What makes you think that?"

Emma bit her lip. "You once said you liked your women soft."

"I reckon yer soft enough, Emma," Josiah said, pulling her down to his side with a low chuckle. He placed her head on his shoulder, hugging her close with his arm. A contented sigh affirmed the truth of his words, and Emma kissed his shirt.

"I tell you, Em," Josiah said with a grin in his voice, "God sure did set a trap fer my soul, when He put you in my way. I didn't want anything to do with God, but when I started loving you, He sure got me good." Josiah's chest moved as Mary cuddled into his other shoulder. "You needing another trip outside yit, Mary?"

"No, Pa."

"Good." A deep breath filled the hunting shirt, and then exhaled in another sigh of contentment.

"Josiah," Emma weighed her words carefully, "I don't suppose you'd ever consider leaving the mountains?"

The muscles beneath her head constricted, and Emma suddenly wished she'd never thought it out loud. Josiah would never leave. If she knew anything about him, she knew *that*.

"Are you wanting to leave, Emma?"

"Not leave *you*," said Emma, raising her head to see his face, "only the mountains." Josiah's jaw was working again. "I wonder if you'd ever consider living in a settlement, or a town, or maybe even a city. You could find work there, and we wouldn't have to rely on hunting and trapping for survival."

"That ain't fer us," said Josiah, firmly placing her head back against his chest. "No, Emma, you don't belong there anymore. These here mountains are our home, and that's where we'll stay."

The finality in his voice sank Emma's spirits, and she realized for the first time how much she desperately wanted to return to civilization. The two trappers were a small taste of her former life, and Emma missed it sorely. Oh for a general store, church, school, the society of other women!

"You ain't fixing to leave me, are you, Emma?"

Emma quietly scolded herself for allowing such thoughts, for Josiah had sensed her longing. "No, Josiah, I'll never leave you."

"But, yer wanting to go back, ain't you."

He asked no question, and Emma offered no answer.

"This is yer life, Emma. You may not be liking it, but it's all I can give."

"I never said I didn't like it," said Emma, feeling a little resentful at the accusation.

"Then speak of something else," Josiah said stiffly.

"I'm sorry I brought it up." Emma no longer felt like nestling, but Josiah's hand firmly kept her at his side, and she found she couldn't move without making any more of a fuss than she already had.

"Pa?"

Mary came as a welcome interruption, and Emma resolved to keep her own mouth shut. Josiah had been in a good mood, before she had voiced thoughts that were best left unsaid.

"Can I leave the mountains when I am older?" asked Mary, ignorantly moving into territory Emma had just left.

The scowl in Josiah's voice couldn't be missed. "What do you want to go and do that fer?"

"The white man does not live like us," said Mary, evidently having gleaned this observation from watching the trappers, "so I will learn to live like them."

"Enough," said Josiah, "you ain't old enough to be going anywhere just now, so let's have no more talk of leaving." He sounded weary. "The next woman who speaks of such things will sleep by herself."

"Pa," Mary said with a giggle, "I am not a woman!"

"Woman or not, you'll be sleeping by yerself."

"I will be quiet," said Mary, cuddling a doll so closely, Emma could see the hem of a brightly colored calico dress resting on Josiah's chest.

Lightly touching the fabric, Emma recalled the bolts of cloth for sale at the general store, back home in Indiana.

"Emma, I meaning it," Josiah's chest rumbled threateningly. "You'll be sleeping by yerself, tonight."

"I didn't say anything," said Emma.

"Maybe not, but you were thinking it."

"Pa?" asked Mary.

"I won't argue with you, Josiah, but you can't stop me from thinking."

"I have to go outside, Pa."

"Emma, you'll do what I say."

Freeing herself from Josiah's arm, Emma struggled to her feet. Maybe since she carried a child inside her womb, her mood shifted more easily, but whatever the cause, Emma didn't feel like talking to Josiah.

"Where are you going, Emma?"

"I'm taking Mary outside," said Emma, putting on her heavy capote. She gathered a warm blanket, and bundled Mary without looking in Josiah's direction. His dark gaze pierced her, and she didn't want to succumb to its effects.

Shotgun in hand, Emma took Mary outside. The storm still persisted, so Emma kept her daughter close to the cabin.

The cold did little to cool Emma's temper, but when she took Mary inside, the grieved look on Josiah's face did what the frigid temperature could not. She felt remorse.

"Are you angry with me, Emma?" he asked.

Every once in a while, Emma glimpsed Josiah's weakness, and on those occasions, it reminded her that though her husband looked strong and invulnerable, he was only flesh and blood.

"I won't stop you from thinking whatever you want," said Josiah, moving to his feet in one fluid action. He stood before her, his arms empty. "I don't want to hang onto you so hard, you come to resent me, Emma."

"I'm sorry I lost my patience," said Emma, stepping into his embrace. Strong arms encircled her, and Emma once again shoved aside the future. Whenever she gave it very much thought, the future loomed before her like a shrouded specter-- dark, uncertain, and foreboding. She had to give it back to God's hands, for she couldn't do anything else.

"I'll make you happy, Emma," Josiah said, nuzzling her with more desperation than desire. "If it's the last thing I do, I promise I will."

"Hush," Emma put a hand to his mouth, "I'm already happy."

As they stood before the fire, Josiah's large frame covered hers in a giant hug. He clung to her tightly. "Don't ever leave me, Em. I don't know what I'd do, if you left."

"Easy now," Emma managed to give him a calm smile, "Mary's the only one who'll eventually leave. This muleheaded woman is staying with her husband, right where she belongs."

"Stay with me forever, Em," he said quickly, squeezing her even harder. A tap on the shoulder, and he gave her room to breathe. "You'll nestle with me, tonight?"

Emma smiled. "So I'm not banished to a separate bed?" She hoped she sounded playful and calm, for Josiah's frantic moments had a tendency to make *her* frantic-- and at least one of them had to think clearly.

For the rest of the evening and all of that night, Emma didn't move from Josiah's side; she kept close, filling his arms whenever he reached for her, returning his affection without question or demand. When Josiah responded with complete and utter gentleness, Emma knew how hard he was trying to please her.

The next morning, Josiah left Emma and Mary, and headed to the trappers' shelter to start Will moving. Up until now, Will had relieved himself in a water-tight leather bag, and George had kept it emptied and Will clean. Josiah didn't like the fact Will never budged from his bed. It wasn't healthy.

The heavy snows of yesterday were only a distant memory as Josiah tramped his way back to the shelter, his rifle loaded and ready but his mind on other things besides danger. Emma had

looked happy that morning, hadn't she? Of course she had. That sunshine of hers had chased away his snowstorm, shedding fresh rays of hope on today. The nature around him mirrored his soul, for the sun had parted the thick mantle of clouds, revealing the blue sky that had been there all along. Josiah thought about that for a moment, before crawling inside the shelter. Just because he couldn't see God, didn't mean He wasn't there.

With a peaceful smile, Josiah ducked inside.

"The storm's let up," said Josiah, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dimness as he undid his snowshoes. He had awakened Will, for the trapper stirred at the sound of Josiah's voice. Even George had slept the early morning through, his yawns and protests at having been awakened filling the lodge. "You men are in sorry shape," grinned Josiah, disposed to be in a good mood this morning, even if they were not. "Git up, fer daylights burning."

"What's there to get up *for*?" asked George, his voice heavy and dull. "There's nothing to do but eat and sleep, and go hunting."

"Emma's expecting you both to pay a visit to our lodge, this morning," said Josiah, noting their look of immediate interest.

"That's good of your wife," said Will, disappointment soon overtaking his enthusiasm, "but I'm in no shape to leave."

"When's the last time you've left that robe?" asked Josiah. "You need to start moving, Will, or yer muscles are going to waste away to nothing."

"Move?" Will's face filled with despair. "How am I to move, without two legs beneath me?"

"You can crawl, can't you?" asked Josiah, not allowing pity to creep into his voice. Will didn't need pity, but resolve.

"I'm not crawling about like a cripple," said Will.

"Crawling's a start," Josiah said with a harrumph. "When yer ready, I'll make a wooden leg, but until you git strong enough to use it, you crawl."

Folding his arms, Will spat in defiance. "I'd like to see you make me."

The absence of "Indian" in Will's challenge made Josiah grin, for it had been a perfect opportunity to hurl an insult.

"If yer wanting me to make you, I'll be glad to oblige," said Josiah, putting aside his flintlock and then his knife. "Afore this day is through, yer going to crawl."

"I can't!" Will said in loud protest. "Look!" He threw aside his robe, revealing his stump. "I don't even have a knee!"

"Then you'll drag yerself with yer elbows," said Josiah, coming to Will's bed as George gaped at Josiah in muted awe. Will was no small man, and it took someone with a lot of sand to go against such a man. "I've bested you once before, and I'll do it again," said Josiah, leveling his eyes with Will's. "How about it? Do you feel like testing me?"

"I'm not in good health," Will said in a whimper, only strengthening Josiah's determination.

This was no way for a man to talk.

"Yer sounding like a woman," said Josiah, taking Will by the scruff of the neck, "and now I want to see if you holler like one!" With that, Josiah hauled Will out of his sickbed and onto the boughs of cottonwood that lined the shelter floor.

Will thrashed about, suddenly crying out in pain as his boot scorched from getting too close to the fire.

"You ain't hurt," said Josiah, squatting over Will with a grin. "I was right though, you scream just like a woman."

"Say that one more time!" Will said, his hands balling into fists. "Just once more!"

"All right," said Josiah, grinning brazenly, "I will." He backed out of the shelter, feet-first, his eyes never leaving Will's. "Yer a balling woman, and if yer wanting to git even, I'm waiting."

For all the insult, Will swallowed hard as his eyes took in the outdoors behind Josiah's back.

"George, put his capote on him," said Josiah. "We wouldn't want him freezing to death, afore I put him in his place."

The mock had its desired effect, and the apprehension disappeared from Will's face as he hurried on the coat. "I'm coming for you, Josiah, so you just keep grinning." Ready to leave the shelter, Will grabbed at the boughs beneath him, dragging himself along the ground one straining pull at a time. His arms were weak, his lungs huffing for breath, his forehead beading with sweat.

"I'm still waiting," said Josiah, peering into the shelter as Will grabbed for his first handful of snow.

"I'm coming," panted Will. He stopped a moment to gather his strength, and George moved to help him.

"Let him be," said Josiah, motioning for George to back away. "This ain't yer fight."

"Come now, Josiah, certainly you don't intend to fight him! Why, he's an invalid!"

"Invalid, am I?" Will pulled himself through the entrance, shivering as his perspiration met the frigid air. Grunting as he went, Will dragged his heavy frame through the deep snow, his hands and elbows pulling, his leg pushing. At last, having gone as far as he could without complete bodily collapse, Will hitched himself into a seated position. His mouth stretched into a grin when he saw how much distance he had covered.

"You look surprised," Josiah said wryly, hunching down to pat Will on the back. "You feel like that fight, now?"

"Reckon I'll let the offense slide," Will said with a grin. "I'm obliged to you, Josiah. I'm outside." He slapped Josiah's arm. "I made it outside under my own steam."

"That you did," said Josiah, "but George and I will carry you the rest of the way. My lodge is just downhill a little ways from here."

Will nodded in assent, his breath still coming in huffs.

"George, git yerself on out here," Josiah shouted at the man watching from the shelter, "and put on yer snowshoes and fetch me mine, and my rifle and knife!"

"I'll get stronger," said Will, putting an arm about Josiah's neck as Josiah helped him onto his only leg. "This hoss still has some fight left in him!" Will paled a little at suddenly being upright, but he gritted his teeth and let George shoulder his other side. With Josiah on his right, and George on his left, Will's leg had little more to do than trail behind him in the snow.

"I hadn't realized how close we were to your cabin," said George, as the back of a log dwelling soon came into view. "I thought the distance was further than this."

"Looks like we're neighbors," Will grinned at Josiah. "I'll be glad for the company, after sitting around all this time with George. He's not that interesting."

Josiah chuckled, glad when he heard George doing the same. The young man laughingly muttered something about Will being an unlearned clod, and then they were there.

They were at Josiah's cabin.

"Emma, open the door!" said Josiah. "Yer company's here!"

"Let us... follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another."

~ Romans 14:19 ~

And "consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works."

~ Hebrews 10:24 ~

Chapter Sixteen

Common Ground

1837, Josiah's cabin, southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"Can two [or more] walk together, except they be agreed?"

~ Amos 3:3 ~

At the sound of Josiah's call, Emma hurried to the cabin door. She had spent all morning preparing for the trappers, and had put her new mirror to good use; after scrubbing her face and checking her likeness, her skin was now free from dirt and soot. She had retied her braids, pinning them up with the certainty of a mirror to guide her hands. Overall, Emma felt more confident about her appearance, and now winced at the thought of Will and George having seen her as she looked before.

Emma swung the door wide open, noticing her first polite smile came from Will.

"Good morning!" she greeted the men.

"Thank you kindly for the invitation, Mrs. Brown," said Will, his coloring somewhat paler than yesterday. "Josiah managed to get me outside, so we've come to pay a visit."

"Please, come in," smiled Emma, moving to one side so they could enter. Behind her stood Mary, quietly staring at the stump protruding from Will's capote.

George nodded at Emma as they lugged Will inside. "Morning, Ma'am."

"Where do you want him, Emma?" asked Josiah, looking about for a likely place to deposit their guest. "How about the robes?"

"If it won't put you to too much trouble," said Will, grinning at the table in the corner of the room, "I wouldn't mind a chair. It'd come as a welcome change."

"Ain't no trouble," said Josiah, angling himself toward the nearest chair. "No one hardly sits in them, anyway."

"I'm afraid we don't use the table nearly as much as we should," Emma heard herself apologize. "Josiah is more comfortable on the ground, so that's where we spend most of our time. Would you like a blanket to keep warm, Mr. Shaw?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Brown," said Will, balancing himself in the chair by placing a steady palm on the table. "Feels odd sitting with one limb. I feel like I'm about to topple over."

"Holler if you want down," said Josiah, stooping to untie the snowshoes strapped to his feet. George followed Josiah's example.

"Mary, please take their coats and put them in the corner," said Emma, as the girl continued to stare at Will. "And remember your manners."

Mary half smiled at the reminder, for Emma had instructed her not to stare as much as she had the day before.

With Will seated at the table, Josiah and George found places on the buffalo hides spread before the fire. Though Emma yearned to take a chair and formally sit with their guests, she didn't want to make Mary uncomfortable and decided on the large bed, instead. This way, Mary could remain close at her side, for the girl struggled with shyness.

Emma smiled in amusement as everyone made themselves comfortable. With five people present, the cabin hadn't been this crowded since Grandpap and Cora's visit.

"Have you gentlemen eaten breakfast?" asked Emma, growing uncomfortable at the prolonged silence taking hold of everyone.

"We've eaten," said George.

"But thanks for thinking of it," Will added, shooting an exasperated look at his young friend. "We ate well this morning."

"That reminds me," said Josiah, "one of us should go back and put something in the entrance of yer shelter. You ain't got a door, and animals could wander in at the smell of that drying elk."

"George will do it," said Will.

George didn't look too happy at being volunteered, but assented and put his snowshoes back on.

"Don't git lost now," grinned Josiah, as Mary ventured forward with George's capote. "I wouldn't want to have to come looking fer you."

Will laughed, but George didn't.

After George had gone, Will spoke to Josiah in an open manner. "Give him time. He liked you better before he knew about your wife."

"I'm knowing it. I don't expect too much from George." Josiah sat cross-legged by the fireplace, an orange glow highlighting one side of his rugged face.

"I know you were only jesting, but if he doesn't come back in a short while, I'd appreciate you checking him."

Josiah nodded. "I won't let anything happen to the boy."

"I appreciate it."

Both men regarded each other with a smile. In that moment, Emma thought they looked very much alike. Experience knew experience when it saw it, and Will and Josiah saw it in each other.

The chair beneath Will tottered, and Will shifted his tailbone to find better balance. "I've got one good foot planted on the ground, but it doesn't feel like it's enough to keep me from falling."

"Those chairs totter some," said Josiah. "It ain't yer leg causing trouble, though. You just ain't used to sitting up yit."

"I don't want to rile you," said Will, "but I don't believe it's polite to use that word in mixed company."

Josiah frowned. "What are you meaning, 'mixed'?"

"I'm meaning there's ladies listening," said Will, inclining his head in Emma and Mary's direction. "It ain't-- I mean-- isn't polite to use that word in front of women. My ma always said it was kind of vulgar."

Josiah looked more puzzled than ever. "What word are you meaning?"

"L-E-G," said Will, spelling out the offending word in as quiet a voice as he could. He obviously didn't want to horrify Emma or Mary with such language.

Awkwardly, Josiah glanced at Emma for help, though he didn't ask for it outright. He couldn't spell, and it was evident he felt self-conscious about showing weakness in front of other men.

"Thank you for your thoughtfulness, Mr. Shaw," Emma quickly interceded, "but my husband uses 'leg' and other rough language that I've since grown accustomed to."

Josiah harrumphed. "I won't say 'leg,' if you don't want me to, Emma."

"It's not a terribly big deal, Josiah."

"I ain't so backward that I can't change some."

"I never said you were."

"Then I'll stop saying it. But if I recollect correctly, you've said 'leg' a few times, yerself."

Emma folded her arms indignantly. "Only in the presence of family."

A faint smile creased Josiah's mouth. "If I can't say 'leg,' what am I supposed to call it?"

"I reckon 'limb' is the proper word," said Will, scratching his chin with his free hand. "Your wife has a civilizing effect on you, Josiah."

Shaking his head, Josiah harrumphed. "I ain't as changed as all that. I am what I am, and Emma knows it."

Hearing this, Emma couldn't help but smile. Josiah kept changing little by little, all the time, whether he was aware of it or not.

"See that smile, Will? Right now, she's thinking she owns me." There was a slight edge in Josiah's voice now, and it caused Emma's smile to slowly fade. The fire burned and his dark eyes glinted with a defiance that simmered just above the surface of his features.

Deep within her heart, Emma's heart felt a sharp tug, as though she were trying to go one way, and he, the other.

Josiah spoke to Will, but his eyes remained on her. "I can say things differently to sound more respectable, but the person saying them is the same. My pa always said you can take the man out

of the mountains, but you can't take the mountains out of the man. Reckon that's so with me, fer I'm never leaving."

This declaration caused something hot to sting Emma's eyes, and she blinked furiously to keep from weeping.

Josiah put out his hand and lightly touched her arm. "Don't cry Em. I'll talk of something else."

She dried the dampness around her eyes and smiled. It wasn't good for Will to know Josiah had made her cry, especially over this.

Will's face searched hers, but he kept silent. All the while, he absently scratched at his chin, until it finally caught Josiah's attention.

"You needing to bathe?"

"No, but this beard of mine sure scratches. I'd like a shave, but that thieving In-- well, someone took my pack mule so I lost my razor and soap."

"I don't have any soap," said Josiah, "but I can lend you a sharp knife. Just scrape the edge over yer face."

Will winced at the thought. "It sounds painful, but I reckon I'll borrow that knife."

"Use some bear grease to make the blade easier on yer skin," said Josiah, standing up to fetch the needed things from his belongs. "Emma, can Will borrow yer looking glass?"

"Of course," said Emma, pulling out the prized possession from the small bag at her belt.

"A long time back, I used to shave," said Josiah, placing the items on the table before Will. "Then I stopped, and grew myself a beard, thinking I'd look like a hairy overgrown white man covered in chin whiskers."

"Why did you shave them off, Pa?"

Josiah raised his brow as he sat back down on the floor.

Mary had been listening.

"My trying to hide who I was made things worse, and I got beat up because some white trappers thought I was trying to make myself out to be the same as them."

Eyes wide, Mary gulped in alarm.

"When my wounds healed, I plucked the whiskers from my face until the hair didn't grow back. I did it out of spite. If the white man didn't like looking at my face before, they sure weren't going to like it now."

"Did they leave you alone after that, Pa?"

Josiah didn't answer.

"Did they?" asked Will.

Josiah looked at the trapper. "What do *you* think?"

"If you look for a fight, Josiah, you'll always find it."

"I don't remember ever having to go looking fer trouble," said Josiah. "It always had a way of finding me."

"Then you shouldn't have taken a white woman." Will grimaced the instant he said the words. "Your wife seems to want to stay with you, so I won't say anything more about it. You're a good enough man, Josiah, but you walk around with your hands balled into angry fists. It isn't a good way to live."

"I didn't choose to be treated this way."

"Whenever you treat me as a friend," said Will, leaning forward in his chair despite being off balance, "it's harder for me to hate you-- harder, though not impossible. Don't give people a reason to hate you, Josiah. Make 'em work for it."

Josiah stared at him thoughtfully.

"Like the Good Book says," Will grinned, "if you do good to your enemies, you shame them into better treatment."

"Ma?" Mary tugged at Emma's arm. "Where is Mr. Hughes?"

"That's right, he ain't back yit, is he?" asked Josiah, his back straightening as he rested before the fireplace. "I'd best go see what's become of him."

"I can find him, Pa." Mary sat up on her knees, her face lit with an eager smile. "Please, Pa? I know the way to the shelter. I will not git lost."

"I want yer solemn word to keep to my tracks. Don't stray, and if you find trouble, you high-tail it back to this lodge."

The short distance between the two dwellings didn't concern Emma, except for the fact Mary would be by herself. "Josiah, I don't want her to go."

"She's old enough fer this. Is yer pistol loaded, Mary? Hand it over and let me make sure."

"How old is the child?" asked Will, letting the knife remain untouched on the table awhile longer. He didn't look eager for a rough shave.

"She'll be six seasons, this summer," said Josiah. He checked the pistol's priming, then handed it back to Mary. "Do I have yer solemn word?"

"Yes, Pa," Mary's braids rubbed against her deerskin dress as she nodded. "I will be careful."

Josiah smiled. "Put on yer blankets, then."

It consternated Emma that her wishes were being ignored by Josiah, but she forced it aside, and helped Mary prepare for the cold. "Don't be gone for long," she quietly told the girl.

Mary was too small to shove open the heavy log door, so Emma opened it for her, silently praying for Mary's safety. The skies were clear of snow, making the way safer for a child. As long as Mary didn't wander or take too long, she wouldn't become blinded in a snowstorm.

After checking Mary's blankets one last time, Emma kissed her forehead and sent her off.

The deep snow kept trapping Mary's feet, but as usual, she managed to make do without snowshoes. She had desired a pair of her own for some time now, but hadn't wanted to ask her pa to fashion them. She figured he had enough troubles without her creating more work.

Snowshoe tracks marked the ground where Pa and the two trappers had crossed that morning, but the tracks that held her attention were the recent ones pointing up the mountainside. Mr. Hughes had made those.

A gust swept across Mary's face, and she turned to keep the wind from robbing her breath. A tree moved, dumping snow from its laden branches. Mary's hand immediately went for the pistol tucked in her belt; she touched its polished wooden handle, but didn't draw the weapon.

It was only the wind.

In the Blackfoot village she had known all her life, she had kept close to *Naahks*, her grandmother, and had never ventured out of sight of the long columns of smoke from the lodge fires. Mary looked over her shoulder, comforted by the smoke from the cabin's chimney. Other Blackfoot children would be braver than her, and Mary had always felt shame at not possessing their courage. Of course, it hadn't helped that they tormented her for being the daughter of the white man who kept bringing trappers into their hunting grounds.

The thought made Mary uneasy, and she wondered what those same people say now, if they found more trappers with her pa.

Mary scanned her surroundings, letting the environment speak to her as she had seen her great-grandfather do so many times before. Her ears strained for signs of danger, but only the wind could be heard, and the distant cry of a wolf in the valley below. Remembering her grandmother's courage, Mary continued on.

The tracks she followed kept pointing up the mountain, and Mary felt certain she would soon see the shelter. Her certainty quickly vanished, however, when the tracks unexpectedly branched off from the others. Mary thought over her solemn promise to Pa. She wanted to go looking for Mr. Hughes, but wasn't willing to break her word. She would stay on the path.

The sound of someone treading across the snow made Mary look up. She gazed at the forbidden snowshoe tracks, and saw a man coming toward her. The hood of his capote flapped in the wind at his back, and the sunlight shone into his brown eyes, reminding Mary of the color of a fawn, when newly born.

Mary waved at Mr. Hughes, but he only frowned upon seeing her. "Are you supposed to be out here by yourself?" he asked.

"I came to bring you home," she said, looking up at the tall figure before her. "They are worried."

"I'll bet." The crease marks on Mr. Hughes' forehead deepened, and he looked down the slope at the view below. "Have you ever been in the valley?"

"Yes, Pa and me went hunting there."

"Pa and I," said Mr. Hughes. "The proper English is, 'Pa and I.'"

"I want to be proper," said Mary.

Mr. Hughes only sighed, and continued to look at the valley. "Tell them I'll be along in a while. I haven't been to the shelter yet."

"The shelter is close by," said Mary, moving past him and on up the mountain. "I will show you."

From the sounds behind her, Mary knew Mr. Hughes followed. Just as she had predicted, the shelter came into view. Before she went inside, she drew her pistol.

"Why did you do that?" asked Mr. Hughes.

"Something might be in there," said Mary, squatting down to peer inside. A quick glance, and all looked to be fine. "When you cover the entrance, leave an opening for a draft to feed the fire."

Mr. Hughes looked at her oddly, as though she had just told him the sky were made of blue robin's eggs.

"The fire must be fed, so the meat will dry," Mary added, hoping the explanation would erase that look on his face.

After Mr. Hughes had done all he thought necessary, he got to his feet and stared down at Mary. "I'm going back to the cabin now. Are you coming?"

"Yes." Mary stood, and quietly followed behind the man whose eyes were the color of a baby fawn's.

The door opened, and Emma breathed a sigh of relief as George and Mary stepped inside. George shut the door and Mary came to Emma to be unwrapped.

"Where were you?" Will asked his trapping partner. "We were thinking you might've gotten lost again."

"I wasn't lost." George crouched before the fire, and Josiah moved over to give him room to sit. "I just wanted to look around and see where we're at."

"And what'd you find?"

"Nothing-- nothing but snow and mountains and rocks for as far as the eye can see."

Will smiled. "Thought as much. Until we get back to civilization, I want you to listen to Josiah and do what he says. I'm not going to be much help to you, not with this stub of mine."

"There's nothing wrong with your mouth," said George, glancing over his shoulder at Will. "You can still tell me what needs to be done."

"Not as good as Josiah can." Will shifted in his chair, looking a bit more comfortable than before. "I'll do my best, George, but it won't be much."

A heavy sigh escaped from George as he sat cross-legged on the hides beside Josiah. George propped an elbow on one knee, and rested his chin on the palm of his hand. Altogether, he looked trapped and unhappy.

Mary dug around in the blankets behind her for something, and soon produced her Blackfoot doll. She stared at it, and then at George, as though trying to work up the courage to speak.

"Do you want to play with my doll?" asked Mary.

George looked at the outstretched Indian doll. Emma feared what the man might say, and wished she could've stopped Mary from making the offer. She didn't want her daughter's feelings to be hurt.

Frowning, George took the object and began to look it over with a casual but inquisitive eye. "It's broken," he said, toying a strand of sinew about the figurine's neck.

Suddenly looking concerned for the wellbeing of her wooden friend, Mary reached for her doll but George pulled it away.

"I'm not done yet."

"Give it back to the girl," said Will.

George gave a mocking grin. "She said I could play with it."

A large hand plucked the doll from George and gave it back to Mary. "She's had enough of people treating her poorly," said Josiah, watching Mary hug her doll and then quickly hide it beneath the covers like a precious treasure. "Them breaks you saw were made by the children in her tribe. She hasn't been treated well by them, or by me, and I aim to make things better for her." Josiah turned his head, the full impact of his stare boring into George. "Hurt her in any way, and you'll never be welcome in my lodge again."

The warning hit its mark, and George looked fearful of being banished from the cabin. The cabin didn't allow for much space, but with George's knees drawn up to his chest and his arms folded over his knees, he succeeded in retreating into a lonely sulk while Will and Josiah spoke of hunting and furs.

When stomachs began to rumble, Emma served pemmican and filled the tin cup with water so everyone could have a drink. When the cup came to Mary, she took it, and a lump of food, and crawled around Josiah to the young man slumped against the wood pile.

The men were still talking buffalo, but Emma didn't pay attention. She watched Mary quietly offer the cup to George. He stared at it a few moments, and then took it and drank. Then Mary gave him pemmican, and after a quick prayer, he began to eat.

"Almost every scrap of a buffalo's hide and bone is used by the Indians," Josiah was saying, "even down to the bull's testicles. They're good eating."

Emma winced with dread, grateful her friends and neighbors in Indiana weren't present to overhear Josiah. Will laughed, then grimaced when Josiah continued to relate some of the delicacies he'd eaten.

Behind Josiah, Mary sat at George's feet to watch him eat. The girl remained there until the cup was empty, and then she went to fill it and bring it back to George.

While George ate, Mary stared at the quillwork on her moccasins, and Emma sensed Mary was working up her courage to speak to George again. She wanted to call the child back, to let the man alone before he did something that would get himself thrown from the cabin. But Emma bit her lip, and watched.

"Do you want more food?" asked Mary, her small voice barely audible over Josiah and Will's discussion.

"No." George set aside the cup, and leaned his head against the firewood.

Mary picked at a pebble on the floor. "Do you have a wife?"

Emma caught the flicker of surprise on George's face.

"No, I'm not married."

"Are you a Christian?" asked Mary. "You prayed afore you ate."

"That's 'before,' not 'afore,'" said George. "Yes, I suppose I'm a Christian. Anyway, I was raised one, if that counts for anything."

Mary smiled, and checked the tin cup. "Do you want more water?"

"No, I've had enough." George closed both eyes, but opened one when Josiah said something that momentarily interested him. Then the eye shut, and Mary watched George doze off for an after-lunch nap.

"George, it's time for you to check our shelter and make sure nothing's got at the meat," Will said, interrupting George's sleep.

"I will go," Mary offered, looking to Will and then to Josiah for permission.

"That's kind of you, but..." Will looked hesitant. "Your ma might not want you to go by yourself."

"It's our shelter, so *I'll* go," said George, twisting to get on his snowshoes in the crowded room. "Pigtails can stay by the fire and keep warm." George lifted his rifle, and then disappeared out the door.

"Pa, what did he mean?" asked Mary.

With a laugh, Josiah lightly pulled one of her braids. "These are pigtails. He's right, Mary. Let him do his own work." Josiah placed the cup in Mary's hands, and then sent her back to Emma.

"Ma," Mary said, kneeling on the buffalo robes beside Emma, "how old before I am married?"

The question sent a bitter-sweet dart through Emma's heart. "Much older than you are right now. Little One, please trust me when I say he's not the one for you."

Mary didn't look at all convinced. "I will marry a white man."

"Yes, but not *that* white man."

"There are only two," Mary said, casting a glance at Will. Will was rubbing bear grease onto his face for a shave, and Mary grimaced in disgust.

"Far away from these mountains," said Emma, drawing Mary onto her lap so she could speak quietly without anyone overhearing, "there are many, many white men who will be looking for a wife when you are older. You don't have to pick from these two trappers. There are many others."

"Where are they?" asked Mary.

"They are in the settlements and cities, with other white people. Some are trappers, like Mr. Hughes and Mr. Shaw, and some are in trade and keep stores."

Mary sighed, and leaned her head against Emma's cheek. "But I like George."

Emma couldn't fathom why. "Until he gives you permission to call him otherwise, it's polite to call him 'Mr. Hughes.' You're young, Mary. You'll meet others when it's time."

Mary sighed, and Emma quietly wondered how she could keep such a promise. She wanted Mary to have an easier life in the city, or even reside in the country and become a farmer's wife. Farming required much labor, but Emma considered it a better life than the one she had with Josiah.

Emma quickly corrected herself. It was no use wishing for things she couldn't have. Her life might be set, but Mary's wasn't. When the time came, Emma determined to give Mary a chance to find a husband who wasn't as wild as these mountains, someone who wore shirts made of cloth and not leather. Someone who could read and write, and do more than simple arithmetic.

And someone besides George.

By the time George returned, his mood had improved and he eventually joined the men's conversation.

The trappers stayed for the entire day, only leaving when daylight no longer shone through the cracks in the window shutters. Armed with weapons against the dangers of the night, Josiah took the men back to their shelter.

Will was still smiling and laughing over some old joke he'd remembered, when Josiah bade the trappers goodnight. Over the course of the day, George had warmed up to Josiah somewhat, making Josiah a little more relieved that at least they might pass the winter sociably.

Upon returning to the lodge, Josiah found Emma tucking Mary into bed. He put the bar over the door as Mary's bedtime prayer filled his ears. Mary listed her usual requests, many of which concerned her family, but Josiah's ears perked upon a new addition:

"Please make Mr. Hughes like us more."

Josiah turned to watch his daughter praying with her eyes shut and her cheek cuddled against her buffalo robe. A doll's head peered above the covers, and Josiah knew another lay hidden in her arms. It had been a curious prayer request.

He pulled off his hunting shirt and stepped onto a thick bed of hides to wait for Emma. Throughout the day, he'd sensed something from her that made him uneasy. She was missing her former life too much.

When habit made Emma check the bar over the door, it prompted a smile from Josiah. He reclined on the fur, and unfolded a blanket as Emma crossed the room to his bed.

She paused when she noticed the hunting shirt on the table.

"Thought we could frolic tonight," he said, watching the way the firelight played with her yellow braids. She had them pinned up, but any moment now, Josiah knew she would let them down.

Completing her routine, Emma unfastened her braids, and let them fall about her shoulders. She climbed beneath his blanket, but didn't lay against him as he wanted.

Josiah pulled her close, but she pulled away.

"Please, Josiah, not now."

"You don't have to frolic, but you *will* nestle with me, Emma."

Her head moved against the buffalo robe, and he saw frustrated anger in her eyes.

"Don't you ever get tired of telling me what to do, instead of asking for my opinion? Don't you care if I agree?"

"Yer my wife."

"All the more reason to have agreement, Josiah."

Their voices remained low, for Mary slept and they didn't want to disturb her.

Tossing back the blanket he had spread for privacy, Josiah sat up in his buckskin trousers and looked at Emma. He was closer to the fire, his shadow cloaking her in semi-darkness as the flames crackled behind his back.

"I ain't wanting disagreement, Emma, but I ain't yer pa and you ain't yer ma. Maybe they did things different, but my decision is the only one that matters in this family."

Emma squeezed her eyes shut.

"I know what this is all about. Yer wanting to leave, ain't you?" When she didn't answer, Josiah grabbed her shoulder, jarring her around until she looked at him. He saw the pain in her eyes, and immediately released his grip. "Yer mine, Emma. I ain't giving you up."

"Couldn't we leave this place in the spring? Couldn't we live close to a settlement, and find happiness there? Does it have to be in these mountains? Must we stay here for the rest of our lives?"

"This is where we belong, Emma."

"No, this is where *you* belong."

The words stuck Josiah like a knife. He felt strength leave his body, and his eyes grew hot. "I thought I was yer people."

Emma's breath caught in a great, silent sob. She turned into the robes and smothered her weeping. "That's not fair, Josiah!"

"Not fair?" Josiah rubbed his face. "Yer wanting something I can't give-- how fair is that?"

"You could leave," said Emma, raising her head to him. "You could, if you really wanted to." Her cheeks shimmered with fresh tears, and it was more than Josiah could take. He lay beside her and enveloped her in a gentle embrace. "Please, Josiah," Emma's breath caressed his face, "please, leave these mountains."

"I can't. I'm trapped, Emma. The white man won't have me, and after all I've done, neither will the Blackfoot. Yer as trapped as I am, but you don't know it yet." Josiah pressed his lips to her hair. "I wish to God it didn't have to be this way."

Emma's grief came in choking sobs, and her face bathed his bare chest with tears.

Stroking her head, Josiah stared at the log walls. "We've been happy, haven't we, Emma? You've told me you were happy. Tell me again."

Weak hands pushed at his chest, until Josiah let go enough for her to breathe and gather her senses. "I'm happy," she said, her voice struggling to remain calm, "but I'd be happier with agreement."

"There you go again," Josiah groaned.

"Please," Emma touched his face and his breath caught, "I won't ask for anything but your consideration. Consider my opinion, before you make your final decision-- not only in this matter, but in others, as well."

Josiah hesitated. It didn't sound like an unreasonable request, though he knew deep down it might change things he wasn't sure he wanted changed. Like putting Emma in her place, and her staying there. She didn't often challenge him, and even now, with her face upturned and her lips moist with tears, she didn't look rebellious. Surely, hers was a reasonable request. If he complied, he could capture that inviting mouth and cozy beneath the blankets with her to his heart's content.

"I've already made my final decision about leaving, Emma." He had to warn her.

"Couldn't you put it off a little longer?"

"What fer? Nothing will change."

"I'm not ready to give it up, Josiah-- not yet. Please, give us time to talk this out. I promise I won't run away or leave you. I'll abide by your decision. Only, please, don't make it yet. I'm begging you."

"Yer only postponing heartache fer later, Emma."

She looked desperate. "Maybe, but I'm willing to risk it."

A rough finger trailed the contour of her cheek, and she sighed at his touch. He could not deny her this. His mind would never be changed, but at least Emma would be happy in the thought that it might.

"I'll consult yer opinion, but I ain't making any more of a promise than that." At least he had warned her. No one could say he hadn't.

"I want us to live in agreement, Josiah."

"I'd rather tussle in agreement," he said smilingly, "but I'll try to give in more often, when I think it'll make you happy. I ain't *trying* to make you cry."

Emma kissed his fingers. "Only give in when you agree."

Hearing this, Josiah couldn't help but laugh. "Yer a wonder, Emma. You want it yer way, but mine, as well."

"I want it *our* way."

It was an odd thing to say, and Josiah promised himself to ponder it later. Right now, he could only think of the tender caress on his face.

Physical contact usually had a way of calming Josiah, and this night proved to be no different. Emma nestled and kissed him, until she held captive his every sense. She didn't hold back her love, and wait for him to make good on any promises, or use herself as leverage to bend him to her will. Emma was his, and her love enveloped him with a certainty that balmied the hurts of the previous day.

Early morning nudged Josiah awake, for he instinctually sensed the approach of dawn even though he couldn't see the sky. Sometime during the night Emma had moved from his arms, so he gently drew her back into his embrace.

Emma nuzzled him, her eyelashes brushing his skin lightly as she stirred. "Is it morning?" she asked, opening her eyes long enough to check Mary. "Couldn't we sleep a little longer? I'm not ready to get up."

"Emma?" Josiah peered down at her to make sure she was still awake. "Does Mary know George and I aren't getting along too well? Does she know why?"

"I don't know." Unwrapping his arm from about her shoulders, Emma sat up, her face betraying deeper thought than Josiah had expected from such a simple question. "Why do you ask?"

Josiah shrugged. "I heard her mention George last night in her prayer, and wondered."

"Do you remember Mary's declaration to marry a white man and live among them?" asked Emma.

"Yes. What of it?"

"She's decided, or is in the process of deciding, that George will be her husband."

A burst of disbelieving laughter erupted from Josiah. The very thought made him laugh... until he saw the sober look on Emma's face. "She's only five, Emma. She can't be serious."

"She's too young to be serious," said Emma, "but it bothers me that she feels she has no choice. Mary's only seen two white men in her entire life, and thinks she has to choose between them."

Josiah stared at Emma, and he glimpsed a familiar question in her brown eyes. She made no request, but he could feel it all the same.

"There's always white men at rendezvous every year," he said quickly. "When she's old enough to be thinking about finding a husband, she can find one there."

Emma didn't answer, but didn't resist as he pulled her back into his arms.

"When it comes time, we'll make sure she has a choice. She'll meet as many white suitors as yer wanting."

He could hear Emma smile.

"There's always white men at rendezvous, so there won't be any need to go too far."

He figured Emma had been hoping for much more, but she kept silent.

"One thing's fer certain, I ain't wanting George for a son-in-law. That Indian hater ain't a suitable match for our little Mary. Now that George feels safer and has a shelter over his head, he's let yer being my wife sour our friendship. You should've seen him before, Emma. We was friends, or at least I thought we were."

"I don't think Mary entirely understands, Josiah, and I don't really want her to. Not now. We've got to make it through the winter, and she'll be around him. I don't want her to fear George or Will. Did you see the look in her eyes when you admitted you had been beaten by white men?"

"I saw." Josiah rubbed Emma's shoulder. "It frightened her."

"I don't want Mary to fear them," said Emma, looking at the small bed on the other side of the fireplace where Mary still slept. "After your warning, I don't think George will tease her. I heard him speak to Mary, and he tried to be kind and answer her questions."

"If he doesn't, he won't be seeing the inside of my lodge anytime soon." The thought of someone mistreating Mary angered Josiah. Then he recalled the many times he had treated her without regard or affection, and it felt like salt on an open wound. "Oh, Emma! That child is sure forgiving. The very morning I asked her to forgive me for not being a father to her, she forgave me. Just like that. She didn't even hold a grudge. I'll make it up to her, Emma. I'll make sure she has as many suitors as she wants. I just ain't too sure them white men will be wanting her the way they should. They look down on Indian women, Emma; they call 'em all squaws, whether she beds a man or not."

Emma had no answer, but he could tell it hadn't changed her mind. The way things stood right now, Mary's best chance at finding a Christian husband would be in the white man's world.

After breakfast, Josiah announced he would go see how the two men up the mountain had fared through the night. Truth was, he wanted to get out of the lodge and stretch his legs. He was unused to remaining indoors for long periods of time, and even when he wintered in hide lodges, he always moved about as much as he could to prevent boredom.

It surprised no one when Mary asked to go with him. Though Emma had hoped to do some schooling, Emma had consented and now the child trailed behind him in the snow.

"Are yer feet hurting you, Mary?" Josiah slowed his pace, seeing her struggle more than usual.

Mary looked at him, her dark eyes hesitant. "No, Pa."

"Yer lagging too far behind, so something's wrong." Josiah stepped across the snow to his daughter. She looked so small standing before him in her blankets. "If you was having a problem, you'd tell me, wouldn't you?"

Mary didn't answer, her stoic face giving him concern.

"Yer my daughter, and when you need something, I'll do my best to provide it. Do you understand?"

Mary nodded "yes," though she remained quietly pensive.

"Do yer feet hurt, Mary?"

No response.

"Sit down on that rock," said Josiah, guiding her to a snow covered stone; he brushed it clear, then lifted Mary onto its rugged surface. Strips of cloth kept her from losing her moccasins in the snow, and Josiah undid one foot to see if he could find anything wrong. Inside her tiny moccasins, Josiah discovered Mary's foot constricted by the leather. "These are too small fer you. You've outgrown them." He looked at Mary. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Mary brushed a small hand across her nose and sniffed. "I do not want to go back to the village."

"Who said you were?"

"If I make work for you, you will send me back?"

Mary gazed at him fearfully, and Josiah suddenly realized he had never given Mary any assurances that her stay with him would be permanent.

Josiah cupped her chin in his large hand. "Yer staying with me, even if I have to fashion you a pair of moccasins every new moon. I haven't done right by you in the past, but God help me if I haven't changed. When yer hurting, I want to know. When yer needing something, don't be fearful to tell me or yer ma."

Mary bit her lip, a habit she must've picked up from Emma, for Emma sometimes did that when a request was coming.

"What is it, Mary?"

"I would like snowshoes," she said in a quiet voice. "Is it too much work?"

"No, not if it's fer you," said Josiah, scooping up his daughter and letting her stay in his arms above the snow. She hugged him about the neck, her face sweet with a wide grin. All those years of staying away and not taking responsibility for this child were forever lost. He hadn't been there for her as a baby, or caught her when she took her first steps.

But Josiah knew the future would be different. Whatever came, he would be there for Mary.

"Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."

~ Ephesians 6:4 ~

Chapter Seventeen

Books, Teachers, and other Unnecessary Things

1837, Southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not... Recompense to no man evil for evil... If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men."

~ Romans 12:14, 17, 18 ~

Outside the trappers' shelter, Josiah put Mary down, having carried her from the lodge a short distance up the mountain.

"Hello in the shelter," Josiah called out as he bent to untie his snowshoes. When no one answered, Josiah frowned. Setting his snowshoes by the entrance, Josiah lifted his rifle, pointing it inside the shelter warily. He could see no signs of trouble, but also no signs of Will and George. "Mary git inside and stay there."

Mary obeyed, her face sober with concern. "Where are they, Pa?"

"I ain't knowing, but I aim to find out. With Will's leg the way it is, they couldn't have got far."

"Best say limb, Pa."

Josiah smiled. He'd forgotten about that. "Keep out of sight until I git back, Cub, and keep yer pistol handy."

After retying his snowshoes, Josiah followed the tracks leading farther up the slope, winding through the trees and rocks. There were three footprints, casting no doubt in Josiah's mind who had made them. By the age of the tracks, Will and George must not be too far ahead.

Before long, Josiah heard the indistinct sounds of two men, their voices almost entirely swallowed by the wind. Flintlock in hand, Josiah ventured closer, not betraying his presence until sure of the situation. Many times as a boy, his pa had scolded him for coming in unawares on a situation; caution was better than blind assumption, and a man needed to keep his guard up, if he wanted to live. Wild animals and unfriendly Indians were just two of the dangers, either of which could put a man under the ground if he wasn't careful.

Keeping himself concealed, Josiah stealthily followed the sounds.

In a small clearing up ahead, he found George leaning against a rock, the young man looking tired and somewhat bored. George said something, and a voice behind the rock answered.

With a grin, Josiah stepped from his cover, allowing George to see him for the first time. George waved, and said something to the rock. Will's head appeared from around the rock, confirming Josiah's guess. They had come here so Will could relieve himself. As far as Josiah was concerned, this was a good sign. Until now, Will had kept to the shelter, letting George clean up after his wounded partner.

"I'll be done shortly," said Will, giving Josiah a quick wave before disappearing again.

"How deep into Blackfoot country are we, Josiah?" asked George, as the two men waited for Will.

"Deep enough to git into mischief if they find us. Why? Are you gitting scared?"

George straightened a little. "I only wanted to know how cautious I should be, that's all. Will said of all the Indians, the Blackfoot are the most dangerous." There was a trace of disbelief in George's voice, as though he hoped Josiah would disagree.

"I reckon that's true enough," said Josiah. "They're a strong people, and fear little."

"But they aren't here presently?" asked George, obviously trying to grasp at some kind of hope. "Besides you and your family, we haven't seen anyone in quite a while."

"There ain't any buffaler around, so I expect there ain't much Blackfoot, either. But that don't mean we can throw caution to the wind."

"I know," sighed George, lifting his rifle in answer to the advice he must've sensed coming. "Don't go anywhere without a loaded weapon or a buffalo robe. I brought the weapon, but left behind the robe; we're only a short distance from the shelter."

"Yer catching on," grinned Josiah.

"I'm ready to leave," Will called from around the rock. George went to help up his friend, and Josiah made himself useful by assisting in their return to the shelter.

"Sure is good to get outside," said Will, his breath coming in huffs as he exerted himself. The one leg did its best to help, though when it couldn't keep up with Josiah and George's pace, it finally dragged behind, useless.

"We're coming, Mary, so don't you go shooting us!" Josiah called to the shelter.

Mary appeared in the entrance, then quickly backed away when she saw they were preparing to come inside.

"In all my days, I've never seen a small girl with a weapon," Will muttered, more to himself than to anyone else.

"She's an odd one, all right," said George. "My journal is fast filling with things I'm sure no one will ever believe to be true." He glanced at Josiah as they lowered Will to the ground. "This is unlike anything I've ever experienced in my life."

"Or ever likely to," said Will, pulling himself inside with his arms. "George is an educated man, so he's led a sheltered life." Will tossed a smile over his shoulder at Josiah. "I reckon just stepping outside this lodge holds more excitement for him than any day back in civilization."

"That's probably true," George said in a low chuckle, as he followed after Will and Josiah. George put away his snowshoes, but looked up in startled surprise when one of the nearby animal skins moved. "Oh, it's you, Mary! Make some noise so I know you're there!"

"She takes after her pa," said Will, watching Mary cross the room to sit beside Josiah. "One of these days, you'll have to teach me some of your stealth."

"You can't sneak up on anything, dragging that leg," said George, reminding Will of the obvious.

Will glared at George. "You'd do better to keep that nose in one of your books."

"You have books?" Mary's eyes widened with wonder. "We have a book. We have a Bible."

"So does George," Will said, evidently glad to change the subject. "Why don't you show her your books, George?" With a chuckle, Will turned to face Mary and Josiah, as if to let them in on a private joke. "This crazy man brought books when he came to the mountains! Can you believe it? Books! Not small volumes, either, but thick heavy ones. What's the good of leaving civilization behind, if you bring such unnecessary things with you?"

Mary blinked at Will, her expression one of bewilderment. "You do not like books?" she asked, her head cocked to one side in puzzlement. She was obviously having trouble figuring out this white man.

"I've never had much use for them," said Will, shaking his head in disdain. "Education breaks a man's spirit, right, Josiah?"

Josiah harrumphed, careful not to agree or disagree with Will. Such things were beyond his understanding, and as George pulled out three heavy books, intimidation sat heavy in Josiah's soul. What were in those books? White man's ideas, most likely, but what ideas? What did they say that someone took the trouble of putting them down into those scratches he had heard Emma say were letters.

Mary shared Josiah's curiosity, for she eagerly moved beside George to peer at the books.

"This one is a Bible, of course," said George, setting aside the volume, "and this is the only volume of Sir William Blackstone's that survived theft; the other three were on my pack mule when it was stolen. Such a shame." George sighed, opening the book. "This set cost me a small fortune in Massachusetts."

"Massachusetts, is it?" Will leaned back with a triumphant gleam in his eye. "I've never been able to get you to tell me where you come from, George. I reckon this is as close to it as you've ever gotten."

"There's not much to tell," George shrugged, letting Mary look over his arm at the open book.

"I know he comes from money," Will said, turning to Josiah in confidence. "When I met him in St. Louis, he wore the clothing of a real gentleman."

"Why'd he join up with you, and not some trapping expedition?" asked Josiah, for Will seemed in the mood for talk.

"He was too green for anyone to take a chance on him," said Will, watching Mary point to something in the book. "I was the only one willing."

"Then why didn't *you* join a trapping party?"

"I wanted to come farther North than most felt comfortable," laughed Will. "I reckon the joke's on me, though, for I sure as--" Will crimsoned, and Josiah knew Will had just caught himself before unleashing an expletive. "I didn't intend to land smack dab in Blackfoot country, that's for sure."

"S-she... w-who..." Mary sounded out the words on the open page while George stared in muted wonderment.

"She who holds the crown in her own right," George finished, "... such a one has the same powers, prerogatives, rights, dignities, and duties, as if she had been a king." George looked at Mary. "You can read? Who taught you?"

"Ma," Mary grinned proudly. "But I can only read small words. I am not good like you yet."

"But you intend to be?" The smile on George's mouth looked strained. He didn't seem amused at Mary's ability to understand letters. "Few races possess the spark of higher understanding needed for true comprehension; everything else is but a parlor trick and rote memorization."

"You be nice to the child," said Will, his tone hardening as he addressed George. "You'd better pray our guests didn't understand what you said, or you'll be wishing you never left Massachusetts."

George slammed the book shut, and Mary disappointedly watched him put it away.

"Mary," Josiah beckoned the girl to leave George's side, and she promptly obeyed.

Still glaring at Will, George folded his arms. "If the meat is dry, you may take your half now, Josiah."

"Thanks, I might just do that." Josiah raised his arm to let Mary hide against his hunting shirt. He had caught enough of George's insult to know what had been said; strangely, it pleased Josiah that George had been impressed enough with Mary's reading, that he had felt the need to lessen her accomplishment. Hugging Mary with one arm, Josiah grinned. "My Emma is real smart. She can read and write, and has been teaching Mary all she knows. I'm proud of them both."

"You've every right to be," said Will, sounding a bit uncomfortable in the wake of George's statement. "Education improves a body's spirit."

Mary harrumphed. Not long ago, Will had voiced a very different opinion.

Chuckling in chagrined embarrassment, Will laughed at himself with the good humor of an easygoing man.

An involuntary smile flashed across George's face, fleeting and almost unnoticeable except to Josiah's watchful eye. That friendly feeling Josiah had sensed when first meeting George, slowly

resurfaced. That feeling that George liked Josiah, and even Mary, though Josiah saw flashes of resistance every now and again.

"She's a bright child," Will smiled at the girl fondly, his words drawing Josiah back into the conversation. "With smarts like hers, she'll learn to read in no time at all."

A frown creased George's forehead, and Josiah guessed George's thoughts were troubling him again.

"I reckon we'd best git back to Emma," said Josiah, readying to leave the trappers' lodge. "Thanks fer showing Mary yer books, George. I reckon you must be a very learned man to understand all them words."

The sincerity of Josiah's compliment made George appear uncomfortable. It gave Josiah all the push he needed to speak further.

"Emma has a lot to do, and Mary's lessons sometimes get put aside. I don't suppose" -- Josiah grinned -- "I don't suppose I could pay you to give Mary some schooling? I know she'd like it, and since you don't have much else to do, maybe you'll give it thought."

"He'll think on it," said Will.

George stiffened at his partner's promise.

"I ain't wanting you to be pushed into anything, George. If yer willing, then I'll pay what you reckon is fair fer such things. You think it over, and let me know what you decide."

"He'll have an answer for you, tomorrow," said Will.

George said nothing to contradict Will, though by his firmly set jaw, Josiah knew George wasn't happy.

Taking half of the dried elk meat, Josiah bundled it into a blanket wrapped about Mary. He crawled outside, put on his snowshoes, and then lifted Mary into his arms as she held the meat. Until he made Mary some snowshoes of her own, he wouldn't let her walk in the snow.

Jostling a flintlock in one arm, and Mary in the other, Josiah made his way down the mountain to the small snug lodge waiting for them both.

Mary grinned excitedly. "Will I git some schooling, Pa? Proper schooling?"

"We'll have to see about that." Josiah hated to get Mary's hopes up too high. "I ain't thinking it's very likely, so don't you go setting yer sights on something you can't reach."

"Can we have elk jerky for supper, Pa?" Mary hugged the dried meat in her arms. "It sure smells good, don't it?"

"It sure does," Josiah grinned proudly. His little girl was sounding more like him, with every passing day.

"You asked Mr. Hughes to *what*?" Emma could hardly believe her ears. "After what he said to Mary, you asked him to tutor her? I don't care if he accepts. I won't allow it, Josiah, I simply won't allow it."

The pleased look on Josiah's face vanished a little and Emma suddenly wished she hadn't sounded so adamant. It might only serve to make Josiah more stubborn. He gnawed at the elk jerky, his face a wall of decided opposition. Emma sighed heavily. As she feared, Josiah had made up his mind, and he had done it without her.

"Mary, git ready fer bed," said Josiah. "Yer ma and I have some talking to do."

"Can I listen?" asked Mary.

"No." Josiah stood up from the buffalo robes in one lithe motion. His dark eyes fastened on Emma. Without his having to say it, Emma knew he was angry. "I'm going out. Call me when Mary's sleeping." Josiah grabbed his bearskin coat, flintlock rifle, and then disappeared out the cabin door without a word more.

Silently, Mary finished her meal while Emma prepared the girl's small bed. Then, after saying a prayer and exchanging goodnight kisses, Emma gathered her blanket shawl, and went outside.

Clouds covered the moon, forcing Emma to wait for her eyes to adjust to the darkness before she could look for Josiah.

A slight movement beside the cabin gave away his presence. Emma drew the shawl around her shoulders and waited for him to speak. Rifle resting in his arms, Josiah leaned against the logs, his face hidden in darkness.

"I thought you'd be happy to hear my news," said Josiah. The edge in his voice couldn't be missed. "I thought it'd please you, but I reckon I was wrong." Josiah snorted, and Emma found herself wishing for one of his familiar harrumphs.

"You never asked me," said Emma, her face growing warm in spite of the biting cold. "You made Mr. Hughes your offer, without even asking me if it was all right."

"All right?" Josiah's form straightened. "I don't have to ask. My gitting yer agreement is only a favor, but I don't have to consult you fer anything."

"Then you don't care what I think?"

"Of course I care." Josiah moved forward, but Emma couldn't help herself and took a quick step back. He stopped, the sound of his breath heavy in the night air. "I care what you think, Emma, or we wouldn't be out here talking."

"But you're only talking, as a favor to me."

"Woman, git it through that stubborn head of yers, once and fer all-- I'm yer husband and you'll do what I say."

"I wish you'd stop turning this into a tug of war, Josiah. I'm not trying to usurp your authority."

"Then don't speak any more of agreement." Josiah's voice cut through the air, and Emma felt the heat of his breath on her face, even though distance separated them. "You and me don't come from the same places, and we don't see everything eye to eye. I understand that. But it don't change the fact that we're man and wife."

"All I'm asking for is agreement."

"No, yer asking fer much more." Josiah leaned his shoulder against the wall of the cabin. "Yer wanting me to have to come to you, afore I make any decisions at all. And some decisions, I ain't wanting any help making."

They both knew what he spoke of. Civilization, and leaving these mountains.

"If you don't want or value my opinion, then you must not want or value *me*."

"I never said that, Emma, and you know it."

"I have a mind," said Emma, her voice raising as she spoke, "and I have thoughts, thoughts just as big and every bit as important as yours."

"Yer real smart. I never said you weren't."

"But you don't allow me to express them-- not really. You don't allow me to have opinions that differ from your own. You only put up with me, and try to cajole me with soft touches and consoling promises. You don't listen to what I have to say."

"I keep my word. I haven't promised you anything, that I haven't kept."

"I'm not saying you have." Emma sighed heavily. The pain between her eyes was getting worse, and this talk wasn't helping. "Stop putting up with me, Josiah. Get my agreement, even if it means having to go to all lot of trouble to do it. Care enough what I think, that you're willing to fight me to find agreement-- that common ground for us to live in peace together. Don't just ask me what I think and then pass over me like I didn't matter."

"Yer my wife, of course you matter."

"Then fight me, Josiah."

"What do you think I'm doing?"

"Why did you ask Mr. Hughes to be Mary's teacher?"

Josiah laughed wearily. "That's the first time you've asked me why, all night long. I told you my news, and you didn't pause to ask why, you just started in on yer disagreement."

"I did?" Emma struggled to remember. "*Why* did you, Josiah?"

"You mean, you care what I think? Even though I'm just yer husband?"

"Please, don't tease me, Josiah. Not now."

"I reckon I had my reasons," Josiah's shoulders shrugged, and Emma sensed he was weighing his willingness to explain his actions against that of what her reaction might be. "I thought it'd do George some good."

"Why?"

"Because I have a hunch he likes me and Mary, even though we ain't all white like he is; because he saw Mary was smart, and it shook him up; because I don't like thinking that George can't change-- that's why."

"Those sound like good reasons," said Emma. "Why didn't you tell me those, in the first place?"

"You never asked."

"Maybe I didn't, but you kept silent because you didn't want to have to explain yourself. You didn't want the trouble of a disagreement."

"This *is* trouble, Emma, no matter what you call it, this disagreement is trouble."

"Do you love me, Josiah?"

Emma heard his mouth immediately open, and then close without an audible response. "Yer aiming to trap me," he said finally.

"It's not a trap, I promise. Do you love me?"

"You know I do."

"Then fight for my agreement."

Josiah groaned. "Yer asking me to go to a lot of trouble, and if I don't, yer going to say I don't love you. If this ain't an example of female thinking, I don't know what is!"

"But, you *do* love me."

"Yes, I love you."

"Then I assume you must care what I think."

"We've already been over this ground, Emma. I can see our tracks, plain as anything."

"I realize we're very different, Josiah, but our marriage is worth some trouble, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I reckon..." Josiah hesitated, and Emma knew he felt unsure of his footing. "If I ask yer opinion, though, you'll be wanting to fight until we find some kind of agreement."

"No, I'd want a reasonable, logical discussion."

Josiah chuckled grimly. "Like the one we're having now?"

"Our agreement matters, doesn't it, Josiah?"

"I ain't knowing, Emma." Josiah sounded frustrated. "I wasn't raised to care too much what a woman thought outside of the bed. Her job was to give pleasure at night, and keep camp during the day. Outside of her willingness to do those things, it didn't matter what else she thought. I can tell you one thing, this ain't at all the way my parents lived."

Emma was silent. "Your pa beat Cora, didn't he?"

"Yes, he beat her." A consoling tone melted into Josiah's voice. "Don't be afeared, Emma; if I agreed with him on such things, I would've beat you long ago." Josiah exhaled, pushing away from the wall with his shoulder. "I reckon I love you enough to get into a fight" -- he laughed -- "a spirited discussion, every once in a while. I'll concede that ground, but it doesn't mean if we can't come to terms, I won't do what I think is best. If that ain't to yer liking, speak up."

"That sounds reasonable, Josiah."

"It does, does it? It doesn't sound to you like I'm rolling over and playing dead, just to please my wife?"

"No."

"Or that I've a wide yellow stripe going down my back, because I'm yellin'? A coward, afeared of only a single woman?"

Emma smothered a smile. "I don't think it sounds that way at all."

"You don't, huh?"

"No, I don't."

Josiah leaned forward, until Emma found her back against the rough hewn logs of the cabin, his face inches from hers. "I ain't afraid of a fight, Emma, but I *am* afraid of losing to you. I've fought off grizzlies, and enemy bound on lifting my scalp, but the biggest threat I've ever faced is standing right here in front of me." A large calloused hand touched her cheek, and Emma heard

him swallow hard. "I ain't surrendering my better judgment to no woman, if even that woman is you. Do you understand me, Emma?"

Emma didn't know what to say, her only thought that his lingering hand felt warm and inviting.

"Do you understand?" Josiah pressed her, until she murmured finally,

"I understand." Emma didn't know if that was quite true. She hoped she understood Josiah, and she sensed his fear of more change. But the entire country was changing, and Josiah could no more stop that, than he could the kiss that swept her firmly into his arms and kept her there. In that kiss, she felt his desperation, that crazy frantic desperation of clinging onto something that made sense when other things no longer did. She knew he didn't want to need her, to need her love or her good opinion, and yet he needed them both. He needed her in so many ways, Emma began to realize the full extent of the hold she had on Josiah.

A wedge of light widened on the snow as the cabin's window quietly opened. Josiah ignored the interruption by smothering Emma more passionately than before, but Emma knew who craned her neck out the window, watching them embrace.

"Mary," Emma managed to break free long enough to speak, "go back to bed like a good girl."

"What about Mr. Hughes?" asked Mary.

Josiah groaned, his breath steadying as he drew his mouth away from Emma's. "What about him?"

"Can he be my teacher?"

"It's all right with me, but only if it's all right with yer ma."

Mary waited for an answer, but Emma could only kiss and hug Josiah. He was trying.

After breakfast the next morning, Mary couldn't sit still, even though Emma did her best by reviewing Mary's alphabet and teaching her some new words from the Bible. But nothing could distract Mary for long. Her head kept bobbing up, looking to the door expectantly at the smallest sound of someone approaching the cabin.

"It ain't likely he'll come," said Josiah, slanting Mary a warning glance over the work in his lap. "I told you not to set yer sights too high, remember?"

Sighing heavily, Mary sat down beside Josiah and watched him tear apart an old pair of his moccasins. The toughened leather soles would be reused to form new shoes for Mary.

Something moved outside the cabin, attracting Mary's immediate attention. She hopped to her feet and ran to the door, stopping only because she couldn't open the door by herself. "Ma!" Mary looked at Emma pleadingly.

"There's nothing out there but wild animals and the wind, Little One."

"Ma, I heard something! It is Mr. Hughes, I know it is!"

"Yer letting wishfulness git in the way of yer thinking, Mary." Josiah expelled a groan as Emma opened the door. They had been through this several times that morning, and Emma understood Josiah's skepticism. The longer it took for George to come with his answer, the more likely his answer would be "no."

Upon finding no one at their door, Mary quietly returned to Josiah's side to watch him work.

Josiah looked at Mary out of the corner of his eye. "One day, we'll find you another teacher. Fer now, you'll have to make due with yer ma. Ma's a good, fine woman, so you've got nothing to gripe about."

"I ain't griping, Pa." Mary stared at the old moccasins in Josiah's lap. "He did not come because I am Blackfoot?" The words fell like heavy stones to the floor, Mary's voice soft with feeling and heartfelt disappointment. Emma saw understanding dawning in Mary's face, and wished she could've shielded Mary from the truth. The world would come soon enough, with all its trials and prejudices. The best thing about these mountains were their remoteness, and Emma wished they had been remote enough to keep Mary from the truth a little longer.

Josiah patted Mary's head. "Not all white people are the same, so don't you go thinking they are. Look at yer ma. She ain't got a drop of Indian blood in her, and it don't make any difference to us, does it?"

Mary shook her head "no," a smile creeping onto her small mouth. Something moved outside the door, but this time, Mary remained where she was. Then Emma saw Mary's nose sniff the air, and Mary's features suddenly came to life with surprise. "Pa, it is him!"

Josiah's back straightened, his face toward the door. No one had knocked, and Emma thought Mary must surely be mistaken.

"I can smell him," said Josiah. "He ain't making much noise, though. I reckon he's just standing there in the snow, thinking-- that, or he's trying to listen." Putting aside the moccasins, Josiah got to his feet and moved toward the door. "Go sit with yer ma, Mary."

"But, Pa--"

"Do as I say." Josiah gave Mary a commanding look, and the girl obeyed.

Emma gathered Mary onto her lap, both watching Josiah open the door.

Snow swirled inside, and Josiah stood staring at the figure before him. "Are you coming in?"

The figure moved forward, into the cabin and into the warm light of the fireplace.

"Good day, ma'am," said George, nodding to Emma as Josiah shut out the cold by closing the door. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything. I came to speak with Josiah."

"You ain't interrupting," said Josiah, motioning George to take a seat on the floor. "Best take off yer capote first, or you'll get to sweating."

After unbinding his snowshoes and removing his coat, George sat down while Josiah resumed his work.

"I'm fashioning Mary some moccasins," said Josiah, answering the unasked question in George's face. "Next, I'll be making little girl sized snowshoes." Josiah grinned, saw that George didn't smile, and bowed his head again to work. "What's on yer mind, George, that you'll stand in the snow fer so long?"

"It hasn't been long," said George. Then his mouth opened in surprise. "How long have you known?"

"Long enough to know yer trying to make up yer mind about something." Josiah slanted George a knowing look, and the young man fell silent. "Have you given any thought to my offer?"

"I have." George stared at the floor. "I'll teach your daughter."

Josiah's eyes narrowed and the work in his lap came to a stop. "You don't have to, George. I ain't trying to pressure you."

George smiled wanly. "But you are. I owe you, Josiah. I owe you my life, as well as Will's. I won't accept payment for teaching your little girl, and I think you realize that, or you wouldn't have asked."

"I don't say things I don't mean," Josiah said evenly. "If I said I'd pay you, then I meant it."

"That may be, but I can't accept." George glanced at Emma and Mary, sitting on the buffalo robes not far from where he spoke with Josiah. "I was taught to pay my debts, and that's what I intend to do."

"Very well." Josiah said nothing more, only "very well," and resumed his work.

"I can't believe I'm here." George cast Emma and Mary another awkward glance as he spoke. He appeared nervous. "This isn't like me at all."

"I thought you said you always pay yer debts," said Josiah, not bothering to look up from the moccasin working in his broad hands.

"I pay them," said George, "but I've never before owed so much to someone... someone like you. If you knew my family, you'd understand how difficult this situation is for me."

"It ain't too easy fer us, either," Josiah said dryly.

"No, you don't understand," the frustration in George's voice was building, "you don't know me. You don't know my father. If he knew I was here, speaking with you as an equal, he'd disown me outright. My father isn't the kind of man people often disobey."

"Yer pa ain't here."

"No, he isn't," George said a little hopefully.

"If yer willing to give Mary some reading and writing lessons, we won't tell him. I give you my word."

This prompted a smile from George. "Thank you, but I don't think it'd help."

He hadn't said it outright, but Emma understood what George had meant. His father would never accept the word of someone like Josiah.

"What he don't know, won't hurt him." Josiah turned the leather between his fingers. "I reckon it don't matter much where a man comes from; it's what he does and how he lives that speaks the loudest. My own pa had his faults, but it doesn't mean I have to follow in his footsteps and repeat them."

George looked at Josiah with an open, forthright stare. "Are you sure you want me to teach Mary? You don't know me, Josiah, not really. If you did, you wouldn't want me as her teacher."

"Do you mean to tease her and make her feel poorly for who she is?"

"No, I don't."

"Then we understand each other." Josiah's face held a warning that anyone could read clearly. Don't hurt Mary.

George nodded in silent agreement.

"Emma, you have anything to say?" asked Josiah. "Anything here change yer agreement about OUR decision?"

From the great deal of emphasis in Josiah's question, Emma knew he took great delight in asking it. Doing her best to maintain composure, Emma tried to ignore the wide mouthed grin of her husband. Although tempted to ask about George's family, and father, Emma left her curiosity unanswered. Josiah hadn't asked, so neither would she. "How much education have you had, Mr. Hughes?"

"As much as my health and constitution would allow," George said with a smile. "My education was interrupted when I left Massachusetts, but when I return, I intend to finish what I started and earn my degree."

"And what would your degree be in?"

"Law. I'm a student at Harvard Law School."

The name sounded vaguely familiar, and when Emma remembered her American history, it came to her. The sixth President of the United States, John Quincy Adams, had been a graduate of Harvard, and had later been a student of the law before entering his political career.

Such were the caliber of men who came from Harvard College.

This was no backwards trapper sitting at their hearth, but a future lawyer who would one day interpret the law for others. Men such as these were judges and senators, men with influence to shape a nation. Looking at George, Emma frankly didn't feel the young man was up to the task.

"Why was your education interrupted?" asked Emma.

George cast his gaze to the ground, his brow furrowing. "I'd rather not say, ma'am. Things were becoming difficult there, and I needed to think."

"Isn't college an excellent place to think?"

"For some."

"Sounds to me," Josiah put in, "you ran away from school."

When George remained silent, Josiah had his answer.

"I'll go back and finish," George said in a low, steady voice that spoke of resolve. "I'll show them I'm not afraid."

"Afraid of what?" asked Mary.

The question shook George from his thoughts, for when he looked up to see Mary staring at him so wonderingly, he looked embarrassed to have spoken his mind out loud. "I'll be by tomorrow, to give your first lesson." George turned to Emma. "Would late morning be all right?"

The girl on Emma's lap squirmed happily. "That would be fine," said Emma, stilling Mary with a hug. "I'm sure she's eagerly looking forward to it."

With a half smile, George put on his snowshoes, collected his capote and rifle, and then headed out the door.

"What a strange man," said Emma, releasing Mary as the child let out an excited war whoop. "Little One, young ladies simply do not do that."

Mary grinned.

"I reckon you never guessed you had a lawyer sitting in yer lodge, did you, Em?" Josiah looked at her with merriment. "Men of all kinds come to the mountains-- some to find their fortunes,

some to run away from their lives back East. I wonder if what George is running away from, has come along for the ride."

"I [God] will bring ... [George] by a way that [he] knew not; I will lead [him] in paths that [he has] not known: I will make darkness light before [him], and crooked things straight."
~ Isaiah 42:16 ~

Chapter Eighteen
Friendship

1837, Southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart: so doth the sweetness of a man's friend by hearty counsel."

~ Proverbs 27:9 ~

It seemed physically impossible for Mary to sit still for more than two minutes at a time. She swallowed her supper without chewing, and every time Emma told Mary to do something, Emma had to repeat herself before Mary listened.

"Will he bring books?" asked Mary, as she finally stoked the fireplace with more wood as Emma had asked. "Will Mr. Hughes bring books?"

"I don't know, Mary, but I wish you'd calm down." Emma glanced at Josiah. He worked cross-legged on the buffalo robes with Mary's moccasins, busily saying nothing. Emma wished he'd speak up, and answer some of Mary's questions.

"Can he be my friend, Ma? Do you think he will be my friend?"

"I don't know, Mary. Now, please, settle down. Mr. Hughes only agreed to be your teacher while he's here, in the mountains."

"I know, Ma." Mary squatted beside the fireplace, her eyes glittering with hopefulness. "I wish he would be my friend. I surely do want one, Ma."

"I'm your friend, aren't I, Little One?" Emma stroked Mary's braid as they both enjoyed the warmth of the hearth. Mary had been speaking much of friends that evening, and ever since, Josiah had been increasingly silent. "You have two friends right here. Your pa and me. And then there's your grandmother, and your great-grandpap."

"But," Mary sighed dully, "they are family."

"That doesn't mean they can't also be friends."

"But I want a real one," said Mary, wistfully dropping onto the buffalo robes and then hugging her knees to her chest. "I want a real friend, Ma, one who is not my family. I am tired of being the only one who does not have a friend."

"Mary, if you can't count family, then I'm the same as you. I don't have anyone but you and Josiah."

"But," Mary looked up at her wistfully, "you had friends in... where you came from, in the white man's world."

"I came from Indiana," said Emma, "but I had very few real friends."

"Why?" Mary gazed at her in bewilderment.

"I was different." Emma tried to sound as though it didn't matter, but knew she failed. The strained sound of her own voice told her it had mattered, and still did. "Without my spectacles, I can't see very far, and when I was little, the other children teased me. I suppose it made me shy when I grew up, for I never possessed the happy ability to make new friends easily."

"I will never tease you for that, Ma. Besides, you ain't so very blind. There was worse in our village than you."

"Thank you, Mary."

Even though he didn't look up, Emma knew Josiah listened.

"You are my friend, Ma, but I still want a real friend. Someone who will like me, even though I am not the same as them."

Opening her arms wide, Emma invited Mary to her side. When the girl came without hesitation, with a smile and a hug in return, Emma said nothing more. She only hugged Mary, quietly wishing the girl didn't so completely understand what it was like to be different.

"Ma?" Mary's voice sounded a bit sleepy now, cuddled in Emma's arms. "When I marry, will my husband be my friend, or will I feel the same?"

"The same?" Emma peered down at Mary, and noticed the girl's eyes growing heavy with sleep. "What do you mean, Mary?"

"Will I still want a friend, or will he be my friend, because he is my husband?" It was a very big question for such a small child.

"I believe," said Emma, trying to choose her words carefully, "if you love someone enough to marry him, then he'd better be your friend, first. Don't you think? Or else your days will be long, and the nights even longer."

"I want a friend, Ma," Mary said yawning, "even more than I want a husband."

"Well," Emma smiled, "since you're only nearing six year old, I should hope so." She kissed Mary's cheek. "You're still very young, so there's plenty of time for both. Come, it's bedtime."

Stretching her arms high above her head, Mary yawned. "I am not tired."

"Then you can lay down until you are. Come, Little One, before you fall asleep, and I have to carry you." Emma lightly tickled Mary, and Mary's eyes brightened a moment before closing.

"I'll take her," said Josiah. He set aside the moccasins, got to his feet, then lifted the tired girl onto her bed.

Sleepily, Mary looked about for Emma. "I want Ma."

"I'm coming," said Emma, crawling from the robes to Mary's small bed. She heard Mary's prayer, gave and received a goodnight kiss, then tucked the child in with one last hug.

Mary ended her protest with a reluctant yawn. "I want to stay awake."

"Goodnight, Mary." Emma kissed her daughter, smiling when Mary's eyes closed and remained shut. Such a dear child, Emma thought, as she returned to the robes.

Josiah resumed his work on the small pair of moccasins, but scooted over to make room for Emma to lay down.

She touched his buckskins, resting her hand on his knee. "You've been awfully quiet, tonight."

Josiah grunted. "She's in for an awful lot of heartbreak, Emma." Emma followed Josiah's gaze to their sleeping daughter. "What's the point of birthing in life, when you know life will only bring it pain?"

"There's more to life than pain, Josiah."

He harrumphed. "I reckon, but it sure is a big part of living."

Folding her legs beneath her, Emma sat up to look into Josiah's face as he bent over his work. "What's wrong? You were completely silent while Mary talked of wanting a friend."

"If I ask you a question, Emma, will you answer it truthfully?"

"I'm not in the habit of lying, Josiah."

"I ain't saying you are. I just want to know something. Something important. Mary may not want to count family among her friends, but I do." He leveled his eyes with Emma's. "Am I yer friend?"

"Of course you are."

"Am I good friend?"

Emma gazed at Josiah, not knowing whether to laugh.

"Mary wanted to know if her future husband would also be her friend, and it got me to thinking." Josiah's dark eyes searched Emma's face. "I got to wondering if I'm as good a friend to you, as you are to me. I ain't thinking so much of myself to say that I am, only that I hope I am."

The quick assurance on Emma's tongue faltered, his words taking her by surprise. Josiah wasn't in the habit of humbling himself before her like this.

"I want to know," he said, touching the hand resting on his knee. "Tell me, Emma. Am I a good friend to you?"

"You are," Emma finally managed.

He pierced her with his stare. "Yer not just saying that to please me, are you?"

Emma leaned into him, touching her lips to his cheek. "You are my dearest friend, Josiah."

"Even after all that's passed between us?"

"Yes."

He gently squeezed her hand. "Thanks, Em."

When he picked up the small moccasins, Emma lay down to watch him work. Firelight flickered against his features, betraying the dampness hiding in the corners of his eyes. She touched Josiah's wrist, and he paused to look at her.

"I'll join you in a bit," his voice hushed against the quietness of the cabin. "I want to get these finished up fer Mary, so she can wear them tomorrow."

"Josiah?"

"Go to sleep, Emma. I'll lay down when I'm done."

"I love you, Josiah. I'll love you and will be your friend for as long as I live."

"You will?" He quickly brushed something wet from his eye. "Do me a favor, Emma, and go to sleep."

"Josiah, what's wrong?" She sat up again, and he exhaled his annoyance even though his arm tugged her close.

"We're both knowing I don't deserve you, Emma. I got a better wife than I should, and I've never had a better friend than you."

"But what, Josiah?"

He turned to look at Mary, sleeping with the head of one of her dolls resting against her cheek. "What's going to become of Mary, if her future ain't as blessed?"

"I pray God will bless her even more than He has us," said Emma. "I've been praying that for some time now."

"I never thought it was possible to be friends with yer spouse, but you've proved me wrong, Emma. I only pray to God that Mary can find such a haven as that. Someone dear to her heart, that'll go on loving her, no matter what trouble comes."

"For as long as we have her, Josiah, we are her haven. When the time comes to let her go, I trust God will choose a good man for our Mary." Emma watched Josiah mull over his worries. She touched her finger to his chin, but his expression remained the same.

"Give it to the Lord, Josiah."

"What happens if she marries someone who beats her, instead of loving her like he should?" Josiah's eyes narrowed in contempt at the very idea of such a man.

Slipping the unfinished moccasins from Josiah's lap, Emma pulled his hunting shirt over his head. He absently complied.

"What if he beats her, Emma? What if I ain't around to stop it?"

"She isn't married yet, Josiah. She's still a little girl, and you've already got her married and moved away." He looked so worried, he didn't notice Emma coaxing him down to bed. "Whatever happens, Josiah, trust her future to the Lord."

"He'd better not beat Mary."

"Who?"

"Mary's husband."

Lying side by side, Emma observed the worried crease in his forehead. Josiah was lost in thought, troubles that had not yet come, burdening him down like a man struggling beneath a sack of weights.

"What about our baby?" asked Josiah, his voice laden with worry. "What's going to happen to him?"

"Him? What if it's a girl?"

"What if he can't find a good woman like you, Emma?"

She pushed herself up to kiss Josiah's shoulder, his chin, and then lingered above his mouth. "Give it to the Lord," she mumbled through the kiss.

Josiah didn't need any more distraction, Emma's love being more than enough. One broad hand touched the small of her back, while another blindly grasped at the bedding, until both were concealed beneath the blanket.

The air hung sleepily in the shelter, lulling George back to slumber until the emptiness in his stomach demanded action.

"Will," George cast a boot at his friend. "Wake up, Will. It's morning and I've got to get you fed and cleaned up before I leave."

Will stretched out, and scratched the beard covering his chin. "You're going somewhere?"

"Don't you remember? I'm going to be at Josiah's cabin, teaching Mary. Maybe you're getting forgetful in your old age," said George, grinning as the boot came hurling back at him.

"I'm not that old." Will pulled himself into a seated position, and looked about for breakfast. Will was old enough to be George's father, a fact George sometimes wished were true.

Over a meal of dried elk meat, George opened his journal and began to write down his thoughts. His pencil halfway through the first sentence, Will broke all concentration by talking. Worse, he waited for George to answer.

"Scribbling away in that book again?"

"What does it look like?"

"What are you writing? Anything about me?"

"Your name comes up once in a while," George said over his shoulder. He jotted down his few thoughts as quickly as he could before he had to put the journal away and help Will.

"What are you saying about me?" Will had taken another bite of food, and George could hear it when Will spoke. "You're always scribbling in that journal of yours, and I want to know what you're saying about me."

George closed the journal with a decisive thud. "These are my own thoughts, not meant for others to read but myself. Do you want a trip outside?"

"I reckon. But I still want to know what you're saying about me, behind my back."

Though George had a habit of complying with Will, the journal was private and George resisted as politely as he could.

"I'll straighten your blankets before I leave," said George, hoping if he ignored the question, the subject would be dropped. "And I'll leave some food by your bed in case I don't return before lunch."

"You're fixing to leave me here, all by myself, until noon?" asked Will, as George helped Will outside and into the snow. "I don't think I like that."

Hefting Will onto his only leg, George steadied them both so they wouldn't fall. "If you get lonely, sit by the entrance and watch for buffalo."

"Buffalo." Will grunted disbelievingly. "There aren't any buffalo, this high in the Rockies."

"Then watch for rabbits," said George, propping Will beside a snow covered rock where Will could have enough privacy to drop his trousers without fear of women happening by. It was because of this, because of Josiah's woman and little Mary, that Will demanded they go so far up the mountain. Today, George decided on a closer location.

"Rabbits." Will spit at the snow, then looked at George with weary patience. George had become familiar with that look, the look that said he was green as grass, a youngster who didn't know up from down. An idiot. Will had never said those exact words, but he didn't have to. That look said it all.

"Then clean your shotgun, I don't care," said George, slumping against the other side of the rock to wait. "Find something that'll keep you busy until I get back."

"Why can't I come?" asked Will, everything hidden behind the rock but the top of his black head. Hair stuck out in every angle, a testament to Will's oblivion to the civilized world. Will had partially surrendered by shaving, but the whiskers were already growing back, and before long, he would look like the hairy mountain man George knew him to be.

"I want to come," said Will. "I'm not going to sit in that shelter, while you're having yourself a good time."

"I'm teaching an ignorant little girl to read and write," said George, checking Will's progress before stepping away to look at the valley down the slope. "Do you call that a good time?"

"I call that being sociable." Will hollered, and George came to help him up. "I hope you're going to treat Mary better than that," said Will, "better than what she is. She may come from an unfortunate parentage, but it isn't right to hold it against her."

"I still can't believe that about Josiah and the girl's true mother," George shook his head, having only been informed of it yesterday. Will had told him. And now regretted it, from the caution George saw in Will's face.

"It isn't Mary's fault," said Will, leaning into George as the two men slowly worked their way back to the shelter. "I never should've told you. Josiah told me in confidence, when I asked him who Mary's real ma was. Mrs. Brown had said the girl wasn't hers, so I asked Josiah in private. He told me, and now that I've gone and told you, you're going to give the girl a difficult time!" Will looked truly flustered.

"It makes little difference to me, I assure you," said George, easing Will down so the man could elbow his way inside. "Bastard or not, she's still--"

"Saying things like that could get us in a heap of trouble," said Will, interrupting George without apology. "We need Josiah's help, and besides that, I've taken a liking to the man. He's a rare breed of wild man and gentleman, and I won't stand by and let his daughter be mistreated-- bastard or not. Mrs. Brown has taken the girl as her own, and that's all that matters. Mary has a ma, and if I haven't wrecked things too badly, she still has a teacher."

"I told you last night, I wasn't going to back out." George felt impatience welling within him. "I freely acknowledge we owe Josiah this, and much more. I've already promised you I would treat Mary politely, and I mean it."

"I want to go with you," said Will.

"I'll only be gone until noon," said George. "You won't get lonely."

"I don't care about that. I'm coming with you."

Irritation taking hold, George ignored Will. He picked up his remaining volume of Sir William Blackstone, and crawled through the entrance with Will's protests sounding in his ears.

Tramping down the mountain in his snowshoes, George wished for the day to be already over. He would teach Mary, and then return to the shelter. No one back home would ever need know he was in the company of these people. He would get through this, survive, and go back home with his head held high.

He would be polite.

George adjusted his capote, took a deep breath, and knocked on the split log door of the small cabin. Inside, he heard the indistinct shouts of Mary, evidently celebrating his arrival.

"Just get through this," George muttered to himself.

The door opened, and the woman greeted him with the same warm smile as the day before. She was a beautiful woman, George admitted to himself as she showed him inside. It was no wonder Josiah had risked so much, to have her for his own.

The mountain man in question looked up from where he worked leather strips into a webbing for snowshoes. George glanced at Mary's feet, realizing she was wearing her new moccasins.

"How's Will?" asked Josiah.

George lifted one shoulder in a careless shrug. "Same as yesterday." The woman was arranging some hides on the floor, where he was apparently supposed to hold school. "If it isn't any inconvenience to you, ma'am, I'd rather work at the table."

"Oh?" she looked at him with a smiling face, then urged him to shed his winter gear. "Mary," she said, turning to the now subdued little girl beside her, "show Mr. Hughes to the table."

Mary looked up at George, her expression timid. She grinned unabashedly when she saw the book under his arm.

"Do you need more light, Mr. Hughes?" the woman asked as George took a seat at the table. Mary scooted an upright log beside him, obviously eager to get started.

"No, ma'am, this is fine," said George. He nodded his gratitude anyway, when Emma cracked open the window shutters, allowing light to spill onto the table.

"What is in the book?" asked Mary, her dark eyes flashing with hungry curiosity.

"It's a law book," said George, opening it so she could see. "This volume is the first in a set called 'Commentaries on the Laws of England,' by Sir William Blackstone." He continued, explaining the importance of law, particularly the profound significance of Sir William's influence on America. He waxed long concerning material that his aunt in Massachusetts had complained was "dry, uninteresting." But little Mary Brown sat rooted to her log chair, eyes wide with interest. The rights of people, the judicial process, justice-- all kept the girl absolutely still. Her expression was so fixed, George felt as though he were speaking great words of wisdom, rather than the ramblings of a run-away law student.

After several minutes of expounding the law, George realized his mistake, and set about the task of finding out how much his small pupil understood of the alphabet. She knew them all, from A to Z. She could read short words, though had an impossible time of anything longer than three letters. This, George decided, was a good place to start.

"Sound the word out, Mary," he said, guiding her eyes to the word on the page.

Mary tried, then sighed when he told her she had gotten it wrong. Again and again she tried, until George gave up and moved to the next word. Again, she couldn't manage, and he moved to the next. George felt a twinge of satisfaction in her failure, but when he saw a tear squeeze from her eyelid, and escape down her cheek, George's victory promptly faded.

"Now, now, dry your tears and let's begin again. Perhaps I'm going too quickly for you. I'll slow down." George tried to give her an encouraging smile, and she seemed to perk up with the kindness. "When you see two vowels side by side like this, the second vowel is silent, but the first is long. Understand?"

Mary gazed at him, mystified, but nodded anyway. George had a hunch she didn't understand, and went over it until he noticed a light behind her eyes. She understood, and proved it by reading the next word.

The broad grin on Mary's face when she read a word correctly was infectious, and before long, George found himself cringing when she made a mistake, and celebrating her small victories right along with her.

He quite forgot that her pa was sitting nearby, most likely keeping an eye on him to make sure everything went all right. It wasn't until the end of a few sentences, when Mary exclaimed to Josiah, "Pa! I am reading! Did you hear me read?" that George suddenly became aware of the two other people in the room. The couple tried to behave as though they were too engrossed in work of their own to notice, but Josiah's quick smile to Mary said otherwise. Josiah was following very closely, and so was the woman.

The woman. The white woman who was Josiah's wife. She smiled thankfully at George and he smiled back. Her very demeanor was one of a mother, guarding over her child, protective of its feelings, delighted with its successes. And yet, she was not the girl's true mother.

"Did I read it right, George?"

George's attention had wandered, and Mary's voice called him back to their lesson. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear."

"Mary." Mrs. Brown gave Mary a reproving look. "We do not call people by their first name without their permission."

Mary frowned. "Pa does. I think he does, don't you, Pa?"

At being called on the spot, Josiah cleared his throat. "I don't reckon I ever gave it any thought, Mary. But if yer ma says not to, then you best obey."

"I can call you George, can't I, Mr. Hughes?" Mary turned to him, and George found himself once again smiling. With such an engaging child, it was hard not to. "I suppose it's all right," he heard himself say.

"Can we finish this page afore lunch?"

"That's 'before,' and no, that'll take too long. We'll resume tomorrow." George shut the book, and Mrs. Brown immediately closed the shutters. The cabin had been steadily growing colder with the window even partially open, and George was glad to have it shut again.

"I'm afraid tomorrow is out of the question," said Mrs. Brown, returning to the fire to resume her mending. "School is closed on the Lord's Day."

"I'd forgotten tomorrow was Sunday," said George. He picked up his book, but remained in his chair. He was ready to leave, but didn't get up.

"If you want, you and Mr. Shaw can come for service," said Mrs. Brown. "It's not anything much, just some singing and reading from the Bible."

His thumb fumbled at a corner of the law book. "Yes, ma'am, we'll come."

"Good." That warm smile again, and then a hug for Mary. That was Mrs. Brown.

He put up no fight when invited to lunch, and stayed the entire afternoon, saying very little but observing the family together. He would've been loath to admit it in public, but he liked what he saw.

From the moment George returned, Will had eyed him angrily. Why hadn't he come back sooner? Had anything bad happened? Did he know that Will had been sitting there, thinking the worst, yet helpless to do anything about it? George answered Will, then went on to relate the first day of tutoring the Brown girl. Since George admitted to making Mary cry at one point, Will didn't consider it an entire success, but for the first day, Will declared it a promising start.

Sunday morning, George and Will arrived at the cabin to the welcome of Josiah and his wife. The last vestiges of shyness from Mary were gone, and she sat beside George, sharing his Bible as Mrs. Brown read from her worn Bible. Mary tracked George's finger as he followed Mrs. Brown from verse to verse, a visual aid to help Mary recognize words as they were being read aloud. Even though Josiah sat beside his wife on the robes during the service, George had a feeling Josiah couldn't read, for the buckskin clad trapper gazed blankly at Emma's open Bible, ignorant of where she was on the page.

Then Mrs. Brown sang a hymn, with Josiah doing his best to keep up with words that were obviously unfamiliar to him. It was a novel thing to watch Josiah, a roughened man at ease in the wilds of the wilderness, now stumbling through a hymn about the tender mercies of the white man's God.

In George's eyes, Josiah was out of place. All that morning, he observed Josiah, trying to detect any marks of deception, any displays of disbelief in Josiah's profession of religion. As savage as he thought Josiah was, by the end of the day, George confessed to Will that he thought Josiah to truly be in earnest. It was a difficult admission for George, one that hushed Will into thoughtful silence.

Lying in bed, awake and full of disturbing thoughts, George was only thankful his father was back East. Thank God, his father wasn't present to see what was happening to his youngest son.

February waxed cold with snow filled skies and warm fireside nights. George kept coming to the lodge for Mary's lessons, their routine becoming as normal and everyday as keeping fresh water in the water bucket. Josiah watched Emma as she bloomed bit by bit, her belly protruding to a noticeable swell by mid March. Still the snows came, and with them anxiety over the baby.

Only this time, the anxiety wasn't Josiah's. He knew Emma wanted a woman present, someone to consult and help with the birthing. A woman to confide in over what was normal, and what wasn't, while you were expecting a child.

One night near the end of March, Josiah was awakened by Emma, tugging at his arm.

"I'm sleeping, Em and so should you." Josiah yawned groggily, only dimly aware of the wide awake face peering down at him. Emma was sitting up in bed, her hand on her belly.

"I felt it move, Josiah. I felt our baby move."

"The quickening's started, then?" He placed his large hand on the swell to feel for movement.

"I pray it will be all right, but oh, how I miss my mother." Emma stroked her belly, then placed her hand on Josiah's. "I wish I could speak to her, Josiah. I'd ask her so many things, things a mother would pass on to her daughter upon the arrival of a first child. I miss her so much, Josiah."

"You ain't worrying again, are you, Emma? You were the one telling me to give my troubles to the Lord."

A small laugh parted Emma's soft lips. "Sometimes, I think I need reminding."

"Nestle with me, Em." Josiah raised his arm, inviting her to snuggle against his chest. When she came to him, he hugged her tight, enveloping her protectively with his arm. "I've been thinking, Emma, and I want you to hear me out afore you go disagreeing."

"Go on, I'm listening."

"You're needing a woman around, someone to help with Mary and the baby. I want to go after my ma, and bring her back to live with us." He gently squeezed his wife. "What do you say, Emma?"

"What do you mean 'go after'? Isn't Cora miles away by now?"

"I reckon, but if I wait until the snow melts, I risk her moving farther North, as the Blackfoot follow the buffalo."

"But winter's hardly over. Surely, you're not planning to leave while there's still snow on the ground. What if you get caught in a blizzard, get hurt, and there's no one to help?"

"I've been on my own plenty of times, Emma. I know my way around these mountains. I'll be fine. And I'm not planning on anything definite, not unless you're in agreement."

"Would you take George with you? At least then, you wouldn't be alone." Josiah could feel Emma stiffen against him, and knew she feared for his safety. Seasoned mountaineer or not, it was a dangerous thing to be on your own, and Emma understood that all too well.

"No, I want George and Will to stay with you. They wouldn't be any help when I found the Blackfoot, anyways. I've thought about this a lot, Emma, and this needs to be done. The idea to go after Ma has come to me before, but I couldn't leave you and Mary. Now that George and Will are here, I can go."

"How long will you be gone?" Josiah caught the dread in Emma's voice.

"I ain't leaving if you don't want me to, Emma."

"If you go, how long would it be?" Emma pressed her hand to his biceps, her fingers constricting his muscles tightly.

"I ain't knowing. Long enough to find where the Blackfoot are camped, and then bring back Ma. Depending on how deep the snows are, it could be for a month or two."

"Two months." Fear filled Emma's voice. "No, I don't want you to leave."

"I need to go, Emma."

"You said you wouldn't if I didn't agree, and I don't. So that's that."

"Emma," Josiah caught her hand before it slipped from his arm. "I don't want you to go through birthing without a woman handy. Ma will come. If I ask her, I know she'll come."

"It's too dangerous, Josiah. What if the Blackfoot haven't entirely forgiven you yet? You could be killed!"

"I'm not thinking of myself. I'm doing this for you and Mary. Think what it'll mean to Mary, to have Cora with us."

"I want Cora here, you know I do, but not if it means you getting killed. Josiah, I'll face this birth all by myself if I have to, but I'm not letting you go to your death."

He groaned softly, not willing to voice his worries out loud to Emma. If he wanted her agreement though, he knew he had to.

"Emma, do you remember speaking of yer ma, and how she had trouble giving birth? And do you recollect what happened to Mary's ma, after Mary was born? I've never fergotten that. If there's something I can do to help you, I will."

In the dim firelight of their shared bed, Emma turned to face him. "I won't die in childbirth, and since I'm stronger than my mother, there's no great emergency."

"What if there is?" asked Josiah.

"What if you get killed?" asked Emma.

"Emma, if I thought I was going to my demise, I wouldn't go. I wouldn't do that to you and Mary. When I head back, I'll make certain I'm not followed, and the Blackfoot won't ever know about George and Will. I'll make sure of it."

She was silent.

"I'm going fer Cora, Emma."

"What about our agreement?"

With a groan that threatened to awaken Mary, Josiah sat up on the robes, the blanket falling in his lap. "I can't wait any longer fer the snow to melt. Ma will be farther North, just when yer needing her most. Agree with me, Emma. I need you to agree. I ain't going to sit by and watch, and do nothing while you struggle with yer birthing. Let me do this fer you, Emma. Just let me go."

Emma closed her eyes so tightly, he feared she was in pain. "Promise me you'll come back, Josiah."

"Of course I'll come back. I'm only going fer Cora." Josiah felt indignation tighten his chest. "I ain't leaving for but a short while, Emma. I'm coming back."

"I know you are." The resignation in Emma's response was palpable, and Josiah knew she would let him go. "I'm afraid," she confessed. "I'm afraid you'll go back, and not want to return."

"Why would I want to do that? My heart is with you and Mary. Yer knowing that."

"Yes, I know." Her voice trembled, and Josiah stretched out beside his wife, gathering her to him in one armful of deerskin and female softness. He inhaled her scent, memorized her heartbeat, soaked in her love.

"I'll be faithful to you, Emma." He whispered the promise tenderly into her ear, knowing deep down that was what held her back. "I swear before God and you, I'll be faithful."

"Don't forget me, Josiah. Please, don't forget what we mean to each other."

"I promise, Emma, I won't."

Silence closed in around them as Emma wept softly into his buckskins. She was trusting him enough to let him leave without her, to be around other women, women who might be willing to share his bed. Josiah knew of some who would likely offer when he arrived at the Blackfoot village, and he steeled himself to keep his promise.

If he had to lash himself to a tree, he would do it. Where he had failed in the past, he would keep himself for just one. His wife.

"And wherefore one? That he [Josiah] might seek a godly seed [children]. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth [Emma]."

~ Malachi 2:15 ~

Chapter Nineteen

The Parting

1837, Southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"Set me [Emma] as a seal upon thine [Josiah's] heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame."

~ Song of Solomon 8:6 ~

Breakfast didn't set well in Emma's stomach, but not because of her being with child. Thankfully, the nauseous regularity of that particular ailment had subsided sometime back, only to be replaced by the terrible dread that now filled her being. There were many fears to give to God's keeping, but one in particular flooded her with thoughts too painful to dwell upon for long.

As Josiah swallowed down his food, she watched him thoughtfully.

He liked women, knew how to make them smile, even when they were determined not to. He had charmed her almost without trying, and she knew he had done similarly with others. He enjoyed the presence of a woman in his bed, the easy intimacy that came from lying with each other, the nestling, the kissing. It consoled her that she had been the first to capture his heart, and she prayed she would be the last. Josiah would be without her on this coming trip, without that presence in his buffalo robes to keep him faithful. All the tie that bound him to her was his vow, his love, his family. His obedience to God's Word. Those were much stronger than knowing she was the first to receive his affections so fully.

As if he had been aware of her thoughts, Josiah moved to her side of the hearth long enough to squat down and plant a kiss on her forehead. "I'll be going up the mountain to talk to Will and George. I want to get them together, afore George comes to give Mary her lessons."

"Can I come, Pa?" Mary jumped up, her face bright and eager to leave the confines of the cabin.

"If you want. Just remember to put on yer snowshoes. I ain't carrying you again." As Mary hurried to get ready, he turned back to Emma, his face gentled with a smile. "Sometimes, I think she doesn't try too hard to remember. I reckon she enjoys being carried."

Emma took a deep breath, then another as he caressed her cheek with his thumb. "Mary enjoys spending time with her father," Emma said softly. "So do I."

The darkness in Josiah's eyes intensified, and without saying it, she knew he understood what she had spent the morning in silent thought over.

"Are you still trusting me to do the right thing?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper over the crackle of the morning fire.

"I trust you, Josiah."

He narrowed those dark eyes into slits, as if to deepen his perception into her soul. "But yer still fearful."

"I'm trying very hard not to be."

Josiah groaned tenderly. "It pains me that yer struggling so much, Emma, but I'm the one to blame fer it. I hurt you once, and I'm--" he paused, and Emma knew he wanted to swear, but smiled thankfully when he didn't. "May God strike me down if I ever betray you again. I'm meaning that with all I got in me. I ain't the same man as afore. Yer still believing that, ain't you?"

Sincerity shone in his eyes, sounded in his voice.

"You've changed," she smiled, touching the hand that touched her cheek. "You're not the same as you used to be, and I love you for it."

He sucked in a deep, contented breath. "What am I going to do without my sunshine? I ain't gone yet, and I'm missing you already, Emma."

"Pa, I'm ready." When he didn't turn to look at Mary, she tugged at his arm. "Can we go now, Pa?"

"I reckon," he said, giving Emma a kiss before standing. "Are you wearing yer snowshoes?"

"Yes," she grinned excitedly. "And my pistol."

Folding his arms, Josiah looked her over with a lightheartedly critical eye. "I reckon yer ready, but what's all the fuss about? George will be here shortly. You aim on visiting Will?"

Mary nodded. "Mr. Shaw knows stories. He tells me them when I come."

"Stories, huh?" Josiah lifted a brow and scowled. "Are they better than mine?"

Mary had a ready answer, but as fast as she opened her mouth, she shut it again. She looked reluctant to answer, then grinned broadly when Josiah laughed and scooped her up, snowshoes and all.

As Emma watched Josiah with Mary, Emma's heart lightened. If she had needed any more proof of Josiah's transformation, she had proof enough, right before her. Josiah's deep laughter filled the cabin as he gave Mary an all-encompassing bear hug before setting her down. He pulled on his coat, went through his normal routine of checking weapons and ammunition, all the while laughing with Mary.

When father and daughter left, the cabin felt empty. Emma would have gone with them, but she didn't feel up to braving the cold. She added wood to the fire, gathered the blanket shawl around her shoulders, then opened the Bible for some quiet time with just her and God.

"You're leaving?" George could hardly believe what he was hearing. How could Will look so calm, when their protector-- their only friend in this wilderness besides Mrs. Brown and Mary-- was leaving?

"I'm asking you to take care of my family while I'm gone," said Josiah, looking directly at George.

"Me?" George felt his heart stop, and expected any moment that someone should pronounce him dead. "I don't know what I'm doing! You've said so, yourself-- I'm the greenest one here! Give the responsibility to Will. I can't possibly accept it."

Will looked at Josiah intently, a shadow of hurt in his eyes. "Why aren't you asking me? You know I have more experience."

"I'm knowing it," said Josiah.

"Is it because I've only got one limb?" asked Will. "You carved me up a wooden one--"

"Which you haven't used," finished Josiah.

"I can learn," said Will.

"That's fine and good," said Josiah, "but I'm needing someone who can move about, and do it now. George is the only one who can go outside, and protect my family when they have to fetch water and firewood."

Will blew out a defeated sigh. "I kept putting off using that wooden limb, and now it seems I'm too late to be of any use."

"That ain't true," said Josiah, straightening as he sat around the fire with George and Will in the center of their shelter. "I don't want to hear you slipping back into yer despair, Will. You've come out of it nicely, and it won't do anyone any good fer you to give up now."

"Then give me something to do," said Will, his face cracking into a smile as Mary looked up at him from his side. "Besides tell stories to this little lady."

Mary smiled brightly.

"I'm relying on you to help George." Josiah turned his eyes back on George, and George shook his head vigorously.

"I won't accept the responsibility, Josiah. It's too much."

"Is that why you ran away from school?" asked Josiah. "Because it was too much responsibility?"

Indignation heated George's face. "I happen to have done well in my studies and all the responsibilities that came with them. That's not why I ran."

"Then you should have no trouble here," said Josiah.

The challenge in Josiah's voice made George want to meet it, and challenge himself with something he'd never done. He'd never had to directly answer for the personal safety of others, though the very thought made him weak.

"You'll have Will and Emma to help," said Josiah.

"And me," said Mary. "I will help you, George."

"Thanks," he smiled, sincerely grateful for her willingness. "Josiah, before you hand over your family, you should know something about me. I'm a terrible coward."

"Maybe, in the past," shrugged Josiah; the mannerism was easy, but the steel in Josiah's eyes was not. He had caught Josiah's attention.

George rubbed his forehead, and wasn't surprised when he touched perspiration. He despised speaking of this to anyone, let alone the two men he had come to respect so highly. "I left

Massachusetts, not because of any great responsibility, but because of a question of morality. The question had been thrust upon me, and rather than face the issue, I ran."

"What issue?" asked Will. "I admit to some curiosity."

George looked to Josiah for assurance that he didn't need to explain himself, but when Josiah continued to stare at him expectantly, George loosened the top collar button of his shirt.

"Was it a woman?" asked Josiah.

"No, it was nothing like that at all," George said hurriedly. He gathered a deep breath. "I suppose what I believe *is* a responsibility, so when I look at it that way, I guess I did run from it. Isn't that good enough for you, Josiah? I'm not trustworthy. I'm a coward, and you know it's true."

"No, you ain't!" Mary folded her arms indignantly. "You ain't yeller, George! Tell them you ain't!"

In her anger, Mary had slipped back into her father's mountain-speak, and George had to smile in spite of himself. "I've been teaching you better than that, Mary."

"You aren't a coward!" she corrected.

"Yes, I am." George smiled at his little defender. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Mary, but I am very much a coward." He tossed a branch into the fire in a fit of disgust. "I don't want to say more, Josiah. I'm afraid it might change our friendship."

"At least yer acknowledging we are friends," Josiah smiled. "I can remember a time when I don't think you would."

"No, I wouldn't," said George, "and that's my problem. Maybe Mary should leave. She shouldn't have to hear this."

"I am staying," said Mary, her little face set like flint. "I want to hear."

"I'll make her leave, if I feel she needs to," said Josiah. "Go on, George. Get whatever you've been carrying, off yer chest."

Taking a deep breath, George looked at his small audience. "Are any of you familiar with the abolitionists?"

"I am," said Will, "or at least, I've heard something of them. They're people who want to do away with slavery."

"That's true." George looked to Josiah, but saw no immediate reaction. Perhaps Josiah couldn't understand, for he had lived all his life in the Rockies, away from the troubling questions back East.

"In Massachusetts, where I've lived the past few years," began George, "the abolitionists are gaining momentum in noticeable ways. They want to put a stop to the slave trade and more and more people are listening. I've heard it said that all men are born free and equal" -- here George noticed a stirring from Josiah -- "and even the Massachusetts Constitution claims this as truth. But not all feel that way, especially down South, where the tobacco and cotton trades require the continuation of slavery."

"What do those slavers have to do with you?" asked Will.

"I'm one of them."

"You're what?" Will narrowed his eyes, and looked at George as though he had never really known his friend.

"I suppose I should say, my father is," said George. "I've never personally owned any slaves, though I don't think that should make any difference. I'm not against the practice, and that makes me the same as my father." The last few words had cost him, for George hated his father, and the very notion that he supported his father's cruelty, filled George with self-loathing.

"I was born in Virginia, on my father's cotton plantation," said George. "My older brothers were given much of the responsibilities as they grew, but my father's sister, Aunt Dorothy, wanted me to come North and live with her in Massachusetts. So when I was fourteen years of age, father sent me to Aunt Dorothy to continue my education." Here, George smiled grimly. "The education I received, however, was quite different than the one I imagine my father wanted. Aunt Dorothy had no views whatsoever concerning slavery, but others in Massachusetts did. Certain citizens were very vocal about abolition, as was the opposition. The longer I stayed, the more pressure I had to decide the issue and stand by my decision once and for all."

"I don't understand," said Will. "If you support your pa, then you've already decided."

"But he hasn't decided-- not yet," said Josiah, staring a hole into George. "Say what you want, George, but deep down you don't like yer pa and are uneasy with his ways."

"I never said that," said George.

"But it's true," insisted Josiah. "I see some of me in you."

"You do?"

"My own pa was an Indian hater, and many of the things he did, I didn't like."

"But I like my father," George said defensively. "It's true there's things about him I don't find agreeable, but overall, he's a good man."

"Then you won't mind following in his footsteps," said Josiah.

George wanted to retaliate, but was unable.

"There's a war waging inside of you," said Josiah, "a war I understand. I've come to see that when I hate others, I'm really hating myself. No matter the skin, we're all men and we all have to come to terms with who we are and what we decide to believe. My pa made his own decisions, and I've made mine. The question is, where will you stand when the time comes for you to act? I figure that's why yer here-- because yer fearing you'll have to act."

"You've got an uncanny ability to see into me, Josiah." An ability George wasn't sure he liked.

Josiah only chuckled. "That's because we ain't so very different. I reckon I have an advantage over you though."

"What's that?"

"My pa is dead, and I don't have to fight him to make my stand."

"My stand." George thought about it grimly, recognizing the war cloaked in Josiah's wording. "You may be closer to the truth than you think, Josiah. I believe the issue of slavery will eventually lead our nation into war."

"I ain't rightly knowing," said Josiah, "but if things come to that, where will George Hughes stand when the lines are drawn? Some time back, Emma told me that men like you would decide this nation's destiny. Emma has a way with big fancy words, but I expect she's right." Josiah laughed. "She usually is."

"Do you still want me to take care of your family while you're away?" asked George.

"If I didn't trust you, I wouldn't have asked," said Josiah. "I've seen enough conscience in yer actions, to think there's reason to hope. And besides, all I'm wanting is fer you to keep my family safe and out of harm. I ain't asking you to raise my children."

George smiled, glad for the relief of Josiah's continued friendship. He needed that friendship to survive in these mountains, but more than that, he respected this wild half-breed of a man who was trying to live honestly before God. Josiah had the courage that George lacked, and George admired Josiah all the more for possessing it and making a stand by the way he lived. George could only wish that one day, he could do the same.

"When will you leave?" asked George, reconciling himself to the fact that Josiah truly was leaving.

"Tomorrow. I've got to go after my ma, afore spring starts showing itself. With that deer we shot some days back, you'll have food enough to last awhile. But you have to keep hunting, or else you'll risk coming up short."

"I'm not afraid of that," said George, gathering the tatters of his dignity left after such a frank discussion. "I can hunt. You've been teaching me enough, and drilling it into me every time we go out."

Will slapped the ground, his teeth clenched in frustration. "Wish I wasn't so useless! I could do the hunting, and George could stay back and protect the women. Now I reckon that job'll fall to me."

"I can protect myself," said Mary, looking up at the one legged man she sat beside.

He peered at her with a wide smile. "I'm sure you can, little lady. I meant no offense."

"Now I'm knowing why Mary likes visiting here so much," said Josiah, shaking his head with a low chuckle. "Yer spoiling her, Will."

"It ain't hard," said Will, patting the girl's head affectionately. "You can leave with yer heart at ease, Josiah. George and I won't let you down. You have my word on it."

"And mine," said George.

Then the men discussed Josiah's trip, and George noticed that in all the talk, Josiah never said which route he would take, or the landmarks he would use to get to his ma's village. George was

impressed with the realization that if Josiah never returned from his trip, George would be unable to go and search for him. There would be no rescue or help, for George had just enough survival skills to stay by the lodges, and nothing more. This sobering reality tempered any pride George had in his newfound responsibility; the only reason he had been given it, was because there was no one else.

Out in the open mountains, Josiah would be on his own. At least here, George had Will.

After Josiah's return from the trappers' shelter, Emma tried to stay out of the way as he prepared his gear for the prolonged trip. George came for Mary's lessons later in the day than usual-- after lunch-- and did a good job of keeping the girl busy while Josiah worked.

Emma wished she had as good a distraction, to keep her own thoughts occupied. Her heart felt a jumble of emotions as she watched Josiah pack extra gunpowder, shot, a length of braided rope still left after making Mary's snowshoes, and a small portion of dried deer meat.

"Won't you take more food than that?" she asked.

"I can hunt fer myself," he said distractedly.

It was difficult for her to keep quiet, and she didn't want to interrupt his planning by voicing silly concerns. But food was important, and Emma knew he didn't pack more to leave the rest for her and the others.

"I'm taking my axe, George." Josiah wrapped something over the sharpened blade, then slipped into the growing leather sack.

"When I need to chop more firewood, I can use Will's," said George, in such a ready voice, Emma knew he only paid half attention to Mary's lessons.

Josiah picked up the snowshoes and inspected the webbing with his fingers, testing knots and sturdiness of construction. He packed two buffalo robes, and a small pouch of Blackfoot medicine. Without turning, he said something in Blackfoot to Mary, and the girl smiled at hearing her pa speak the native tongue. She answered with an affirming nod, then returned to her schooling.

"What language was that?" asked George, unable to contain his curiosity. "Was that Blackfoot?"

"It was." Josiah didn't even turn, but kept his attention focused.

"What did he tell you?" George asked Mary in a hushed voice.

"Pa is leaving behind medicine, and told me where to find it."

"Why didn't he tell that to your mother?"

Mary giggled, glancing quickly at Emma before staring back at the open book on the table. "She would not know how to use it."

To protest the point would do no good, for Mary had been right. The silent admission made Emma feel a little left out, however, and when she bowed her head to stare at the hands folded in her lap, Josiah grunted.

"You ain't going to be lonely, Emma."

She looked up, and smiled when her gaze met his. "You guessed wrongly, Josiah. I wasn't thinking of that at all."

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, he leaned back from his work to stare at her. She caught the playfulness in his eyes and prepared herself to be teased.

"Are you saying you ain't going to miss me? Not even a little?"

She leveled her chin at Josiah. "With so many people to talk to now, I won't even know you're gone."

"Good." He turned back to the flintlock he was cleaning. "Now I won't feel so poorly fer leaving you behind." He glanced back at her, a tender smile teasing his lips. "Then what were you keeping to yerself, all quiet and somber?"

"I was just wishing I were Blackfoot," said Emma.

Josiah's eyebrows shot up. "That's a mighty peculiar thing fer a white woman to say."

"Not really," said Emma, "not when you consider the rest of that white woman's family speaks a language she can't understand."

"Oh." Josiah grinned at her sheepishly. "You were feeling left out. You want me to stop speaking to Mary in Blackfoot?"

Emma smoothed out her deerskin dress. "No, but I wouldn't mind learning some of your native tongue, and someday, I'd like to learn how to use that Blackfoot medicine."

"Neither will be easy," said Josiah.

"I'm willing to learn," she answered stoutly.

"I'm sure going to miss you, Emma."

When she only smiled, he poked his chin at her.

"I want to hear you say it."

Emma managed not to crack a smile. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

"Say you'll miss me, Emma."

"I will not. It won't be a compliment, if it's forced."

"I don't care. Say it."

Emma shrank back a little when she shook her head and Josiah laid aside his weapon.

"I want to hear you say it," he said, crawling on all fours to her side of the hearth. In that position, he resembled a bear, all shaggy and wild.

She gulped back a nervous laugh. "Now, Josiah, you're taking things too far."

He crowded over her until her back was against the buffalo robes. "Say it."

Resolute, Emma shook her head, "no."

"Then you need some reminding," he breathed, and dropped over her, smothering her mouth in a kiss.

Her senses drowned in that kiss, and Emma felt her hand in his long mane, caressing his neck, and pulling him closer.

When he finally came up for air, his grin was victorious. "Tell me you won't be missing me after that. I dare you."

Her vision misted, and she brushed away the wistful tears. "Please, don't go, Josiah. I'm begging you."

All playfulness disappeared, and he hid her a moment beneath his buckskins. "Now I've gone and made you cry." He raised his head, gazed down at her, stroked her cheek tenderly. "Yer knowing I have to do this."

His mane cascaded around them in a private fall of semi-curling hair. She fingered the eagle feather, perched in dark tangles, and sighed wistfully.

"You'll be careful, won't you, Josiah? You'll take every precaution to remain safe?"

His lips spread in a wide grin. "I ain't one to take unnecessary risks."

"I'm not so sure about that," she said, trying to plumb the depths of that masculine stare. "Promise me you won't."

"When I'm this near to you, I could almost promise you anything," he said, his unsteady breath caressing her face. "I promise, Emma. Now let me hear you say it."

His playfulness brought a smile to her face. "I'll miss you."

"How much?" he pressed.

Her heart gathering speed, she brought his head down to hers and kissed him until he moaned in pleasure. It wasn't until then, Emma suddenly remembered George was in the cabin.

"Josiah," she whispered, struggling to push him off as his hand searched for the small of her back, "we have a guest."

"Let him watch," mumbled Josiah. To her great relief, however, he heaved a reluctant groan and pushed himself upright.

The giggles of a little girl told them they had been watched. Josiah slanted a look at the table where George and Mary sat.

"Are you leaving any time soon, George?"

The young man looked about to answer, when Emma slapped Josiah's arm and addressed George, herself.

"You stay right where you are. Josiah is only teasing."

"Speak fer yerself, woman." With a low mutter, Josiah grabbed up his flintlock and went back to cleaning it before the fire. "I'll remember to return the favor one of these days, George."

With an easy laugh, George tapped at the book in front of Mary, calling her attention back to their lesson.

This time, as Josiah worked, he didn't look or take notice of Emma. She knew the reason for it, and was glad she wielded such influence over him as to be able to distract him so thoroughly.

That morning she had been working on a secret task, a task which had been interrupted when Josiah returned from the trappers' shelter. Now that he tried not to pay her any attention, Emma took the opportunity and retreated to a private corner of the buffalo robes. Beneath a corner, she pulled out the fluffy white rabbit skins that Mary had given her from Mary's own snares. Emma took out Josiah's awl, some sinew, and went to work. She needed to get this done, before he left tomorrow morning.

After George left, Mary snuggled beside Emma and they exchanged a conspiratorial hush of whispers and smiles as the work progressed.

Supper time came, and Mary jumped up to get the food so Emma wouldn't have to. They were almost done, and if the sinew didn't run out, their gift would soon be ready.

It needed to be, for Josiah was growing restless. They had refused him access to his own bed, so they could finish.

"What are you doing over there that's so all-fired important?" he asked, sitting on Mary's blankets with a tired frown. He shifted a moment, then pulled out Mary's wooden Blackfoot doll. "I'm meaning it, Emma, I'm tired. I got a long day tomorrow, and I need some sleep."

"In a short while," she said, looking up from her work long enough to give him a smile. "Please, Josiah."

He sighed wearily, looked about for some place to put the doll, then pulled out his knife to test its sharpness one more time. It was a habit Emma had seen him do all evening, as though his mind were busy with thoughts of tomorrow.

The awl punched through rabbit skins, then the two sides were brought together with sinew and tied off as securely as Emma could manage. Mary added the finished item to the other she had been holding in her lap.

"They're done," Emma nodded to the girl. "Go on and give them to your pa. After all," she added in a louder voice, "he's been so patient."

Josiah harrumphed, though from the way he sat, Emma knew he was curious.

Hiding the surprise behind her back, Mary got up and stood before Josiah with a grin so like his own. "They are for you," she said, presenting him with two furry objects.

All traces of annoyance vanished as Josiah slipped his hands into the warm rabbit mittens. Though they didn't have fingers, Emma had split the fur of the right hand to allow room for his trigger finger; he could keep warm, and still fire his rifle without first having to tug off his mitts.

"Do they fit?" Emma asked when Josiah remained silent. She crawled over to him, and inspected his large paws with satisfaction.

"I'm obliged to you fer thinking of this, Emma."

"I didn't do it alone. The rabbit skins are from Mary."

He tugged the grinning girl onto his lap, and hugged her tightly. "Yer gitting to be quite a trapper. Those rabbits have been good eating this winter."

With Mary on Josiah's lap, and Emma in front of him, the three enjoyed the companionable company of each other. Then Josiah spoke soberly, his face creased with concern.

"While I'm gone, keep close to the lodge. Take George whenever you go to the spring, but always keep yer weapons ready; it's further from the lodge than the creek, and not as safe."

Emma listened as Josiah gave them instructions. They had been using the spring ever since the creek had frozen heavily. Instead of melting snow, Josiah had shown them a spring in the crevice of the mountains where they could still find water.

Then Josiah prayed and talked with Emma while Mary fell asleep in his arms. When Josiah tucked the child into her bed, night had already descended on the Rockies.

"Goodnight, Cub," he whispered, kissing her forehead lightly.

"Don't go until I wake up," Mary mumbled pleadingly. She sleepily latched onto her Christmas doll, only shutting her eyes when Josiah had promised not to leave without her goodbye in the morning.

The night was cold, even by the fire, so when Josiah pulled off his hunting shirt before crawling beneath the blankets with Emma, Emma knew what he wanted.

"I thought you needed sleep for tomorrow."

"I'm needing something else more," he said, stretching out beside her. "This will need to last me until I git back."

"That's not very romantic, Josiah."

Grinning, he slid an arm around her shoulders, then kissed her so intently Emma felt his desperation. He was soaking her in as thoroughly as he could, to stave off later temptation.

Morning came too soon for Emma, but she was thankful when Will and George came to see Josiah off. With the trappers present, she didn't feel so small and alone as they stood in the snow to say goodbye.

Outfitted in a fox skin cap, grizzly bear coat, rabbit mitts, and deerskin moccasins, Josiah was protected against the elements with as much fur and hide as most animals could ever want. A large leather bag hung from two straps at his back, containing his supplies.

A light snow sprinkled the skies as Josiah shook hands with first Will and then George. Then he turned to give Mary a hug.

When he came to Emma, Emma was crying.

"Mary," Josiah called as he took Emma into a tight hug, "yer to sleep with yer ma, do you hear? I don't want her sleeping all by herself. She'll git lonely."

"I'm sorry, Josiah," Emma pulled free from his embrace. She straightened her hair, gathered her courage, and determined to be stronger. "I'll pray everyday for your safety."

"I'll do the same fer you," he said, looking her over slowly, drinking her in with his gaze. "God help me," he sighed, "I love you more and more every day. Yer a wonder and a miracle, and I ain't accepting what God's done fer me, lightly."

She trembled inwardly.

"I love you, Emma."

Her reply couldn't be spoken without more tears, so she rushed him for one last hug. They kissed, then his arms released her for the rifle at his shoulder.

Turning his face into the wind, Josiah spoke with his back to her. "I can't look back, or else I'll never leave."

Emma took a deep breath. "Go with God, My Love."

Without further lingering, he started for his destination.

She watched until his bearskin coat could no longer be seen through the line of trees, and when she imagined another glimpse, she knew her poor eyesight was to blame.

"Mrs. Brown?"

Emma looked up to see George, his rifle in hand.

"Do you need to fetch water, Mrs. Brown?"

Half paying attention, Emma turned her eyes back to where she had last seen Josiah. Life must go on, even if she felt it would never really begin again until Josiah returned.

"Order my [Josiah's] steps in Thy [God's] word: and let not any iniquity have dominion over me. Deliver me from the oppression of man: so will I keep Thy precepts. Make Thy face to shine upon Thy servant; and teach me Thy statutes."

~ Psalm 119:133-135 ~

Chapter Twenty

George's Responsibility

1837, Southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more."

~ Luke 12:48 ~

The wind awakened Josiah with a loud shrill that filled his ears until they hurt. He slanted his face into the wind, crouched even more into the robe, and waited. At least it didn't snow, he had that working in his favor.

Days had passed since he'd left, days without seeing another human. He figured the Blackfoot were still well ahead of him, so he didn't expect to find anyone soon. Still, those handful of days had been lonely for Josiah. In the past, he'd been able to endure such solitude relatively well, but that had been before Emma. Before he'd rooted himself to her presence. Now solitude only served to remind him of what he was missing. The vast expanse of wilderness felt emptier than it ever had, and Josiah knew it was because she wasn't there. He had prized his freedom in the past, but after this absence, freedom no longer seemed as important. He wanted Emma. He wanted to be home, with her, with Mary.

Growing weary of the constant howl, Josiah moved to his feet. The wind wasn't letting up, and he needed to get going. The sooner he found the Blackfoot, the sooner he could start for home.

George checked his rifle, going through the same movements he had seen Josiah do so many times before. Powder, flint, shot. And the robe. Don't forget the buffalo robe. He cleaned his knife, replaced it into its scabbard in his boot.

"Wish I was coming with you," said Will, his voice trailing off in a heavy sigh.

"I can manage," said George, double checking himself one more time. He felt as though he'd forgotten something, but couldn't tell what.

"There's no need for you to go hunting so soon," said Will, once more trying to dissuade George from his purpose. "We've still got deer meat left."

George grinned. "You aren't worrying about me, are you, Will?"

Will's bearded chin shot up a few inches, and his eyes deepened with reproach. "No, I'm not worrying. It's only that you're so green, I can't help but feel a little pity for something as helpless as you."

"I know what I'm doing," said George, his voice level with confidence he didn't exactly feel. "Are you sure you don't want me to help you to the Browns' cabin? I probably won't be back until sundown."

"It isn't safe for you to be out so long," said Will, his voice filling with worry once more. "I know Josiah said to keep hunting, but--"

"It's no use, Will, I'm going. If we run out of food, it'll be my fault." George secured the sash on his capote. "Do you want to stay with the Browns while I'm gone, or not?"

A bright, blustery day greeted George and Will as they started down the mountain. Will was in a worrying mood, one that made George anxious to be out and about. It was hard to be cooped up in a small shelter with a worrier. His worrying started to make him worry, and George decided that didn't do either of them any good. Better to hunt, and try to be useful; and better to keep those thoughts to himself, rather than remind Will of what he could no longer do.

It took only one knock on the split log door for someone to let them inside. That someone was Mary, his small pupil who always seemed glad to see him, even if his arrival meant more homework.

George helped Will to the table.

"Mrs. Brown," said Will, easing himself into a chair, "I hope you can talk some sense into this fool knucklehead of ours. He's planning to be gone the entire day. Going hunting, he says."

"Is it all right if I leave him here until I get back?" George looked to Mrs. Brown for permission.

"I am coming," said Mary.

"I could be late, Mrs. Brown. If Will's going to get in your way, I can take him back now."

"Oh, no you won't." Will glared at George. "I'm not getting stuck in that shelter by myself all day long."

"You're perfectly welcome to stay, Mr. Shaw," said their hostess. "With Josiah away, I'm grateful for the company."

As George started for the door, he noticed Mary, bundled in her winter blankets, pistol jabbed into her belt.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked her.

"I'm coming with you."

"No, you're not. Turn around, take off those blankets, and stay with your ma and Will."

Mary folded her arms. "I am coming."

"No, you are not." George could feel himself grow frustrated. He could easily refer to Mrs. Brown for help, but he felt his own authority was being questioned. And by a little girl. "I'm only going to say this once more, Mary. Stay here."

Mary sighed. She turned, looked to Mrs. Brown. "Ma, George says I can't come."

"Then I guess you'll have to stay." Mrs. Brown didn't look as though she wanted Mary to come, and it bolstered George. Mary could be quite determined, when she set her mind to something.

"I'll see you later," smiled George. He opened the door, turned to shut it and saw Mary's disappointed face. "Do your homework," he told her.

"I already have."

"Then do it again."

"You will need my help."

"I'm not arguing with a five-year old. Homework. Now." When she started to pout, George shut the door. A man had to show who was boss, put his foot down once in a while to make it clear.

He had taken about four steps away from the cabin, when the door opened.

"Mr. Hughes?" Mrs. Brown called him back. "Are you quite sure you won't take Mary? As much as I don't like her leaving the safety of this cabin, she was born to these mountains and you were not."

George's pride deflated a bit. "I'm sure, Mrs. Brown."

"You will make sure not to go too far, won't you?"

He couldn't help the scowl he was sure he gave. "Good day, Mrs. Brown."

"Good day, then." The doubt in her voice only made George more determined than ever. He wended his way through the trees, and started toward the valley below when he caught the sound of a girl's voice, smothered by the wind but still distinguishable.

"George! George!"

He looked behind him, saw Mary in her snowshoes, waving something over her head as she hurried to meet him.

"I thought I told you to stay inside."

Her breath came in quick huffs, and when she caught up to him, she had to double over to regain her voice.

"You fergot something, George."

"If you're going to speak, use proper English."

"I asked Mr. Shaw what you took, and he said he couldn't remember if you had any food." She held out a small leather bag. "You can take my jerky."

A quick check of his pockets confirmed Mary's suspicion. He eyed the bag warily. He knew he'd forgotten something.

Reluctantly, George took the bag, tucked it into his belt. "Does this mean I have to take you with me?"

Mary bit her lip hopefully. "Ma said I could come."

He had lost, and knew it. "Very well, if you're coming, then come. But when I tell you to do something, I don't want any argument. I'm still your teacher, whether we're in school or not. Understood?"

"Yes." But Mary was too busy checking her pistol to pay much attention to him. She sniffed the air, examined the clouds, made certain of the ties on her snowshoes.

The decision wasn't hers, George never having given it to her to make in the first place; but he could tell the look of surprise that filled her face when he informed her they were going into the valley. He would brook no opposition, and to his satisfaction, Mary didn't give any. She simply followed.

Over the hours, his quick strides had to be shortened, for Mary couldn't keep up otherwise. He expected her to ask to be taken back to the cabin, and marveled when the request never came. She didn't even look tired. On the contrary, she seemed perfectly happy. Happy to be there, happy to be in their untamed surroundings.

As much as George tried to tell himself he felt the same, he couldn't quite work up the enthusiasm. His feet were cold, though he thought not dangerously so, and his face had numbed to the chill. When he stopped to look about, Mary took off her snowshoes, climbed onto a rock to bring herself to his height.

"What are you doing?" he asked, as she adjusted his scarf to cover his mouth and cheeks.

She shook her head, looked at him as though he should know better. "You are turning red."

"I'm warm enough," he said, but let her finish securing the top of his capote.

She hopped down, and he waited while she retied her snowshoes. The warmth of the scarf slowly brought feeling back to his face.

"Do you want to make a fire?" asked Mary.

"Only if you need a break from the cold," said George. He shifted the heavy rifle in his arms. "Are you tired yet? No? Then let's keep going."

It had to be far past noon, for George's belly began to growl so loudly even Mary noticed. Her eyes widened, and to his consternation, she giggled each time.

"I think this is a good place to stop and have lunch," said George, deciding on the meager shelter of a large rock to shield them from wind. He pulled out the buffalo robe folded into the back of his capote, glad to be rid of the hunch for a while. The robe unfurled onto the snow, George took off his snowshoes so he could sit without encumbrance. The novelty of moving about on snowshoes had long ago worn off. He no longer found it enjoyable to have to wear them everywhere he went, even to relieve himself.

Mary didn't follow his example, but hunted for firewood instead. He would have gotten up to help, but his feet felt heavy, his legs weary. He pulled at the small leather bag, opened it, ate only a portion to save plenty for Mary. Then he lay down, covered himself partially with the robe, and fell asleep.

The warm hearth comforted Emma, though her heart didn't rest easy as she ate lunch. Josiah was out in that cold, and now so was Mary. She had let the girl leave with George, knowing George would likely need Mary's help.

A cough shook Emma.

Will looked up from watching the door, his face creased with worry.

"You feeling all right, Mrs. Brown?"

Emma tried to shake off his excess concern. Her visitor was welcome, but the worry he'd brought with him had a tendency to spill onto her if she wasn't careful.

"Yes, Mr. Shaw, I'm fine. Are you certain you don't want any sewing? It would give you something to do."

Will grimaced. "Sewing is women's work. I never do it, unless there's a real need."

Sighing, Emma stopped making the suggestion. She had thought the tear in the knee of his trousers was a real need, but he didn't seem to think so. She tried to busy herself with work, keeping her mind occupied with prayer and not worry.

She didn't like her family being in so many different places at once, and prayed she had done the right thing in letting Mary go with George. Survival called upon every resource, even the very young. A howl of wind blasted against the log walls, renewing Emma's prayers for her family.

Darkness clouded George's mind. Something had changed. Something was different, but what? The wind. It had stopped, leaving eerie silence in its wake. He would have welcomed the peace before, but now, it seemed unnatural.

Alarm hit George like a bolt of lightning. Mary! Where was she? He had drifted to sleep, leaving the girl unattended.

He grasped the robe, shoved it back, only to find Mary sitting beside him on the large buffalo hide. Relief flooded him, and he dropped back with a loud groan.

"You must be very tired, George. I thought you wanted to go hunting."

"I fell asleep..." he rubbed his face, tried to shake himself from the haze of inactivity. "What smells so good?" He raised his head, saw the fire, and the meat cooking on a flat rock Mary had placed beside the flames.

"I caught a rabbit in my snare. Do you want some?" Mary cut a piece from the carcass, offered it to him.

"You were setting snares while I slept?" George sat up, grateful for the hot meal, though surprised it had come from a girl. "Hmmm," George tasted the meat and smiled. It was heavenly. He didn't even miss the lack of salt. Hunger had seasoned it to perfection.

"It will be night soon," said Mary.

It was then George realized he had slept the day away. Early evening tinted the clouds, huing them with soft pinks and yellows.

"Why didn't you wake me, Mary?" He ran a hand through his hair, cast his eyes about the land-- though for what, he wasn't certain. He only knew night would soon descend, and plunge these mountains into inky darkness.

A small, consoling hand lightly touched his. "Don't be afeared, George. We can go home in the morning."

"But... if it snows..." George groaned. He had been counting on following their tracks back to the cabin. Night and snow would obliterate them from sight. He was lost. Sadly, miserably, lost.

A tug on his hand made him look at Mary. "What?"

"Do you see that?" she asked, pointing to the flatted crown of a mountain. In the setting sun, he could see it easily. "That will guide us home," said Mary, turning back to the cooking rabbit.

Greatly relieved and yet greatly annoyed, George frowned. "What makes you think I need a mountain to find our way back?"

Mary looked at him simply, her childish intuition too perceptive to be so easily thwarted. "You were not lost, George?"

"Not yet, I wasn't." He accepted more rabbit, and found himself smiling in defeat. "I guess it was good you came, after all." One look at the gathering darkness, though, had him again worried. "We should build a shelter for the night. Do you know how your pa constructs them?" George's pride stung, for he had just consulted a child.

And not over something trivial.

"They aren't back yet." Will took another bite of dried meat, shifted on the buffalo robe Mary used for her bed. "I don't like this, Mrs. Brown. Not one bit. George and Mary should've been back by now."

It wasn't easy for Emma to agree, for she knew it would only feed Will's concern. "They were probably forced to make camp for the night," she said, placing the bar over the door. "You said Mr. Hughes intended to hunt in the valley. That's a fair distance, especially when you're keeping a slower pace because a child is along."

Will looked at her. "Sorry you let Mary go?"

Emma prepared her buffalo robes for bed. "Mary may be young, Mr. Shaw, but she knows considerably more than I in matters of survival. Mr. Hughes will need her advice. I'm sure of it."

"You aren't afraid for her safety?"

"Mr. Hughes will look after her."

Will chuckled, leaned back on an elbow and stared into the fire. "You're a strong woman, Mrs. Brown. I admire that in a female."

"Thank you, Mr. Shaw, that's good to know. Are you sure you have enough bedding to make yourself comfortable for the night?"

"I'll make do with this, thank you, ma'am."

With a tired sigh, Emma lay down. All this mitering, reminded her of her early days with Josiah.

Josiah. Please, God, protect him. Protect Mary, protect George. Bring them all safely home. Her soul filled with prayer, then rested as sleep closed her eyes.

The small lean-to didn't look like much, with wood tied together at the ends and propped up to form an upside down V, but it was shelter. George felt rather pleased with its construction. They had worked hard to find dead wood, low hanging branches-- anything that might be useful to help insulate them from the cold.

He crawled inside the long shelter, spread the buffalo robe over the tree boughs covering the floor. Mary hunched at the opposite entrance, her face tired.

"Climb in, but first, give me your pistol. I don't like the thought of waking up wounded because it accidentally went off in your sleep."

With a grin, Mary handed it over and went inside. She took off her blanket wraps, and using them, covered herself on the buffalo robe.

He had considered taking turns sleeping, so someone could guard the camp during the night, but decided against it. Mary was exhausted, and needed all the rest she could get. And with the buffalo robe in the lean-to, he had nothing but his capote and the fire to keep him warm.

After placing as much wood on the fire as he dared, George crawled into the shelter. He had heard of Josiah's stories of enemy using a night fire to find their prey, but felt he had no choice. They needed the warmth.

Using the remaining side of his buffalo robe, George pulled it over his shoulder. Mary lay at his side, wrapped in blankets. He heard her yawn.

George hefted his rifle in between him and Mary, so he could easily grab the weapon in case of trouble. He would stay awake for as long as he could, then sleep.

The crackle of fire, the sound of the light breeze, occupied him for several moments.

"George?"

"Aren't you asleep yet?" he asked.

She propped herself on an elbow, looked at him seriously. "Would you wait for me, until I'm grown enough to marry you?"

"What? Go to sleep."

"Would you?" she asked.

"Don't be ridiculous. Lay back down and sleep."

He thought she had obeyed, when she asked yet another question.

"What now?" he groaned.

"I'm cold."

"You have all the blankets."

"But I'm still cold."

He tugged up the buffalo robe on her side, draped it over the small huddled form. "Is that better?"

"Yes." Mary cozied into the robe. "George?"

"I wish you'd go to sleep. I'm keeping guard so you don't have to."

With a sigh of contentment, she shut her eyes. "I'm glad we're friends, George."

The simplicity of the statement made him smile. "I'm glad, too, Mary. Now quiet down and try to rest." He tucked the blanket under her chin, moved the robe to cover her ears.

She yawned again, and before long, he heard the soft rhythmic sounds of slumber.

Late into the night, he watched Mary sleep. The youngest of five children, George had been the baby of the family. As a youngster, his sisters doted on him, his brothers favored him. He was the family favorite, always being taken care of, always pampered, even by his aunt. Responsibility had never been his, and he'd never sought it out. Yet here he was, alone in the wilderness with a little girl who needed his protection.

He checked Mary, made certain her feet didn't stick out the other end and freeze.

With a tired yawn, George finally let himself nod off. For once in his life, he felt like a big brother.

When Emma saw the whitened morning sky, her heart sank. She hoped the newly fallen snow wouldn't hide tracks that George needed to use to find his way home. She reminded herself that such a tactic would be something she herself would have employed, but not Mary. Mary would give George direction, of that Emma was confident.

The meal of dried meat eaten, the bar taken from the door, Emma tried to settle into her normal routine of keeping house. Without Mary, though, the routine felt terribly empty, as did the cabin.

Seated at the table, Will drummed his fingers and waited, puffing out exasperated, anxious sighs. "I bet you never figured on being a trapper's wife," he said finally, his head cocked in her direction. "Let alone, being here," he swept his hand across the room, "here in this place, waiting for a little Blackfoot girl you call daughter. Strange the way life works out sometimes, isn't it?"

There had been no contempt in his voice, so Emma took no offense. She turned the page of the Bible on her lap, looked up at him and smiled in agreement. "Yes, life can be very surprising." She resumed her reading.

Fingers tapped the tabletop, worried sighs repeated themselves until Emma became so distracted, she could take it no more and closed the Bible. She had offered to read out loud, but he had politely turned her down.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Brown," he said, suddenly becoming still, "I'm not disturbing you, am I?"

It would have been discourteous to answer bluntly, so Emma set aside the Bible, put on her best smile. "I can read later. Right now, I need to leave and fetch some water."

"I don't think that's a good idea, Mrs. Brown." Will looked at his leg, as though wishing he could sprout a new limb by just willing it into being. "There's no one to escort you to the spring."

"I can manage by myself," said Emma, gathering her shotgun and capote. She didn't want to say it, but she looked forward to escaping the cabin, away from Will's fretting. Her husband and daughter already consumed her thoughts, and Will only made it worse.

"Things can get dangerous in a hurry, Mrs. Brown. I wish you'd wait for George and Mary."

Emma took in a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Please, Mr. Shaw, I'd like you to call me Emma. Since we have to get through all this together, it feels rather silly for you to keep calling me Mrs. Brown."

A twinkle of merriment flashed in those sky blue eyes, and he smiled. "Only if you'll call me Will."

"Very well." Emma returned his smile. "I'll be back shortly, Will."

"You won't take my words into consideration?" He looked at her, hurt, though not so hurt he didn't smile. "Do you need the water right now? It seems to me to be an unnecessary risk, Mrs. Bro-- Emma," he finished with a laughing shake of his head. The smile faded a little, and she could see worry line his face. "If something happened to you, I'd never forgive myself. I wish you'd wait for George and Mary to return."

The promise of not taking unnecessary risks had been extracted from Josiah, before he left, and she couldn't deny the wisdom in Will's advice. Disappointedly, she laid aside the capote.

"We really do need more water, but I suppose it can wait. For now, at least." She returned to the hearth, laid more wood on the flames.

"Thank you, Emma."

She looked at him over her shoulder, smiled when he did. "It's not always easy for me to remain inside, when I know my family is out there, doing things. Dangerous things I can't help them with. All I can do is pray and have faith, weak as it is." She sighed, sat down on the robes and took out her sewing.

"Can't say I'm much of a praying man, myself. I reckon God is catching up to me, though." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him massage the folded-over leg of his trousers, the one covering his stump. "I believe I'm about done running from Him. Reckon it's too late, ma'am?"

Emma looked at him with raised brows.

"I mean, Emma," he smiled.

"I don't like to think it's too late for anyone, Will." She hemmed a few stitches, paused when she sensed him watching.

"Didn't mean to make you uncomfortable by staring," he said, shaking his head with a sigh. "You've been putting me to shame, Emma, with all your composure and praying. I've been worrying, and all I got out there is George; you've got Josiah and Mary. Wish I had your faith. I really do."

"I don't deserve such praise," said Emma. "I've had my share of worries, and if you could ask God face to face, he'd tell you I haven't given Him a moment's rest this morning."

"Don't you give it any more thought, Emma." Will nodded to her adamantly. "They'll be home before you know it. Safe and healthy, and right as rain. You just see."

Emma smiled, picked up where she left off in her sewing. She prayed for Will, for George, and then pestered Heaven once more about her family.

She had just fallen into the rhythm of her work, when movement outside the door caught her attention.

"I hear something," Will muttered, his hand automatically reaching for the shotgun he had leaned against his chair.

Emma moved to the door, waited to see what she could hear.

"It's probably George and Mary," said Will, raising his weapon, "but we'd better be careful. Ho! outside!" he shouted. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"It's us," said a familiar voice. "Open up, would you? My arms are tired."

"That's George all right." Will smiled hugely. He dropped his rifle as Emma pulled at the heavy log door.

"It sure is colder here, than in the valley," said Will, moving inside with Mary under one arm and his heavy rifle under the other. He set her down, brushed the snow from her blankets, then looked at Emma in apology. "I'm afraid I've given you a hard night of worrying. Mary is perfectly fine, though I fear she might've twisted her ankle this morning, chasing after a rabbit."

"I'm all right, Ma," said Mary, as Emma knelt to look her over. "George carried me, but I ain't hurt."

George shot her a look, and Mary sighed.

"I'm not hurt," she corrected, though she sounded somewhat defiant. "I'm not, Ma. See?" Mary moved about, but Emma could see the wince on the girl's face and immediately made her sit.

Will easily leaned back in his chair as George fell into the remaining split-bottom chair at the table. The young man unfastened his snowshoes, took the buffalo robe from his capote.

"I take it you didn't find any meat," said Will.

"No, I didn't see a thing. Only rabbits." George pulled off his boots. "Mary managed to snare one, so we had a hot meal last night. But that was it."

"Hunting isn't easy, is it." Humor highlighted Will's face, surprising both Emma and George.

"You're looking very happy," said George, "considering we might starve if I don't find more food." George turned to Mary. "I'm not trying to frighten you, Mary, or you either, Mrs. Brown. We have plenty for now. But I see wisdom in going out every day. "

"I am coming with you," said Mary.

Emma waited for George to protest, but he didn't. He only nodded in agreement and shrugged off his capote.

"I nearly got lost, with all that fresh snow covering my tracks home," said George, disgust lacing his voice. "If it hadn't been for Mary, I'd still be out there, trying to find my bearings."

"You'd be dead, all right," chuckled Will, leaning over to set aside his shotgun. When he straightened, George frowned at him.

"It seems to me, you're taking a little too much delight in my failings," said George, in an uncharacteristic show of self-defense. "These Rockies are dangerous. Mary and I could have been killed."

"But you weren't," said Will, "and for that, I thank God."

"Yeah, well, I didn't hear any thanksgiving when I returned," said George, "just laughter."

Taking the pistol from Mary's belt, Emma unbundled Mary one blanket at a time. "Did you stay warm last night?"

"Yes, Ma. George and I built a shelter."

"Good. That's good." Emma sucked in a breath of relief, thanked God for her answer to prayer. George had taken good care of Mary. She didn't look hungry or cold, and was in fairly high spirits for one who had returned empty-handed-- save for a single white rabbit skin.

"And just where do you think you're going?" asked Emma, when Mary postured to stand. "You're going to rest that ankle."

"But, Ma, I need to check my snares."

"I'll do that," said George. "You be still like your ma says."

Mary folded her arms. "I don't want to be still."

"I don't care what you want, you'll stay put." George tugged his capote back on, gave Emma a weary smile. "Would you like an escort to the spring, Mrs. Brown? From the empty water bucket, I see you waited for me."

"Yes, thank you." Emma got to her feet, retrieved her coat from a peg on the wall. She checked her shotgun, while Mary looked imploringly at her to come. "Haven't you had enough excitement for one day?" Emma asked her.

Mary beckoned her to come close, spoke softly so the others couldn't hear. "George gets lost awfully easy, Ma."

"Don't worry," Emma said, patting Mary's hand, "I'll look after him."

Armed with weaponry and soft armor against the cold, George and Emma braved the outdoors once more for water, the bounty in Mary's rabbit snares, and wood for the fire.

Winter was refusing to let go, Josiah decided, as he tramped across the patches of snow in his moccasins. It was spring, though very early on in the season, for snow fell sporadically, followed by warmth. By Josiah's calculations, half a month had passed since he'd left the lodge, and he still hadn't seen any signs of the Blackfoot.

The afternoon grew long, forcing Josiah to stop and make camp. A fire burned brightly as he warmed himself and ate the bird he had caught. Tree boughs on the snow and dirt, covered with a buffalo robe, would serve to keep his body from direct contact with the still frozen ground. He wrapped himself in the second robe, then put out the fire. He was getting too close to the

Blackfoot-- he could sense it-- and didn't want the alert of a night fire to lead them to him unawares.

In the bitter cold, beneath a darkening sky, Josiah hunkered in his robe. He lay down on his side, hugged his arms about his rifle. Eyes closed, he remembered his last embrace with Emma, the softness of her kiss, the caress of her hands. He grew feverish at the memory, and had to get his mind on something else.

Josiah didn't remember falling asleep, but when he awoke suddenly, the sky was just turning to morning. Every limb, every muscle remained completely still. The noise that had awakened him came again, this time to fully awake ears and an alert mind.

Dropping his head, Josiah checked the flintlock's priming. There it came again-- the low nicker of a horse. This deep into Blackfoot territory, that horse would likely have an owner. His eyes flicked across the landscape, but he saw no one, not even the horse.

Careful to not make any noise on the boughs, Josiah tugged off his robe. He folded his hides, packed his few belongings onto his back, then stealthily followed the direction of the sounds.

Josiah stopped in his tracks when the rocks and trees thinned before him, allowing an unobstructed view of what lay beyond. Smoke drifted into the heavens from tall, coned shaped lodges, their outer walls covered with brightly painted decorations. Women sat outside, scraping skins, their voices carrying faintly on the wind of their husbands' successful hunts. Heart pounding, Josiah scanned the lodges, his eyes coming to rest on one in particular.

Nearby, horses had been hobbled to keep them from wandering during the night. Josiah immediately backed away, concealed himself when a broad shouldered man came to release the ponies so they could graze the patchy ground. In low, gentle tones, the man patted the animals, spoke to them in friendly words.

Friendly Blackfoot words.

Josiah had found the Blackfoot, but more importantly, he had found his mother's village. They looked to be several dozen strong, well armed and well fed. He rested his rifle harmlessly in the crook of his arm, took a deep breath.

And stepped forward to let himself be seen.

"The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous are bold as a lion."

~ Proverbs 28:1 ~

Chapter Twenty-one

Mercy in the Shining Mountains

1837, Southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"Let Thy mercy, O LORD, be upon us, according as we hope in Thee."

~ Psalm 33:22 ~

Outside the village, where the horses grazed quietly, Josiah stood before a Blackfoot Indian. Josiah signaled to him in peace, not wanting the man to act rashly. In alarm, the man quickly stepped back, his hand automatically reaching for the knife at his belt.

Josiah relaxed his stance even more, letting the Blackfoot recognize him. They were joined by a second man-- both known to Josiah. Their eyes glared unwelcome.

"Why are you here?" the second man asked in his native tongue. He held a solid flintlock rifle in his hands, and looked as though he wouldn't mind turning it on Josiah.

"My mother," Josiah said in Blackfoot, pointing his chin in the general direction of her lodge. "I have come to see her."

"You come to make trouble for her. It is not good that you are here. Leave."

"I will not leave," said Josiah. "I will speak to her."

The man aimed the flintlock at Josiah. "You have more beaver and horses to give Wild Knife?"

Josiah stiffened. He hadn't heard anyone say that name, since he'd been hauled to a tree to be whipped within an inch of his life. "Is he here?"

For the first time, the Blackfoot smiled, though his face lacked humor. "He is here. When he sees you, he will kill you."

"I will see my mother."

The two men were about to forcibly remove Josiah from the village, when a commanding voice stilled them. A man well known to Josiah approached, a robe of hides covering his body from the cold.

"Uncle," Josiah greeted his mother's older brother.

The man breathed heavily, and shook his head. "Why have you returned? You will only bring heaviness to your mother. When you are killed, she will mourn for you."

Josiah didn't like the fact he kept getting the same warning from everyone he met. The husband of Mary's mother apparently still harbored a grudge, and it sharpened Josiah's determination to get what he had come for and leave. "I want to take my mother with me. Please, Uncle, let me take her. I will go, but not without my mother."

Uncle turned to the two men. "Tell my sister that her son is here, but tell no one else."

The men looked at each other, then at Uncle. Reluctantly, they left-- Josiah hoped, to do as they had been told.

"How is my mother?" asked Josiah, as they stood watching the horses and the everyday activity of the village. "Is she well?"

"Her body is with her people, but her heart is with her son and his daughter." Uncle looked at him, and Josiah could feel his displeasure. "You will not come here again. If my sister chooses to go with you, then I will let her. But if she wants to remain, you will not return."

The forcibleness of Uncle's words made it clear to Josiah that whatever peace he had with the Blackfoot, was tenuous, at best. He had long ago worn out his welcome, and it was only for his mother's sake, that he wasn't killed where he stood. He had caused heartache and trouble to his mother's people, and now, standing with Uncle, Josiah knew he would never be able to return again.

A woman clad in a buffalo robe approached them. She looked at Josiah.

He had expected her, and tensed now that he saw her. "I have no beaver to trade," he said, hoping that would discourage her.

She let the thin, worn robe drop about her shoulders, and Josiah hated himself when he felt the old wants begin to gnaw at him. He'd been with her before, and knew what was under those animal skins.

"I ain't interested," Josiah said, momentarily forgetting to speak in Blackfoot.

She didn't understand, and stepped closer, until Josiah braced himself with his rifle. The woman stopped, but didn't leave. Instead, she sat down and waited.

Josiah couldn't make the woman go, and was afraid that if she did, Wild Knife would know he was there. He said nothing more, and ignored her presence by keeping his eyes from her.

Uncle grunted, and Josiah looked up to see his mother coming toward him. A buffalo hide covered her, revealing only her head and moccasins.

"Ma." He smiled, but she didn't return the gesture. Those piercing eyes looked at him, cut him like a knife.

"Why are you here?" she asked in English. The others watched closely, but couldn't know what was said, for they spoke no English. "You never should have come, Josiah."

The rebuke grated him, causing a pang of regret for coming. He hadn't been on good terms with his ma in a very, very long time, and he nearly gave in to past habit and left. He looked at her, and realized that was what she wanted. After all, Wild Knife was in the village. "Ma, Emma's with child."

Cora looked at him steadily.

Josiah could tell she was pleased, and continued. "She'll be needing help late this summer."

Cora nodded willingly. "I will come when you ask."

"I'm asking you to come now."

Her eyes narrowed at him in scrutiny.

"Ma, I'm asking you to live with us. Emma gets to hankering after female company, and yer already knowing how much Mary would want you to come."

Cora remained stone silent. She was waiting for more, and Josiah knew it.

"You'd be welcome in my lodge. And, I reckon..." he hesitated, "I reckon I'm needing you, too. Will you come?"

She looked at Uncle, and spoke to him in Blackfoot. Uncle nodded in agreement, then pinned Josiah with another of those disapproving looks before leaving.

"I will come," said Cora, taking note of the woman sitting in the buffalo robe nearby. Cora grunted, then looked back at Josiah knowingly. "Finish your trading away from the village. Wild Knife must not know you are here."

Josiah opened his mouth to protest that there would be no trading, but Cora didn't let him speak.

"I will meet you by the fork in the creek, Josiah." She left, and Josiah felt the relief of knowing his mother would indeed come. He had thought she would, but for some moments during their meeting, he hadn't been so sure. Her self-control often didn't betray emotion, and it took someone who knew her closely, to read those hidden meanings in her face, her voice. As her son, Josiah prided himself that he knew her better than anyone-- anyone but Grandpap and Uncle, that is. Her clan was tight-knit, loyal, protective of each other. It would be no small thing for Cora to leave, but Josiah knew she would.

He moved away from the village, kept out of sight behind a thick line of trees and rocks beside the creek. The warmer weather had thawed the frozen waters, though snow and ice could still be found on its banks. Feeling parched, he dropped onto one knee to dip his hand into the water. Then he saw the woman.

His heart sank when he realized she had followed him.

She was the wife of someone, though Josiah couldn't remember whom. It had never mattered in the past, only that she habitually sought him out whenever he came into the village. As much as Josiah despised himself to admit it, he felt himself drawn to her. Familiarity would not be ignored, and as she approached him, he drew in a breath and held it.

Silence surrounded them as she stared and waited. He shook his head, "no," but she removed her robe and spread it on the ground.

Thoughts wildly chased through Josiah's mind, and his senses clouded with want. If he gave in, no one would ever know. Emma would never find out, and she wouldn't be hurt. What harm would it do, if here in this secluded spot, away from everyone that mattered, he lay down with his old acquaintance and had a good tussle?

She reached for his hand, inviting him onto the robe.

Why did his chest have to thump so loudly? He couldn't hear himself think! His hand stretched to her, their fingers touched, and in that brief contact, Josiah remembered his promise to God and to Emma.

Panic engulfed him. He had been seriously contemplating sinning, and he, not even a full day back at his mother's village! His feet stumbled backward, and he turned and fled. Water soaked his moccasins as he frantically splashed across to the other side of the creek, away from the woman. Ice water shuddered into his veins when his foot slipped on the ice, plunging him backward into the water. He scrambled onto the bank and ran.

It wasn't until his legs, numbed from the biting cold, began to give way, that he finally stopped. He dropped onto his knees, grasped weakly for the pouch hanging from his belt. His hands shook violently as he tried to make his fingers work the flint and steel, until a spark kindled the tinder. He struggled to his feet, grabbed a handful of low hanging tree branches before letting gravity drop him back to the ground. He had to get warm, and get his wet moccasins and buckskins off.

Josiah rebuked himself as he huddled before the blazing fire, a dry robe from his pack clutched about him for warmth. He'd behaved like a frightened boy, and not as a man determined not to repeat the same sins. Then he remembered how strong the temptation had been, and clamped his eyes shut. Thank God he'd run. His powder was wet, his buckskins were wet, but providentially, his buffalo robes had been protected by the watertight leather bag he wore on his back. He was wet, but he was safe. He hadn't let Emma or God down, though the memory of how close he'd come left him frightened.

He checked the rifle drying beside him. It needed to be thoroughly wiped down and cleaned, for it not to rust.

The day waxed long, and Josiah finally tugged his damp buckskins on. He had to go back to the fork in the creek, for Cora would be waiting. He sincerely prayed the woman would not be waiting there, as well.

It was cold, but Cora resisted the urge to build a fire. It might attract attention, and she desperately wanted to get away before Wild Knife discovered her son had returned. Where was Josiah? He should have been here when she'd arrived at the creek. Instead, she had only found that woman. She waited too, and it only added to Cora's already mounting concerns. Had Wild Knife finished his revenge? If Josiah were all right, that woman would not be alone.

Cora didn't set up her hide lodge, but kept it bundled on the travois with her other belongings. She wanted to leave as soon as possible, just as soon as Josiah came.

Nearby, her brother sat with their father, both men quiet and solemn. It was not easy for her to leave her people, and her brother and his family. Even so, it gladdened Cora to know their father would come. He had insisted on leaving with her, stubbornly refusing his son's pleas to stay. He was old, he'd said, and his remaining days were few. Before he died, he wanted to see his grandson, his great-grand-daughter, and know how they fared.

An approaching figure caught Cora's attention, and she stood expectantly. It was Josiah.

"Ma, I'm thinking we best git out of here," he said, casting a hawkish glance over his shoulder. "Are you ready?"

"We are ready," she said, moving to the pony to harness the travois.

"We?" Josiah stared at her. "Who's coming with us?"

Cora nodded to her father, and he stood up.

"Grandpap," Josiah went to him, put a hand on his shoulder. "Yer knowing this is fer good? This ain't a visit. You'll be living in my lodge, from here on out."

The old man's eyes glinted with a mixture of wariness and hopefulness. "Am I welcome in your lodge, with your white wife?"

A smile creased Josiah's mouth. "You'll be even more welcome, since yer family."

The gentle kindness in Josiah's face when he spoke to her father, made Cora wonder. Something had changed in her son. Something subtle, and yet as big as the Shining Mountains the white man called the Rockies. Josiah had changed, and immediately, Cora's thoughts went to the white woman named Emma.

If change had occurred in Josiah, Cora was certain Emma was the cause.

To Josiah's great discouragement, the woman had waited for him at the creek, waited for him still, after he'd spoken to Grandpap and Cora. Thankful he had others present, Josiah decided to face her, and make her understand she must leave. The trick was not to do it in such a way that would anger her, for he needed her to keep his visit silent in the village.

He could feel Cora's gaze upon him as he approached the waiting woman. He flicked a quick glance at his mother, then turned to his old acquaintance.

"You have to leave," he told her, trying to speak Blackfoot as firmly as he could without showing anger. "There is no trading."

She didn't look as disappointed as Josiah had expected. She simply nodded that she understood, but didn't make any signs of leaving.

"My husband is dead," she said in a quiet voice. "I will be your wife now."

"I already have a wife."

"I will be second wife." She looked at him earnestly, pleading him to take her, too.

"I can't," said Josiah, grasping for the right words to make her understand. "I'm already hitched to a woman, and she won't share me with another. Do you understand?"

"I will be good wife. Not eat very much."

"I'm sorry," he said, shaking his head, "but Emma won't let me." He reached into his backpack, took out the first thing of value he saw that she could use for trade. His axe. He gave it to her, stepped back, and shook his head again. "I can't take you."

Her eyes held sorrow, but she no longer looked as dejected as before. She had something she could use for barter, and Josiah had no concern that she wouldn't be able to find another husband. It just couldn't be him.

Night blackened the sky, hiding the untamed wilderness from Josiah's tired eyes. He hunkered further down into his buffalo robes, more for lack of comfort than warmth. His arms were so empty they ached. He grabbed his leather pack, hugged it tightly to his chest.

Movement beside the dimming campfire caught his attention. With wide blinking eyes, Grandpap sat up and looked at him as though his grandson had lost his mind.

"I can't sleep," said Josiah. He rolled onto his other side, away from Grandpap's view. How he missed being with a woman. He hugged the leather supply bag-- hard lumps and all-- to his chest, and pretended it was the one someone he wanted most in all the world.

"You miss white woman?" Grandpap's voice came from behind Josiah's back.

"Stop trying to read my mind, Old Man."

Grandpap harrumphed. "You miss your wife. You miss the white woman."

Josiah turned to look at his grandfather. "Her name is Emma, and yes, I'm missing her. What of it?"

Grandpap only grinned. "It is good," he said, and lay back down.

"That's easy fer you to say," Josiah mumbled. "I'm the one missing her." He pulled the pack closer, and shut his eyes to sleep. As yellow hair the color of sunlight filled his memory, a smile spread across his lips.

Grandpap was right. It was good.

"It's snowing again," sighed George, as white flakes fell from the sky. "I bet you anything, it's not snowing down in the valley right now."

"I wouldn't know," said Will, sitting up on the robe by the hearth, "for I'm not a betting man. Not anymore, at least. Why don't you take Mary, and go see for yourself, instead of haunting the doorway like a restless ghost? If you want to get out so much, then go. Leave the rest of us alone to get some work done."

Leaning his shoulder against the jamb, George looked at his friend. Will had been talking more and more like a man who'd found religion, and George was beginning to think it was more than just talk. Will had been reading the Bible, praying like he meant every word, being careful of what he said and did. That morning, before Mrs. Brown and Mary had awakened, Will had shook his shoulder, roused him from sleep to ask for forgiveness. George had thought he'd been dreaming as he listened to Will repent of despairing when his leg had been taken, and for the harsh things he'd said at George's expense. George had forgiven him gladly, but it still made him unsettled, as though God were now waiting on him to do the same. Will had made peace with God. Did that mean it was his turn?

George frowned, turned to look back out the door. "Mary, why don't we try hunting elk in the Southern half of the valley, again?"

Mary looked up from where she worked at the table, his old law book open before her. "Now? I'm studying, George."

"Excuse me," he said, grinning. "After you're done, of course."

"Mr. Hughes?" Mrs. Brown moved forward with Will's axe. "We could use more firewood."

"Yes, Ma'am." He straightened as she handed him the tool. "I'll start now, before the snow gets any heavier."

"Snow won't last the day," said Will, tugging a thread of sinew through two sides of a rabbit skin. "Just wait and see. The clouds will part, the snow will start to melting, and it'll feel like spring all over again."

With an uncaring grunt, George shrugged on his capote. The weather teased him, making him think spring one moment, and winter, the next. He tired of snow, of the constriction of remaining inside the cabin. Even so, it was far better than the shelter Josiah had built them, and George remembered to thank Mrs. Brown again for the invitation for them to remain. It was easier for him to look after the family, with everyone under one roof.

Propping the axe handle over one shoulder, and grasping the rifle with a free hand, George made his way down the mountain. He realized with a smile, that he had come to think of Mrs. Brown, Mary, Josiah and Will as family, and not just as strangers trapped in the same place as himself. In an odd sort of way, he belonged here. He was useful, needed, even depended upon, and it felt good to be so trusted.

He paused a moment, heard the soft footfall of approaching moccasins, and smiled as Mary came running to join him. "I thought you were studying!"

"Are we going into the valley?" she asked excitedly. A bag of dried meat was tied at her sash, and her pistol looked primed and ready. With Mary tagging along, he never went hungry.

"Firewood first," he said, and let himself enjoy the cold breeze as they descended the slope.

"Is it May yet, George?"

"Nope. By my journal, this is still April-- the very last part of it, but still April." He didn't need to ask the reason for the question; Mary always asked the same thing, whenever she was thinking about Josiah, and how long he'd been gone.

George understood the brave look on Mrs. Brown's face, whenever Josiah's name was mentioned. Josiah had been gone for nearly a month, and no one liked to talk of the fact he hadn't returned. In quiet moments such as this, George toyed with the idea of going to look for him. Then he would remember the responsibilities entrusted to him, and dismiss it. He would be of no use to anyone, dead.

The firewood chopped, Mary helped him carry armload after armload back to the cabin. As they gathered the last of the wood, Mary's head bobbed up in alert. She cocked her head, narrowed her eyes as though listening to some faint sound that only she could hear.

"What is it, Mary?"

She put a finger to her lips, signaling him to be quiet. Her hand went to her sash, to the pistol he helped her to clean and keep loaded.

He followed her example, and felt for the rifle hanging at his back.

A bird sound whistled lightly in the air, and George smiled easily. He looked at Mary, noticed her eyes grow big and round. Frowning, he looked back at their surroundings. He could see nothing.

"Mary--" he started to say, but she quickly shook her head, put a clapped hand over her mouth to signal silence. "What is it?" he mouthed the words.

"Someone is here," she mouthed, her face sober with fear.

The bird sound came again, and this time, Mary dropped to the ground and George did the same. He'd heard Josiah speak of whistle talk before, and the way Indians had of communicating their presence to each other without alerting their enemy. His stunned mind struggled with the shocking possibility that they were being hunted. Even more frightening-- if their adversary communicated in whistle talk, it meant there were more than one.

George followed Mary's gaze, clutched his weapon when she drew her pistol. Nothing but ordinary terrain and some patches of ice were before him, and George couldn't understand how someone could possibly be there. He would have doubted Mary, but something within him screamed danger. It was pure instinct, instinct George didn't even know he had. He twisted about, scanned the slope above them for some kind of cover. They were exposed here, out in the open, without anything to shield them from gunfire or arrows.

He wondered if danger really did lurk out there, which would it be, arrows or gunfire? He stopped wondering when an arrow shaft whistled past him, nearly catching his capote. The sound of a firing gun spun him about, and he saw the telltale puff of smoke from another of their attackers, crouched behind a tree. Mary leveled her weapon, and for a brief moment, George feared she would fire. They didn't have enough ammunition for a prolonged firefight, and when she held back, he inhaled a sigh of relief.

"Only fire when it counts," he said, and she nodded in understanding. Another arrow shot past them, and he shoved Mary's head to the ground when she looked up. They had to get out of there, caught in a crossfire of bullets and arrows, with little to no cover.

He had no time to assemble a plan, to weigh the consequences. He had to act, and when he saw the Indian behind the tree move to a better vantage, George leaped to his feet, grabbed Mary like she was a rag doll, and made a beeline for the trees just behind them. The thwipp of an arrow kept George running, dodging behind rocks and trees, Mary tucked under his arm.

Someone shouted in a language George couldn't understand, and Mary screamed in terror. He turned to look, saw someone level a rifle, aim it directly at Mary. In a swift moment of raw reaction, George threw Mary behind him, and caught a blast of burning pain in his side. George raised his rifle, squeezed the trigger as the Indian unsheathed a knife to rush him. George staggered backward, tripping over Mary. He frantically searched for the second Indian, saw him step out boldly from behind the rocks, begin to draw his bow and arrow, thinking George had spent his only shot.

Mary placed the pistol into George's hand, and without hesitation, George aimed the weapon and fired. Surprised shock filled the man's face as he fell to the ground. Blood bubbled from his chest, and he pushed himself onto his back, facing the sky.

George grasped Mary's arm when she tried to rise, struggling to keep her out of the line of fire.

"I think they are dead, George."

"You stay where you are," he said, releasing her only when she stopped moving. He gripped the pistol in his hand, knowing it was empty but unwilling to give it up. The two men lay there, unmoving and apparently lifeless. He combed the trees, rocks, terrain for others. "How many, Mary? How many did you count?"

"Two." Her voice sounded so distant, he repeated the question in a loud bark. "Two, George! There are only two!"

Lightheaded, and losing his sight fast, George squinted hard at the two bodies, his empty pistol trained on them. "Go, Mary. Go get your ma."

Thick darkness smothered George like a heavy blanket. He was dimly aware of the hot wetness soaking his shirt, the searing pain, the touch of Mary's hands. Then he could see nothing, feel nothing, and the darkness overtook him.

At the sound of the fourth gunshot, Emma grabbed her shotgun and ran to the door. The gunfire was coming too steadily to be from one, or even two people, and it sent a shock of dread through Emma as she looked outside. Will, newly moving about on his wooden leg, stopped her from leaving without him. He hadn't been outside except for brief visits to the latrine, but Emma, too flushed with fright and urgency, made no protest.

The lack of deep snow aided Will, as he hobbled beside Emma, doing his level best to keep up.

"Best not to rush in, Emma," he said, when she ran even faster.

They could hear nothing more, and Emma prayed with all her might that Mary was all right. She slipped once, ignored the hand Will offered, and kept going, all the way to the place George usually chopped firewood.

Emma's heart trembled when she saw Mary, on her knees, beside a fallen George. She didn't stop to look about, but hurried to help Mary. The girl had placed a heavy stone over the wound in George's side, to stop him from bleeding to death.

"Are you hurt, Mary?" asked Emma, laying aside her shotgun to tend to George.

"No, Ma. I'm fine."

"What happened? Who did this?" Emma tore away the store bought linen shirt, and unfastened the woolen pants to see the wound. She didn't wait for Mary's reply, but searched for shattered bones, anything that might prove fatal to the young man.

"God, have mercy," said Will, just now arriving.

Emma glanced up, looked at Will. "I think it's a flesh wound."

"He isn't conscious," said Will, struggling down on one leg for a better look. "Appears he's been through quite a battle."

"What do you mean?" asked Emma. She followed Will's gaze, saw the two dead men.

"What tribe are they, do you know?" Will looked to Emma, then to Mary.

"They are Blackfoot," said Mary, in a quiet, frightened voice. Emma noticed the girl held George's limp hand.

"I think he will live," Emma told her gently. "Who are the men? Do you recognize them?"

Mary shook her head. "I couldn't see their faces. It happened so fast, Ma."

"I wonder if there's any more Indians about," said Will.

"I only saw two," said Mary, squeezing George's hand. "Ma, he saved me. He threw me behind him."

"We'll do our best for him, Mary." Emma rubbed George's cheek, trying to revive him. A low groan escaped from his pale lips, and to everyone's relief, he opened his eyes.

"Mary," he whispered, "is Mary all right?"

Emma breathed a silent prayer of gratitude. "She wasn't hurt, George. I'm afraid you were, though. You caught a ball in the side. Do you think you can stand if we help? We need to get you into the cabin, but I don't know how'll we'll manage it, if you can't walk."

Mary had to help Will upright, then aided Emma as she tried to stand George on his feet. His hand grasped his side, applying pressure so he wouldn't lose more blood. Emma feared he would cry out in pain, but the young man kept mostly silent. He gave Mary a weak smile, and Emma realized he was being brave for Mary's sake, and didn't want to frighten her anymore than she already was.

Slowly, the small procession made its way up the mountain, and into the safety of the small cabin. Emma made George lay down on his bed beside the hearth, and Mary ran to get the medicine Josiah had told her of before leaving.

Will sat on the floor beside his young friend. "It'll have to be cauterized, George," he said firmly. "Reckon you're up to it?"

"Reckon I don't have a choice," said George, as Emma prepared a knife over the flames. "Does the child have to be here to watch?"

"She's the one who knows Blackfoot medicine," said Emma. "But I'll get Will to take her outside when it's time to apply the knife."

George closed his eyes, his face pale, his lungs sucking in rapid snatches of air. He was beginning to panic.

"Will, take Mary." Emma helped Will up, then coaxed an unwilling Mary with him to the door. "It won't take long, Mary. When it's done, I'll call you inside and you can apply the medicine."

Mary shook her head. "No, I will stay and help."

Emma bent down, looked into Mary's frightened dark eyes. "I know you want to help George. Right now, he needs you to leave for just a little while." She touched the girl's face. "I promise, I'll take good care of him."

Reluctantly, Mary let Will lead her outside.

Emma felt weak as she returned to George. She had to be sure the ball, all the material and debris had been removed from the wound, or gangrene would set in. There would be no amputation possible. George would die, if the wound wasn't properly treated. How Emma wished Josiah were here!

Emma did all she knew how, then lifted the glowing knife from the flames. George clamped his teeth onto a folded strip of leather, nodded to her that he was ready.

He moaned, but did not scream as the blade touched his skin. Emma tried to hurry, knowing every moment she took cost him dearly.

"Mary!" Emma called to her daughter, and the girl hurried through the door Will opened. "It's your turn."

Mary went about her task with a steady efficiency that reminded Emma of Cora. Mary applied medicine, inspected it, finessed it, worried over it, then let Emma bind it with strips of clean cloth.

"Did I kill them?" he asked Emma in a rough whisper.

Emma didn't know how to answer the pained soulful look in his eyes, and decided the truth was best. "I believe so. They weren't moving when we left. Did Mary fire her pistol?"

"No, she gave it to me." George leaned his head back, and shut his eyes. "Thank God, she gave it to me. I wouldn't have wanted her to..."

Silent as a mouse, Mary sat beside him, holding his hand. She didn't let go when Emma checked her to be sure she hadn't been hurt, and didn't let go when Emma gave her some supper.

"If she bothers you too much, tell her to leave you alone," Emma told George, when he awakened between naps.

His pale face smiled, but he didn't shoo Mary away. The girl needed to be there, and George seemed to know that. Tending him meant she could keep busy, keep her attention on something besides their harrowing experience that morning.

For the next two days, no one left the cabin unless it was to visit the latrine or to fetch water. They had enough firewood, and Will thought it best not to risk meeting with more Blackfoot, should the two men have company. It didn't help to remember that Cora's clan knew the location of the cabin, for they had been there before. Knowing how hidden the cabin was, made Emma think their attackers hadn't simply chanced upon it. They knew of the cabin, had known Josiah wasn't there to defend it, because they knew he was with Cora. Such boldness and detailed knowledge, made Emma think the men had come for personal reasons.

Though Emma didn't say it, she had a feeling one of those men had been the angry husband of Mary's mother. She could have gone to check the dead bodies, see for herself, for she had met the man when he'd whipped Josiah. But Emma wasn't brave enough to check, especially when it meant potentially encountering more Indians.

For two days, they kept close to the cabin, and kept their weapons ready. Then, on the morning of the third day, Mary bounded out of bed before Emma awoke, and went to the shutters.

"Pa! It's Pa!" she shouted, jarring poor George from his sleep, and startling Will to reach for his shotgun until he realized what Mary had said.

Thankfulness washed through Emma as Mary danced with excitement. They went to the door, threw it open, saw Josiah with two other Blackfoot. Emma couldn't see them, for all she saw was Josiah and his arms outstretched to her. She ran into those arms, hiding herself in his embrace.

He was home. Thank God, Josiah was home.

"Thy mercy, O LORD, is in the heavens; and Thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds."
~ Psalm 36:5 ~

Chapter Twenty-two

The Homecoming

1837, Southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is Thy faithfulness."

~ Lamentations 3:22, 23 ~

Josiah wasn't sensible of the relief that washed through him when he saw Emma, or the joy he felt when he lifted Mary into his arms. His mind was too busy, his senses too occupied with the terrible scene he'd just come from. He couldn't get two coherent words put together from Emma, though from the intensity of her sobs, he didn't need words to understand they had been through an ordeal.

"Are you hurt? Are you all right?" he asked Emma, tearing her away so he could get a good look at her. With Mary hugging him so tightly about the neck, and Emma sobbing into his chest, Josiah refused to let go of either one. "They ain't hurt, Grandpap."

Grandpap grunted, and moved to the open doorway of the cabin. A cry of alarm sounded from inside, and Josiah heard the unmistakable click of a rifle cocking.

"Don't shoot!" Josiah shouted, hauling his clinging family to the entrance. "George-- Will-- don't shoot!"

Stepping past Grandpap and into the dark cabin, Josiah saw Will, sitting at the table with a shotgun braced across his knee. "That's my grandpap, Will. He won't harm you any. He knows all about you and--" Josiah's eyes settled on the weak figure lying on the buffalo robes beside the fire. It was George.

George opened his mouth to speak, but Josiah heard no words. The pale lips shut, and George closed his eyes.

"Am I ever glad to see you," said Will, setting aside his shotgun. "We've had some Indian trouble."

"I saw them," said Josiah, finally releasing Mary when she tugged at his shirt to put her down. She went to George's side, and held his hand.

"Do you reckon they had company, Josiah?" Will squinted him a fearful look, and Josiah shook his head "no." "Mary said she didn't recognize them," Will continued, "but she was fairly certain they were Blackfoot."

"Oh, Josiah," Emma clung to him. "I'm so grateful you're home!"

He hugged his wife, but kept his gaze fixed on George. "Little Cub, go outside."

The girl shook her head stoutly. "I ain't leaving George."

"Mary." George's voice was only a whisper, but his fingers squeezed her hand and she sighed reluctantly.

"I always have to leave," she said, getting to her feet. "It ain't fair, Pa."

"Mary." The whisper came again, and Mary bit her lip. "I mean, isn't. Can't I stay to hear you talk to George, Pa?"

Josiah nodded to the door. "Yer grandma'am is outside."

"She is?" Mary's eyes lit up with delight. She ran through the entrance, and into Cora's arms.

"Ma," Josiah said over his shoulder, "keep her outside. I want to speak to the men." Emma gripped his arm, and he patted it, assuring Emma she could stay.

Hugging her granddaughter lovingly to her side, Cora led the child away as Josiah shut the door.

Grandpap sat down on the floor, and lit his tobacco pipe, while Will stared at him warily from the table.

The pluck Josiah had always admired about Emma, slowly resurfaced, and she quieted her sobs and dried her tears. She was with child, and Josiah figured it made those tears come more easily than usual. He led Emma to their bed, sat her down, and gently touched her bound golden hair.

Before he heard their story, Josiah went to George, and carefully checked the bandaged wound in his side. Blackfoot medicine had been correctly applied, and Josiah guessed it was the handiwork of Mary.

George's pale lips parted, and Josiah heard him ask a single, heartfelt question: "Are they dead?"

Josiah nodded. "They are. My family wasn't hurt, though, and from what I'm seeing, I reckon I have you to thank for it."

"That's very true," Emma said soberly. "He saved Mary's life, and took the shot that had been intended for her. Without him, she would have been killed."

Josiah groaned, sat down, and stared at George. "I'm mighty grateful to you, George, and I'm sorry this happened. It was because of me."

George looked puzzled.

"I reckon it's best Mary doesn't hear what I'm about to say," Josiah said quietly. "I'm glad she didn't recognize them two Blackfoot, lying on the mountain, for one of them is her dead ma's husband-- the other, his brother."

"Then, it was him." Emma squeezed her eyes shut. "I feared as much."

"I reckon Wild Knife came to kill Mary," said Josiah, "and possibly, even you, Emma. He must've had quite a surprise though, when he discovered you weren't by yerselves. No, sir," said Josiah, tucking in a loose corner of George's blanket, "he didn't count on this brave mountain man being here."

Tears came to George's eyes, and his voice sounded in a quiet whisper. "I'm not brave, Josiah. I was scared stiff."

"But you didn't let it stop you," said Josiah, "and to my way of thinking, that's what it means to be brave."

A tear rolled down George's face, and splashed onto the robe beneath him.

Josiah touched his arm. "Thank you, George. Thank you for saving Mary."

The young man tried to wipe away the tears, but when his arms were too weak, Josiah brushed the wetness away with his own hand.

"You're needing some good food to give your body strength," said Josiah, noticing George had expended a lot of energy in their small talk. "When was the last time you had fresh meat?"

"George shot an elk some time back," said Will, swiping away something suspiciously wet on his own cheek. "It was good eating while it lasted."

"Well then," Josiah got to his feet, "reckon I know what I'm doing today." He peered down at George. "You shot an elk, huh? Sounds like you're getting to be a regular hunter."

George smiled wanly. "Hardly," he said in a husky voice. "Mary's been doing most of the hunting." George looked as though he wanted to say more, but was too tired to continue. When he closed his eyes, Will did the rest of the talking.

"Between George and Mary, we haven't been going hungry, have we, Emma?" Will tossed Emma a jovial wink, then leaned back in the split-bottom chair he occupied at the table. "We've not been doing too poorly, if I do say so myself. Emma has even gotten me to use that wooden leg, and I've been getting about quite nicely."

After hearing Will use Emma's name so freely, and without the Mrs., it was difficult for Josiah to feel relaxed and friendly toward Will. He looked about the lodge, and realized the two trappers had been living there for some time. When had that happened? And when had Will started calling Emma by her first name?

Grandpap muttered to Josiah in Blackfoot, and the cautious look returned to Will's face. It was hard to blame Will for being uneasy. After the attack they'd just endured, Josiah was only grateful Will wasn't outwardly belligerent towards Grandpap. After all, this was William Shaw, a sometimes outspoken Indian hater, and he was at this very moment sharing the same lodge with a Blackfoot.

Grandpap muttered again, and Josiah nodded to the old man in agreement. Josiah searched for his shovel, choosing to speak in English so Will and George could follow the conversation. "Grandpap's right. I'd better get what's left of those bodies under the ground, afore anyone starts to assume there's a war between us and the Blackfoot."

"Do you think there will be more trouble, Josiah?" Emma asked as he measured out dry gunpowder into his horn. "Do you think the two men came alone? We've been staying inside, just to be safe."

"No, I reckon there ain't anymore Blackfoot around," said Josiah, "except for the ones at this lodge. As fer trouble, I ain't rightly knowing. George here wasn't looking to shoot himself any Indians, but if the Blackfoot find out, I ain't thinking they'll be so understanding." Josiah glanced up at Grandpap, saw that the old man agreed.

"Will you be back for supper?" asked Emma.

Josiah sighed heavily. "I want to, Emma, but I need to scout around and see if any tribes moved into the area while I was gone. And while I'm at it, see if I can't shoot some meat for George. The wound is looking good, but he's on the weak side, and I'd like to see him stronger."

She looked disappointed at the prospect of him leaving again so soon, especially since he'd just gotten there. Josiah knew how she felt. She smiled bravely as he stooped for his kiss goodbye, and the warmth of her slowed him, made him linger over his wife.

"I need to go, but I'll be back as soon as I can, Emma."

"I know," she said quietly.

He sensed she was near tears again, and was proud of her when they didn't come. He wanted to stay-- God knew how much he did-- but he couldn't. She touched his face, and he lowered his mouth for another kiss. With a painful moan, he pulled away. "Grandpap," he turned to the old man sitting on the floor, "will you look after things while I'm gone?"

Grandpap gave a grunting nod. He stood up to get out of Josiah's way, so Josiah could get out the door, and moved to the buffalo robes where Emma sat on the bed. There was little room for so many in the lodge, and Emma seemed momentarily unnerved when Grandpap came to sit beside her. Seated in the place of authority, the old man huffed his pipe and watched everyone with an air of quiet dignity. Josiah thought he resembled a Blackfoot chief, sitting there cross-legged next to Emma, confident and in control.

"Will, strap on that wooden leg of yours," said Josiah, slinging the pack he had used for the last couple of weeks, back over his shoulder.

The surprise in Will's face lasted for only a moment, then his smile came quick and ready. "I was wondering why you didn't ask me to look after things. Thought for a moment there, you didn't trust me."

Will's choice of words struck Josiah as rather interesting. Josiah said nothing, and waited as Will tied on the leg. The trapper stood, shrugged on his coat, lifted his shotgun, and hobbled to the door where Josiah waited.

The men stepped outside, and Josiah looked about for his mother. She sat by the corral with Mary, listening to the child talk of all that had happened since Mary had come to live with her ma and pa. They spoke in Blackfoot, engrossed in their conversation, and with each other.

"That your ma?" asked Will, as they moved past the happy scene, and started down the mountain.

"It is," said Josiah, letting Will negotiate the terrain on his own, instead of offering a steadying hand. He kept a watchful eye on the wooden leg, waiting to see how long it would take before its owner asked for help.

"Mind if I use that shovel?" asked Will. "It'll make a good cane."

Without a word, Josiah handed over the shovel. "You weren't bragging back there, Will; you really can get along on that leg."

Will smiled mildly. "I didn't want to mention it back in the lodge, especially in front of Emma, but we were all getting mighty worried about you. You've been gone for over a month, and I know for a fact Emma did a lot of praying for your safe return."

"Knowing her as well as I do," said Josiah, "I'd already figured as much." He squinted at the hobbling man. "How long have you been sleeping in the lodge?"

Will chuckled. "So that's it, huh? I was wondering what was bothering you."

"How long, Will?"

"For your edification," said Will in a careful tone, "Emma, herself, invited George and me to move into the cabin. That's a fact. We didn't go searching for any invitation."

"How long?" pressed Josiah.

"I can't be sure, but I reckon it's been about two weeks now." Will came to a stop, gathering his strength and breath. "I suppose I should take this as a compliment, seeing I'm old enough to be your and Emma's father. Makes me feel as though I'm not so elderly, after all."

"I ain't accusing you of anything, Will."

"I know you aren't."

Inhaling a slow breath, Josiah rested his rifle in the crook of his arm. "It kind of took me by surprise, when I came and found you and George living in my lodge. I hadn't expected it."

"Well now," said Will, scratching his thickly bearded chin, "I suppose if I was in your place, I'd feel the same." Will offered his hand in friendship. "I understand, Josiah. I'm not offended."

Surprised, Josiah looked at the hand, then back at Will. "Something's different about you," he said, accepting the handshake.

Will looked pleased. "I'm glad you think so. I've been getting myself right with God, and with George. And to prove I'm not just spouting hot air, I want to get things right with you. I'm asking your forgiveness for some of the things I've said in the past. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not taking back everything."

"I'm understanding yer meaning," Josiah said with a nod. "I ain't defending what I did to Emma."

The two men continued down the mountain, their pace greatly slowed by Will. Not once did Will ask for help, but steadily managed on his own.

Wild animals had gotten to the slain men, and Josiah was grateful George wasn't there to see it. Will seated himself on a boulder to keep watch with his loaded shotgun, while Josiah took the shovel and dug graves. When the men were buried, Josiah did his best to erase all evidence of the battle.

If the Blackfoot ever found out who had shot Wild Knife and his brother, Josiah figured they would go harder on George, than even himself. George was a white man, through and through-- a white man who had come to trap the land the Blackfoot called their own. If it was discovered George had killed two Blackfoot, the young man would die. Josiah had no doubt of it.

"What do you think will happen?" asked Will.

Before answering, Josiah thought about it long and hard. "I reckon when they don't return, their tribe will start to missing them." He handed the shovel back to Will. "If Wild Knife told anyone of where he was going afore he left, we'll have people coming to look fer him. And knowing the grudge he held against me, it shouldn't be too hard fer anyone to put two and two together."

"Then you think they'll assume you killed the two men?"

Josiah nodded. "They know nothing of you and George. Wild Knife proved that, by coming after Mary with just his brother."

"What do you think we should do?"

"There ain't much else to do but leave," said Josiah. He picked up his flintlock, made doubly sure of its priming. "As soon as George is strong enough, we'll leave the area." He helped Will onto his wooden leg, then both men continued down the mountain until they reached the valley to do a little scouting and some hunting.

Josiah had said he wouldn't be back for supper, so Emma wasn't surprised when he and Will were missing from the evening meal. Mary crawled to George's bed, and helped him to eat the pemmican Cora had brought. George remained quiet for most of the evening, too tired to do much else than slowly chew the small bites Mary kept placing into his mouth.

After eating, Cora came over to where Emma sat, and placed an expert hand over Emma's swollen belly.

"I know it isn't as big as it should be," Emma said apologetically. "I think I'm four months along, but I'm not certain."

"The baby is growing good," Cora said with such calm authority, Emma felt deep relief. For weeks, she had been concerned that the baby wasn't growing fast enough, but if Cora wasn't alarmed, then neither should she.

"I don't know much about such things," said Emma, as Cora shooed Grandpap away from the buffalo robes. Cora took his place, and waited for Emma to continue. "I've never been present at a birthing, but I did have a friend who had twins. I suppose I'm comparing myself to her."

Cora looked at Emma in wonderment. "You never helped a woman to give birth?"

Emma wondered at it herself, now that she thought about it. "I don't remember anyone ever asking. I was unmarried at the time, so I suppose I was never someone who people thought of when it came time to give birth." Emma shrugged. "My ma was frail for nearly as long as I can remember, and needed almost constant nursing, so I didn't have much time for other things. It kept me at home."

Cora looked at Emma thoughtfully, but said nothing.

That one look gave Emma the strong impression Cora had seen a lot more, than Emma had really wanted her to. She'd been solitary a great deal of the time in Indiana, and from that brief description of her life, Cora had easily discerned the truth. This wasn't something Emma enjoyed speaking of, especially to Josiah's mother. If she'd wanted pity, there were more excuses, more reasons she could have given as to why things had turned out the way they had, back East.

Painful reasons, such as her poor eyesight and lack of finding a husband. But at times like these, Emma tried to be thankful for what she had, and not for what she lacked.

A flutter moved inside her belly, and Emma touched it lovingly. She never had so much to be thankful for, as now.

"I will help you with the birthing," Cora said quietly. She turned to watch Mary feed George. "I have missed her."

It was such a simple statement, Emma wondered why she felt tears sting her eyes. "You raised her into a beautiful and loving child, Cora. I'm glad you're with us."

Cora grunted, but Emma saw something shiny spill down her cheek and knew her mother-in-law had been touched by the words.

She looked back at Emma. "He is not the same man."

"By that, I suppose you mean Josiah. Yes, he has changed."

Dark eyes examined Emma, and Emma felt oddly self-conscious.

"I think he loves you more than he has told me," said Cora. Before Emma could answer, Cora lightly touched Emma's hand. "You are good for my son."

Emma's tears came easily now, and she wiped them away as best she could before her face again became wet.

"What's wrong with Ma?" asked Mary, getting up from her vigil over George. Before Emma knew it, Mary had climbed onto her lap and was hugging her. "Don't cry, Ma."

"These are tears of joy, and not sadness," said Emma, hugging her daughter so hard Mary started to squirm.

A low groan came from George's bed. Mary was about to get up and check him when Cora stopped her.

"I will go," said the woman.

Emma and Mary watched as Cora spoke gently to George. She fixed his bandage, gave him a sip of water, and then adjusted his blankets.

"Thank you, ma'am," Emma heard George say.

"Sleep now," said Cora.

He obediently closed his eyes, and before long, was fast asleep.

The bed where George and Will usually occupied, lay on the other side of the hearth. Now that Emma had more guests, she moved her own buffalo robes against the log wall, allowing for another bed to be made beside hers. If George needed tending, Emma assured Mary, he would only be a very short distance, on the other side of Grandpap and Cora.

Grandpap lay down, and then Cora, so that Mary snuggled between her and Emma. As Josiah's child cuddled with Emma in her sleep, Emma thanked God for the family she'd been given.

Something moved into Josiah's face, and he blinked open his eyes. Lifting Will's hand, Josiah moved it back to the sleeping man's side. First the snoring, then the muttering in his sleep, and now the arm that kept stretching into Josiah's face. Josiah nudged Will in the side. A snort momentarily caught in Will's throat, and then the snoring continued.

Moving onto his back, Josiah lay awake in the buffalo robes, and stared at the clear night sky. He had imagined sharing this night with Emma, and not a loudly snoring trapper who mumbled and moved about in his sleep. How was a man supposed to get any rest, when he lay beside all that commotion? Josiah tugged at the robe, but it held fast under Will. Josiah had two robes with him, and wished he had thought to give Will a robe of his own, so they could sleep on opposite sides of the fire, instead of together.

It served him right for forgetting that Will snored like a sputtering kettle.

With a sigh of regret and longing, Josiah shut his eyes and tried to will himself to sleep. He sure was missing Emma right now.

Morning peeked through the shutters, slowly awakening the occupants in the cabin. It was difficult to do anything until everyone had gotten up, for the beds filled a great deal of the space on the floor. Cora served pemmican, and Mary looked happy to feast on such a familiar meal. The treat of pounded meat mixed with honey tasted wonderful, and Emma ate every bite of her breakfast in a state of bliss. It had been ages since she'd had honey.

After washing her hands, Emma picked up the chamber pot to bring it to George. He couldn't crawl outside like Will, and needed to remain in his bed so his wound could heal.

"I will do this," said Cora, taking the pot from Emma. "Then I will clean him, and change his bandage. Go." She pointed her chin to the door.

Emma thought she should put up some kind of protest, for up until now, George had been her responsibility. But Cora didn't give Emma the chance to decline her help. The Blackfoot woman spoke to Grandpap in their native tongue, and the old man grunted. What he had grunted about was beyond Emma, until she saw him go to the door and wait for her to follow.

"You too," Cora said to Mary.

After quickly making sure George was still breathing, Mary joined Emma and Grandpap as they went outside. The first thing Emma noticed, besides the crisp morning breeze, were the horses. She hadn't seen horses since the Blackfoot had led away Josiah's ponies after he'd been beaten. But here stood two horses, grazing peacefully on shredded cottonwood bark, their legs hobbled, for the rails of the corral had fallen into disrepair over the winter months.

Curiously, Emma went to a fallen rail, and watched the docile looking animals as they ate and blinked back at her. They must belong to Josiah's family, Emma thought to herself. A large travois rested nearby, its contents of long poles and animal hides resembling something of a dismantled lodge-- the kind that stood like an upside-down triangle on the ground. Emma had seen the Crows in such lodges, and hoped to see Grandpap set up his.

Instead of unpacking the lodge, however, the old man set about repairing the corral. Eagerly, Mary climbed through the fallen rails and spoke to the horses as though they were cherished pets. Emma watched for as long as she could, before her swollen ankles forced her to find a seat beneath a tree.

She rubbed her feet, trying to ignore the pain in her lower back. In spite of her fears that the baby wasn't growing as big and as fast as it should, Emma felt her own body was growing uncommonly large. Her deerskin gown had become so snug, Emma kept a blanket shawl around her at all times for the sake of modesty. At this rate, she wouldn't be able to wear the gown until after the baby came. She tried to reason away a sudden burst of panic. All this swelling would go away, wouldn't it? Emma prayed it would.

The nicker of horses made Emma look back at the corral. When she saw the ponies looking in a particular direction, their ears perked in attention, Emma turned to see what it was they were sensing.

Grandpap dropped a long rail, and lifted a hand in greeting to someone coming up the mountain. Since he hadn't went for his rifle, Emma assumed it was not a hostile presence.

Josiah. It had to be Josiah. Emma struggled to her feet, straightened her aching back. She thanked God as Josiah came into view, for he was safe, and he was home. He carried no meat, no wet hides, nothing that showed his hunt had been successful. In spite of his lack, she watched with heartwarming delight as his eyes met hers and he smiled broadly. Will hobbled beside him, looking somewhat tired from so much travel on his wooden leg.

"How's young George doing?" Will called to her.

"He's doing well," said Emma, bracing herself as Josiah came straight toward her, and enveloped her in a great bear hug. She was so happy, she forgot to breathe-- or rather, she breathed, and wasn't aware of it. Were the birds singing? She didn't know, for she couldn't hear them, only the sound of her own heart, as Josiah pressed her to him.

"Emma, oh Emma," he breathed, the words tickling her ear as he spoke. "I've missed you so much." His mouth searched for hers, and he kissed her so soundly, so completely, Emma entirely forgot that Will and Grandpap, and even little Mary, were watching them. She forgot, and returned the kiss until a large hand moved to the small of her back. Alarm broke through Emma's consciousness, and she suddenly remembered where they were. It took every ounce of determination she had, to try and push him away.

"Emma," he said, not letting go, "I want--"

"I know what you want," she said, glancing nervously at Will and Grandpap, "but this isn't the time or the place for it."

Josiah grinned. "Say my name again, Emma." He tugged at her playfully, weakening her resolve.

"Please, Josiah, not now."

He hugged her again, and she heard a steadying breath shudder through his lungs. "I sure do love to hear you say my name," he whispered.

"Will," Emma waved a hand over Josiah's shoulder as the man grinned at them, "have you and Josiah eaten this morning?"

A low rumble moved through Josiah's chest. "I don't need any food but you, Emma."

"Hush," she said slapping his arm, "they'll hear you. It's time to let me go."

"Never," he whispered. Fearing he might pull her back into another passionate kiss, she struggled to free herself from his arms. He groaned painfully, but let her out of his grasp.

Trying to recover some measure of dignity, Emma straightened her deerskin dress, and hurriedly gathered the end of the shawl that had dropped to her side during their embrace.

"You've been doing some growing while I was away," said Josiah, looking at her and the swollen belly. "Have you been doing all right? Is the baby still moving?"

She smarted a little at the observation, but hurried to answer the concern in his voice. "I'm well, and the baby has been moving, especially when I'm trying to sleep." She looked back at Will, who was staring warily at Grandpap, who, in turn, was staring cautiously at Will.

Josiah squeezed her hand. "I need to talk to you, Emma."

"Later, Josiah, please."

He sighed loudly, bordering on the impatient. "All right, Emma, I'll wait. But I haven't had a chance to enjoy you yet, let alone talk to you, and I ain't going to wait fer very long. Tonight, you and I are going to share a buffaler robe."

Panic made Emma hesitate. She pictured the crowded cabin, everyone in their beds before the hearth, trying to sleep while Josiah and she were kissing. "If you haven't noticed, Josiah, we have company. That means we have no privacy."

He frowned. "I ain't needing any."

"But I do," said Emma. "Josiah, the cabin is already crowded. Now that you're home, we're going to be stepping over each other just to get from one end of the room to the other. We won't have a private moment to ourselves."

Grandpap approached them. "Did you find horses?" he asked his grandson.

"Yeah, we found them," said Josiah, still wearing a scowl. "Wild Knife hid them in a stand of trees, North of here."

Puzzled, Emma looked at Josiah. "What horses?" she asked.

"Wild Knife's and his brother's," said Josiah, stepping back from her, as though he needed the distance. "They hid them, so you and Mary wouldn't know anyone was on the mountain. I left them hobbled, right where I found them. Gave 'em some cottonwood, and made sure they could drink from the creek. I ain't wanting to bring them up here, in case any Blackfoot come calling. It won't be healthy fer us, if they see Wild Knife's horses here."

"Then why don't you let them go?" asked Emma. "Isn't it too dangerous to keep them?"

"It's a risk I'm willing to take," said Josiah. "We'll be needing every horse we can get, when it's time to leave the lodge."

"We're leaving?" It didn't come as too great a shock to Emma, for she'd known Josiah would move her and Mary after winter had come to an end. Still, the thought of leaving their safe home, saddened her.

Josiah slung his rifle over his shoulder. "As soon as George is able, we're leaving." He looked at Emma, took a deep breath, then strode off in the direction of the cabin with Grandpap.

"We haven't had anything to eat all day," said Will, coming forward now that she wasn't busy with Josiah. "I don't suppose you have any food, Emma?"

"Cora brought plenty of pemmican," Emma smiled. "As soon as she's finished cleaning George, I'll get you some."

Will nodded gratefully, and carefully lowered himself to the ground. He leaned his back against a tree, pulled off his hat, and closed his eyes in the partial shade of the overhead boughs. He needed to rest awhile, so Emma left him as he dozed off into sleep.

After lunch, Emma noticed Josiah speaking to Cora alone by the door. She wondered what they discussed, and why Josiah kept his voice so low that no one could overhear. Josiah said something, turned his head and looked at Emma, then turned his back to the room and continued to talk to his mother.

At Emma's side, Grandpap sat with his tobacco pipe, his head nodding forward every time he drifted to sleep. Will sat on the robes beside George, working a piece of rabbit hide with an awl and some sinew. George was sleepy, and each time he yawned, so did Grandpap. Mary squatted beside Will, watching him work, and every so often checking on George.

The sound of Cora's hushed voice drifted across the room, and Emma looked back to the entrance. Josiah had picked up his rifle, and his free hand was on the door. Cora added something, Josiah nodded, then opened the split log door, and disappeared outside. Emma couldn't help feeling disappointed. She had known there wouldn't be any privacy in the cabin with so many people, but at least they could find a quiet corner and sit together.

At least they could have that.

Sighing, Emma pulled out some sewing, and tried to keep herself busy. She couldn't help thinking about Josiah. Where had he gone? Couldn't he have stayed awhile, before rushing off after wolfing down his lunch? A small fear tugged at Emma, making her wonder if the urgent thing Josiah had said he needed to talk to her about, was another confession-- another indiscretion-- a woman he had lain with, while he was at Cora's village. She regretted putting him off, but knew very well that she hadn't had any choice. If she lingered too long in Josiah's arms, they would need that privacy she had considered so important.

The afternoon waxed long, and Emma tired of the sewing. As she put it away, the door opened, and Josiah appeared.

"Emma," he said, disturbing the quiet atmosphere and awakening George from his rest, "get up and come outside." He didn't wait for her to ask why, but went back out, shutting the door behind him.

Without a word, Cora came over to help Emma to her feet. Emma wanted to ask Cora what was going on, for she had a feeling Cora knew. But Cora remained stone silent as she led Emma to the door. Without explanation, Cora gently pushed Emma outside, then promptly closed the door in Emma's face.

Puzzled, Emma drew up the blanket shawl about her shoulders, and looked around. It was then that she saw it. An Indian lodge had been set up some feet from the cabin, its frame of sturdy wooden poles covered by buffalo hides in the familiar upside down V.

The front flap opened, and Josiah stepped out.

Emma smiled as he came to her. "Did Grandpap give you his permission to put up his lodge?" she asked.

"It ain't his," he grinned. "It's Ma's."

"Oh, I see," said Emma, beginning to understand. "Is this what you were talking to her about?"

Josiah grinned, and pulled her by the hand toward the lodge. "I reckon you'll tussle with me now," he said, stopping before the entrance. He dropped his head, and covered her mouth in a long sweet kiss. Before she could recover, he took her inside.

The lodge was roomier than Emma had thought it would be, even though from the outside, its tall poles stood impressively against the sky. Hide covered the walls, and some of the floor, lending it a close feeling, even though there was room to spare. A fire burned in the center of the room, its smoke curling up through the hole at the top. She noticed a buffalo hide bed, made toward the back. It looked as though it were several skins deep-- deep enough to make even the stiffest back comfortable on the hard ground.

"Josiah," Emma looked behind her, and noticed he was busy pulling off his hunting shirt and moccasins. "Josiah," she said, as he came to her, tugging her into his arms, "I'd like us to talk first, if you don't mind."

"I mind, Emma. I mind a lot." But even as he spoke, he took a few steps back and refrained himself from going any further. "But I reckon yer right," he said, sucking in a deep breath. "I was wanting to tell you something."

Emma shuddered with dread, but stopped herself from being certain of what he was about to say. After all, Josiah had promised her-- had given his solemn word-- that he would be faithful. "What is it?" she asked him.

He looked hesitant. "I'm taking a risk by telling you, Emma, but I reckon I owe it to you, all the same."

Emma's heart stopped as she waited for him to finish.

"Back there, in my Ma's village, there was this woman..."

Emma shut her eyes.

"I didn't lay with her, Emma," he said hurriedly, stepping forward and taking Emma by the shoulders, "so don't you go looking like I did. I didn't. I was faithful to you."

Emma opened her eyes, and looked up at Josiah. "I'm sorry," she breathed shakily, "I'm sorry."

"You ain't got nothing to be sorry about," he said, rubbing her arms as though he were frightened she might pass out.

Emma shook her head. "I should have known you weren't going to make another confession. I should have known." She gulped in air, felt herself being lowered onto the robes to sit.

Crouched before her, she saw the wincing hesitation in his face. "I was faithful, Emma, but the truth is, I nearly wasn't." He rubbed her hands. "There was this woman-- one that later turned out, wanted to be my wife."

Emma felt dazed.

"I told her I already had myself a wife," said Josiah, his voice rising a little in self defense, "but she said she'd be my second."

"You mean, a second wife?" Emma pulled her hands from Josiah, trying to understand what he was telling her. "What did you say to this woman, Josiah?"

He frowned, a touch of hurt in his expression. "What do you think I told her?"

"Since I don't see her here, I suppose you told her 'no.'"

"That's right, I told her 'no,'" said Josiah, picking up Emma's hands to resume reviving her. "I told her you wouldn't let me."

"That was a good answer," said Emma, "because I wouldn't have. I don't."

"But, the thing is, Emma..." Josiah sat back on his heels, looked at her directly. "I almost went to the buffalo robes with her. Everywhere I went, she was there, waiting fer me. It would've been so easy to do it, but I want you to know that I didn't. I didn't forget you, or God. When she reached out her hands to me, I didn't take them."

"What did you do?" asked Emma.

"I ran." He looked embarrassed to admit it, and Emma realized he was doing his very best to be honest. "I ran straight into an icy creek, my foot slipped, and I fell in." He looked at her, a half smile on his lips. "That cold water did me a lot of good, Emma. I got up, and just kept running."

"Thank you, Josiah."

"I didn't want you to think I hadn't been tempted," said Josiah, "that when I told you I'd been faithful, you wouldn't think that it hadn't crossed my mind to lay with that woman. Because it did."

"I appreciate your honesty," said Emma.

His brows went up, and a smile spread across his face. "You do? You ain't angry with me fer being tempted?"

"Did you purposely find this woman?" asked Emma.

"No, she found me," said Josiah.

"Did you lay with her?"

"No."

"Then you don't owe me an apology. It's only human to be tempted, Josiah. But you didn't act on that temptation, and so you didn't do anything wrong. I'm proud of you for running."

He grinned, a soft light flickering in his eyes. "You are, Emma? You ain't just saying that to make me feel easier about what happened?"

"Oh, Josiah," she touched his face, and he lifted his hand and covered hers. "You've come so far, and changed so much. I'm so grateful. So very grateful to God for what He's done."

Josiah had held back for as long as he was going to, and he tenderly pushed her onto the robes. She felt the thick buffalo fur beneath her, then quickly glanced at the flap over the entrance, to be sure no one could see inside.

It was closed. They were truly alone.

His breath warmly skimmed her face, and his hand moved to the small of her back. He spoke, his lips brushing hers. "I love you, Emma. It ain't humanly possible fer me to love you anymore than I do right now. And yet," he said, his voice hushed and wistfully gentle, "I reckon tomorrow, that love will be even bigger."

She had no time to answer, to bask in the sweet comfort of those words, for his mouth smothered hers, and the only response she could give, was to return his love.

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth... His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me."

~ Song of Solomon 1:2, 2:6 ~

"Blessed is the man [Josiah] that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him."

~ James 1:12 ~

Chapter Twenty-three
Farewell to the Cabin

1837, Southwest of Three Forks, in what would later become the State of Montana.

"Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered..."
~ Hebrews 5:8 ~

Pain crept into George's dreams, twisting them into nightmarish visions of flying arrows, black gunpowder and death. He saw himself on the mountain, clenched with terror as the enemy surrounded him and Mary. They were no longer two Blackfoot, but thousands, and the more George looked at them, they changed into apparitions of his worst fears. He no longer fought against Indians, but against his father, his birthright, and the cries of the slaves that came with it.

With a wrenching gasp, George jarred awake to a dim fireplace and a dark cabin. He remembered where he was, and realized the nightmare for what it was-- just a dream.

"George?" Mary peered above him in the semi-darkness. "Are you all right? Are you hurting any?"

His chest thumped like a frightened rabbit, but he wasn't going to tell his little friend that. He tried to speak, but his tongue felt glued to the roof of his mouth. Before he could rasp out a request for water, the child crawled away on her hands and knees.

Dimly, the sensation of pain brought him more fully back to the present. He lifted a hand to the bandage at his side. It throbbed, but not as much as when he kept completely still. Movement seemed to make the pain even worse, so he did his best not to move.

How his mouth felt like cotton! George raised his head, looking for someone he could ask for a drink. To his puzzlement, he found everyone asleep. Frowning, he let his head drop back to the robes. It must be nighttime, he slowly realized. It explained the dying fire, and the lack of light coming through the empty cracks in the log walls.

Had Josiah really returned, or had he simply dreamed it? George was no longer sure. He was about to doubt Mary's recent presence, when she returned with an overflowing cup that dripped with water. He eagerly raised his head, and drank from the cup she put to his lips.

"Is your pa back?" asked George, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt.

The question appeared to trouble Mary. She put a palm to his forehead. "Don't you remember?" she asked timidly.

"I'm not feverish, Mary." He brushed aside her hand, intent on getting his question answered. "Is Josiah back?"

"You talked to him yesterday. Ain't you remembering at all?"

"Then he *is* home," said George, breathing in a deep sigh of relief. "I was afraid I'd only dreamed the things he said to me." George closed his eyes, then opened them to pin his wayward student with a reprimand. "What do I have to do before you erase that word from your vocabulary? 'Ain't' isn't a word."

"Sorry, George." Mary offered him the cup again, and he raised himself for a few swallows more. When she kept tipping the cup, cold water ran down his neck and wet his shirt.

"Enough," he said, pulling away before she poured the entire amount into his clothing. He lay back, gradually becoming aware that the cabin wasn't silent at all. Will snored at his usual loudness, this time, newly accompanied by Josiah's Grandpap. No wonder Mary was awake.

"Does it hurt a lot?" she asked, her eyes filled with fearful concern. It was a question she frequently asked, and it seemed to George, that no matter how hard he tried to console her, it never stopped her concern.

"I'm all right, Mary. I really am. I'm in pain, but it's livable pain, and will only last for a short duration." George sure *hoped* the duration would be short, but refused to burden the child with his fears. He gave her his very best smile. "Thank you for the water. It's helped immensely."

A pleased grin spread over her face, but quickly vanished when he winced as he gingerly moved his leg to stop it from cramping. Finding a comfortable position, he closed his eyes.

"George?"

"Huh?" he asked, hoping sleep would pull him into more rest. His body felt drained and he needed escape from the throbbing in his side.

"Do you want one of my dolls?"

"Whatever for?" groaned George. He remembered he was trying to console her about his well-being, and tried to lighten his tone. "It's very kind of you to make the offer, Miss Brown, but I

can do without it." When there was no response, George opened one eye and discovered Mary had gone. Thinking she'd grown tired of sitting up and talking with him, George shifted on the robe and tried to sleep.

Something nestled beside him, and George opened his eyes to find a wooden doll tucked into his blanket.

"This will help you," said Mary, covering his cold feet under the blanket. "She is my Blackfoot doll, the one *Naahks* made for me. When I can't sleep, I hold her and think of my family." Mary adjusted the robe beneath his head, and he had to admit he felt better for the attention.

"Thank you for looking after me," he said in a hushed voice, "but now it's time you went back to sleep. Go on. I'll be all right. I've had a drink of water, I'm all tucked in, and thanks to your doll, I have some company." He tried to coax her away, and finally, after a promise that he'd awake her if he needed anything else, Mary crawled back to her bed on the other side of Will, Grandpap, and Josiah's mother.

A warm feeling comforted George. He had friends in this cabin, and friends in the hide lodge outside. Closing his eyes, George let sleep and exhaustion overtake him. With Mary's doll beside him, his dreams were sweet.

A cool draft awakened Emma. She turned onto her side with a whimper, pulled down the corner of the buffalo robe that had been left open, then settled back into her warm nest to get more sleep. Drowsily, it occurred to her that Josiah had left their bed. She reached a hand to his vacant place on the robes, and felt it had grown cold. He'd left some time ago, only she hadn't realized it until now.

"I'm over here, Emma."

She lifted her head and saw Josiah, sitting cross-legged by the fire. "Come back to bed, Josiah." She opened the robe for him.

"I need to think," he said, turning down the invitation. His chiseled features were solemn, as though he had already been doing a great deal of thinking. "We can't be staying here, Emma."

At first, she didn't understand. Did he want to move back into the cabin before their night was over? Sleep muddled her thinking, and Emma sat up on the robes to fully wake up. The cabin. He meant they were going to leave the cabin and the area, altogether.

"I've been turning it over in my mind, and we can't afford to wait." The firelight played shadows on his face, making Josiah look severe and even ominous.

He was preparing for trouble.

"They're coming -- it's only a matter of time. It makes too much sense for Wild Knife's kin to come to my lodge, looking fer him. Problem is, when they do," Josiah flexed his right hand, his thick fingers tightening into a fist, "they'll find George and Will. I ain't having to tell you what that'll mean."

No, Josiah didn't have to tell her. She could picture several possibilities, all of them dangerous, and many quite deadly. There was too much bad blood between Josiah and the Blackfoot, and Wild Knife's death only complicated matters further.

"There's a big problem about leaving now, though." The fist opened, and the fingers rubbed his cheek in troubled frustration. "George. If only he had time to get strong. Moving him too soon could cost him his life, but if I don't, and we wait here for him to recover, he could die anyway."

"We have to protect him, Josiah."

"I'm knowing that. I ain't intending to let him go under, just because he helped our Mary. Even so, we're in a tight fix. Our good intentions might not be enough to keep that young man alive."

"I think you'd better talk to him," Emma said quietly. "If he's going to die, it's best he has a say in the decision."

Josiah blew out a defeated sigh. "I reckon you're right. I sure could use some more faith right now, Emma."

"I remember something in Psalms that might help," said Emma, trying to recall the exact words. "'The LORD taketh my part with them that help me...' I believe since George helped Mary, God will help George."

Josiah looked at Emma with something akin to admiration. "How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"You rattled off that verse like it was right in front of you."

"It almost was," she smiled. "I read that passage yesterday."

He nodded, though he still looked at her curiously. "I surely would like to be able to do that. Do you reckon I could?"

"Remember a simple Bible verse? Of course."

"No," he rubbed the worn knee of his buckskin trousers. "I'm meaning, do you think I could learn to read? Everything I know from the Bible is what someone else tells me. I surely would like to read them words fer myself."

Emma smiled. "I hope you don't think I'd purposefully misdirect you."

"I trust you well enough," he said with a small grin.

"You could learn to read," Emma nodded.

He sat there, quietly looking at her with growing intensity in his dark eyes. He didn't have to say anything for her to know his thoughts were returning to more intimate matters.

"Is there anything we can do about George right now?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Not until morning."

"Then come to bed, Josiah. Who knows when we'll be able to have this much privacy again."

He grinned broadly, got up, and came over to the robes. "If I have to build a separate lodge every night, I'll find a way fer us to be together. You can count on it." She averted her eyes as he pulled off his buckskins, and heard quiet laughter behind her back. "Emma, try not to ever change too much. Grow older, get larger, do whatever you need to-- just don't stop loving me. I reckon it'd break my heart if you did." The robes stirred, then she felt his arm come around her, and pull her back against his chest. "Yer my sunshine, Em. I can face a lot in life, knowing yer standing with me."

He moved the hair away from the back of her neck, and she felt his lips on her skin.

"You and God and family," he breathed, nuzzling her neck with a groan of satisfaction. "Except fer the trouble with the Blackfoot, I reckon it couldn't get much better than this."

Emma hadn't wanted to contradict her husband in such a tender moment, for she felt more problems lay before them besides the Blackfoot. It couldn't be denied, however, in the full light of morning, that the Blackfoot were a most definite problem. She sat on the buffalo robe by the hearth, trying to appear busy while Josiah spoke to George a few feet away. She'd succeeded in getting Mary out of the cabin beforehand, by asking Cora to keep the girl busy outside. Grandpap huffed on his tobacco pipe on one side of the table, while Will sat on the other, each staring at each other from time to time as though they were just checking. Talk of more trouble with the Blackfoot didn't help Grandpap and Will to get along, but so far, they seemed to tolerate each other's presence.

From the start, Will had wanted to be in on the discussion with George, but Josiah had insisted on talking to George alone. Afterward, if anyone had something they wanted to say, they could say it. But right now, Josiah wanted to hear George.

The young man looked the better for a good night's rest, or so Emma tried to tell herself as she listened to Josiah explain their situation. The truth was, George was weak and would need a lot of care before he was up and around again. Emma wondered why God had allowed such a serious injury when Heaven knew they needed to leave as soon as possible. Her pa's voice sounded in her memory, his confidence in God's purpose firm every time he quoted the favorite passage: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose."

How this would work to everyone's good, Emma didn't know. She only knew that God would keep His promise.

The quiet that filled the cabin after Josiah had laid things out before George, was heavy and somber. His lips pale, his eyes betraying a fear that his half smiling mouth did not, Emma knew he had understood the danger.

"My choice is easy, Josiah," George said with a false chuckle. The young trapper was propped up against some belongings, so he could sit up and interact with everyone else without having to lay there, looking at the ceiling rafters. "The way I see it, if I let you hide Will and I-- and we stay-- the Blackfoot will think you killed Wild Knife and his brother, and you risk getting killed yourself. So I refuse to let you hide me." George sucked in a deep breath, his voice cracking with the strain of speaking so boldly. "We need to leave this place. If I die, then so be it. Let me die without knowing it didn't cost you your life, as well."

"Think carefully, George. I could hide you and Will so no one would find you until yer better."

"No, it won't do, Josiah." A flush of color came to George's face, and he pushed himself forward to look Josiah straight in the eye. "I didn't save Mary, just so she could live without her pa. I won't do it. We're leaving."

Josiah sighed heavily, his expression argumentative but his voice silent.

"You've been a better friend to me than I deserve," said George, weakly dropping back. "Let me do this for you and the others." His breathing came in quick breaths, trying to recover the strength it had taken for him to "stand" up to Josiah.

The seasoned mountain man looked at the younger, and Emma saw the fondness in Josiah's eyes. "Don't you go wearing yerself out," said Josiah, bringing the blanket back up to George's chest. He was about to go on, when Josiah noticed the Indian doll.

"Mary put it there," said George. "She's trying so hard to help me, I didn't have the heart to toss it aside."

A subdued smile parted Josiah's mouth, half in sadness, half in determination. "You've got people here willing to do a lot to keep you alive, George. While yer busy sacrificing yerself, I don't want you to ferget that."

George swallowed hard, and moisture gathered in his brown eyes. Neither man said a word more, but parted with a nod-- a nod that acknowledged deep friendship. Will didn't speak up, and neither did Grandpap.

The decision had been made. They would leave the cabin.

The flurry of activity that followed amazed Emma. She didn't know what she would have done without Cora, overseeing the packing and keeping things in order while everyone hurried to clear out. Josiah brought up the horses that Wild Knife and his brother had hidden, though Emma couldn't recognize either of them as Josiah's former pony. The hide lodge was dismantled and packed onto Cora's travois, while Josiah constructed another travois for George.

One of the Blackfoot ponies was given to Will, and it took considerable help from Josiah to get Will onto the animal's back. Since Will only had one leg to keep him mounted, Josiah tied him into a saddle so he wouldn't fall out. The horse pranced about with Will, both enjoying the freedom of movement until Josiah hitched them to George's travois.

"Don't worry, little lady," Will said, looking down at a concerned Mary. "I'll take particular good care of George. This is a strong horse, and between the two of us, we'll get him out of here safely. We won't jostle him too much, will we boy?" said Will, patting the pony's neck. "Feels good to be on a horse again. Makes me feel like a whole man."

With a great deal of care, Josiah lifted the young trapper from his bed in the cabin and carried him out to the awaiting travois. George winced during the transfer, but not once did he cry out in pain.

Though Emma didn't feel easy about sitting a horse while she was with child, she had to admit she wouldn't move very quickly on foot and would most likely slow everyone down. So with the help of a tree stump and Josiah's steadying hands, Emma climbed onto the back of Cora's horse. The horse pulled Cora's travois, and with Cora leading the animal by its halter, all Emma had to do was keep her seat and pray it wouldn't harm the unborn baby.

Mounting the remaining Indian pony, Josiah hoisted Mary up in front of him so the two sat together. The girl looked pleased to ride with her pa, her face beaming with the grin that reminded Emma so much of Josiah. Father and daughter took the point, leading the way for the others.

As their procession moved down the mountain, Emma looked back one last time at the cabin that had been their home. The lodge was humble, but it had given them shelter during more than one blizzard, refuge from wild animals, and a cozy roof over their heads all those winter months. Josiah had brought her here shortly after her rescue, and she remembered with a smile her disappointment upon first seeing his lodge; then, it had been nothing but a fallen pile of old logs and a crumbling chimney, but with work and a lot of love, it had turned into a home.

Upon reaching the valley below, Josiah swung Mary onto Emma's horse.

"Grandpap," Josiah said to the old man, "take them South of here, and keep 'em moving fer as long as you can afore nightfall. Keep the camp cold, and picket the horses out of sight."

Grandpap grunted, and turned his pony to the head of the line.

"Josiah," Emma called to her husband, alarmed that he intended to leave. "Where are you going? We aren't leaving without you!"

To her consternation, Josiah said something more to Grandpap, this time in Blackfoot. The old man nodded, apparently in agreement.

"Josiah, if you're staying, then so am I!" Emma searched for a way to drop off the horse, but couldn't without help. Josiah looked at her quietly, knowing full well her threat was an idle one.

"I'll catch up, Emma. You go on with the others. I'll be along when it's all clear."

"What are you going to do?" she asked, pushing back the panic that threatened to bring tears to her eyes. "Josiah, please, let's just leave this place before there's anymore trouble."

His smile was grim, though Emma thought not hopeless. "I ain't looking fer trouble, Emma, but I sure ain't going to let it catch up to my family, if it's there. I'll only be about a full day's ride behind you."

"Please, Josiah--"

His face hardened into flint. "I've made up my mind, Emma, so there ain't any use talking. Daylight's burning." There was no sentimentality in his voice, no soft look that told her he was trying to be gentle. He didn't turn to look at her as he galloped away, and Emma had watched to see if he would.

Will trotted his horse to Cora's travois, and looked at Emma with understanding in his eyes. "He's trying to keep us safe, that's all. I'd offer to remain behind, if I thought I'd be much help."

Emma smiled kindly at Will. She had assumed they would leave together, but not like this, not separated from each other if trouble arose.

The horses moved South, but Emma kept turning about, trying to look back at Hollowtop Mountain, trying to see Josiah. Of course, with her poor eyesight, it was no use, and after awhile, Emma stopped trying.

Someone whistled, and Emma saw Will point to the mountain behind them. She turned about on the horse, saw faintly the column of smoke that held everyone's attention.

"What does it mean?" she asked, touching her heart with a trembling hand.

"He's burning the cabin," said Will, looking to Grandpap.

Grandpap gave Will an affirming nod.

"But why?" asked Emma.

Grandpap urged the procession forward, and spoke to her over his shoulder. "To show them he will not come back."

The finality of those words haunted Emma. Another cabin could always be built, but not in this land, not in these mountains. That bit of ground where their cabin used to sit, was where Josiah's pa had built his own lodge. Josiah had brought her there, rebuilt the walls, and they had enjoyed a relatively quiet winter in their mountain seclusion. Now it was gone.

"Smoke's dying away," said Will, twisting about on his horse to look back. "I can't see it so much anymore. Maybe we're just getting farther."

Behind her on the pony, Emma felt Mary's little hands, clutching onto her ma's deerskin gown so she wouldn't fall off. The reminder of her daughter's presence comforted the shock of Emma's grief. With the exception of Josiah, she had all that mattered, right here with her. They would go elsewhere, find some other place to call home.

But would they ever again enjoy the protection of four walls and a roof? With Josiah's nomadic life, hunting and trapping wherever he thought there were pelts to be caught?

Josiah. Emma turned again, hoping and praying to see his pony in the distance. She should be counting her blessings, but one of them was still behind.

"Mary," Emma said to the small girl, "if you see your pa, be sure to let me know."

"I will, Ma."

"Are you all right back there?"

"I am fine," Mary said stoutly, her childish voice more resilient than Emma's. She grasped more deerskin dress, leaned around and looked at Emma. "When will Pa come?"

Emma smiled at her expectant face. "Soon, I hope."

With a sigh, Mary disappeared behind Emma's back.

"George?" Mary called to the occupant of the travois beside them.

"What?" came the weak reply.

"Are you hurting any?"

"I wish you'd stop asking that, Mary."

"But are you?"

There was silence.

"George?"

"I'm well enough, Mary. Now please stop talking. You're wearing me out."

The pain in George's voice was noticeable, but Cora and Grandpap pushed on. Emma prayed George could hold on long enough for them to gain a safe distance from the cabin. They needed to leave the area. With each passing day, it would only become more and more dangerous to stay, and now was not a good time to slow their pace.

Emma prayed they hadn't waited too long to leave. If only they'd set out as soon as Josiah had gotten back from his journey to the Blackfoot village. If only she and Josiah hadn't spent half a day in Cora's hide lodge... if only... if only. The regrets mounted, but then, Emma remembered God hadn't given Josiah that sense of urgency until last night. God's timing was always perfect, and Emma rested her confidence in His providence.

She craned her neck to look behind once more, only to see a fuzzy horizon crowded with mountains and trees and sky.

The sun grew warm overhead, and still there was no sign of Josiah. Grandpap kept the pace slow enough to keep George from moaning, but fast enough to keep up with Cora. Though the only one not sitting a horse, Cora seemed to have no trouble at all-- not only in keeping up-- but many times leading her pony before her father's. Cora handed out pemmican for lunch, and still they kept moving, ever Southward.

The sky began to change color, signaling nightfall. Only then did Grandpap stop. Since they were in a hurry and trying to stay out of sight, Cora decided not to set up her hide lodge. Instead, they would sleep on the ground under the open sky, and pray the weather didn't turn against them.

Though Josiah had told Grandpap to keep a cold camp, the old man built a fire anyway, and Emma noticed the apprehension build in Will's expression. She sensed Will was starting to wonder if Grandpap had led them into a trap. Perhaps Grandpap had moved them far away from Josiah, only to let the Blackfoot take their revenge. Will said nothing, but was noticeably

easier when Cora put out the fire and scolded Grandpap. The old man merely harrumphed, and added another blanket to his shoulders.

The Rockies descended into a moonless night, making Emma miss the fire Cora had put out. On the robes at her side, Mary slept with her cloth Christmas doll. The other had apparently been bestowed on George, and Emma was grateful for the young man's long-suffering good humor in the matter. Not even Will's teasing before bedtime, when Mary had tucked her beloved Indian doll into George's blankets, had made George willing to refuse Mary's kind gesture. It had come with a price, though: Mary was not to ask him if he was in pain again-- at least, not until morning.

Thankfully, George had fallen asleep quickly, granting him some respite from the pain. When they had heard the soft snores come from George's buffalo robes, everyone spoke in hushed whispers so his much needed rest wouldn't be disturbed.

Now, in the darkness of their fireless and moonless camp, Emma lay awake and thought of Josiah. Was he safe? Emma prayed with all heart that he was. She wondered if it had cost him anything to burn down his pa's lodge, the sweet little cabin on the mountain. Then Josiah's unflinching face before he rode away, came back to her, and she sensed it had. Josiah had wanted to spare her the distress of seeing their home burn down, as well as the grief he might have felt upon knowing he could never return. His childhood memories must stay in these magnificent mountains in the Blackfoot country, but he would have to move on.

A familiar hope fluttered in Emma's breast, and she struggled to remain realistic. She knew Josiah would never leave this way of life, and scolded herself for even dreaming of the possibilities. He could not go back to the land of his mother's people, but the Rockies extended well out of Blackfoot country, and there were other streams to trap, other valleys to hunt.

Fatigue tugged at Emma as the weariness of the day gradually caught up to her. One by one, her thoughts were swallowed by a hazy sleep, until not even the loud chorus of Will and Grandpap's slumber could awaken her.

The chilly spring morning and the insistent hand rocking her shoulder, were finally enough to rouse Emma. Her eyes opened, and she saw a new morning beginning to dawn in the horizon. Cora handed her some pemmican, and Emma ate it without thinking. Grandpap was already making sounds that he wanted to get moving, and everyone was busy packing their things to resume the journey.

"Is Josiah back?" she asked Will, as he rolled up his buffalo robe.

"No, I'm afraid he isn't," said Will. "You know Josiah, though. He does a good job of looking after himself. He'll be all right."

Emma nodded absently, not really hearing the comfort Will tried to offer.

"Is Josiah's pa dead?"

Emma hadn't realized she'd been asked a question, until Will repeated it, and politely waited for an answer.

"Yes, I believe he is," said Emma, puzzled by the expression on Will's face. "Why do you ask?"

Will shrugged lightly. "Just wondering. Need any help with your bedding?"

Without making a big deal of the fact he was moving and that it hurt to do so, George carefully climbed back into the travois. No one present was strong enough to lift him by themselves, but George hadn't complained. He did, however, give a measure of protest when Mary replaced the doll at his side.

The small procession started out once more, and Emma kept a prayer ready on her lips for her absent husband. She knew he was only a day's ride behind them, but it didn't make her feel any less apprehensive. The fact Josiah kept back, told her a lot of what he was thinking. Though he hadn't burdened her with all his thoughts, she understood Josiah felt the possibility of being followed was at least big enough for him to take such a precaution. Enough days had to pass for Wild Knife's family to come looking for him, and Emma didn't think that had happened yet. Wasn't it still too soon? But Josiah was being cautious, and with so many in his care, she understood his abundance of caution.

It was easier to understand, after she'd calmed down, than it had been the day before. Obviously, Josiah had known that, and had acted without giving her a chance to get all emotional. At times, that man could be very annoying. He had thought he knew her so well, he could correctly anticipate her reaction, even before she could, herself. Well, when he returned, she would prove to him that he had been wrong. It didn't matter if she was with child or not, she was just as rational as Josiah Brown.

She thought of ways to gently punish him, when a gunshot pierced the stillness of the morning. Everyone reigned in their horses, and Will grabbed his rifle, his eyes steadily searching the Northern horizon.

"I only heard one shot," Will said to Grandpap. "How about you?"

"One," said the old Blackfoot, his flintlock at the ready. The wind whistled down the foothills as everyone waited, listening.

The distant explosion of a second gunshot echoed against the mountains, causing everyone to look at each other soberly.

More agonizing silence followed.

Grandpap's face filled with resolve. "I will go back," he said, directing his instructions to Cora. "Keep heading South. We will meet you in the Yellowstone."

Cora nodded in understanding, then watched as her father galloped away.

"Should I go with him?" Will asked Cora.

"No, we keep moving." Cora's eyes closed for a few moments, and Emma saw her mouth move in silent prayer.

One long day after another passed, and Grandpap and Josiah didn't return. They heard no more gunfire, and Emma tried to comfort herself that it was a good sign.

Then, a day after Cora announced they were nearing the land of the Yellowstone, Mary cried out that she saw a rider-- two of them-- heading in their direction!

Emma's heart pounded loudly as she waited for someone to recognize the riders.

"It's Pa and Grandpap!" came Mary's excited shout. The girl dropped off Cora's pony, then went running toward the two riders.

"Is it them?" Emma asked Cora a little frantically, for they were unable to stop Mary.

"It is," said Cora, her usual reserve breaking into a wide smile. "They are coming back to us."

"Thank God," said George.

"Amen to that," said Will, breathing a huge sigh of relief. He looked to Cora with a chuckle. "Not meaning any disrespect to your Shining Mountains, ma'am, but this trapper is mighty glad to have escaped with his scalp."

Whatever Cora felt, Emma didn't know, but Will was more readable; he watched Cora somewhat wistfully as they waited for Josiah and Grandpap to rejoin them.

"Pa shot a deer!" Mary shouted to anyone who would listen.

Relief flooded Emma's soul. No one had followed them, and Josiah was safe. Someone might still track them later, but at least they were away from the cabin and the immediate vicinity of Blackfoot territory. The dangers were still there, though now they were fewer in number.

It felt good to know that the farther they travelled, the safer they would be.

Former concerns in the process of being put behind them, Emma's mind moved on to the future, even before she saw Josiah riding up to meet them. Would he ever leave the Rockies, altogether? she wondered.

Her intent of gently punishing him forgotten, Emma smiled at Josiah as he trotted up to Cora's horse.

"I'm back, Em," he said, that handsome grin of his flashing with unabashed male confidence. "You can tell me how much you missed me later. I lost my food somewhere along the way, and thought I'd have to live on raw deer until Grandpap showed up. We ran out of his supply of pemmican a few days back though, and I'm sure enough hungry. Got any pemmican handy?" He leaned forward on his mount and gave her a kiss, which she willingly returned.

In spite of his rough talk, Emma could see the tenderness in his dark eyes. He was glad to see her, and gladder still that she wasn't angry. She didn't need words to know what he felt, for no matter how well Josiah Brown thought he knew his wife, she knew *him* even better.

"Do good, O LORD, unto those that be good, and to them that are upright in their hearts."
~ Psalm 125: 4 ~

Chapter Twenty-four

Women Are a Lot of Trouble

1837, in what would later become Yellowstone National Park.

"Though I walk in the midst of trouble, Thou [God] wilt revive me..."

~ Psalm 138:7 ~

Shortly after Josiah and Grandpap rejoined the group, and after a brief meal, they resumed their journey South, into the Yellowstone. Mountains jutted against a sapphire blue sky, their snow capped peaks wearing a perpetual garment of white. But in the lower elevations, spring had kissed the earth with fields of green and wildflowers in profuse abandon. The beauty was startling, even to Emma, who still felt the happy glow of Josiah's return. He rode at the head of the procession with Mary, the two of them talking and laughing, the strain of the recent dangers behind them.

Even Grandpap's weathered face showed signs of relief, wrinkling into a relaxed smile when they stopped later that day to make camp. He pulled out his pipe and sat against a tree, watching the others work until falling into a much needed nap before supper.

They had all been pushing hard, not stopping unless absolutely necessary, even forgoing the comfort of Cora's hide lodge at night. For days on end, they had slept beneath the open sky, keeping a cold camp to prevent from being spotted. Now they could rest.

Early evening cast its shadow on the ground, but Emma knew enough daylight remained to make a proper camp.

With Will's help, Josiah led their tired horses to a nearby field with enough grass to satisfy the hungry animals. Even in this relaxed atmosphere, Josiah didn't want the ponies grazing too far from camp, where they could easily be taken by others who might happen to be in the area. Josiah had earlier scouted out the land, pronounced it safe, but even still, Emma knew only a fool let his guard completely down in the wilderness.

On a bed of robes and blankets near Grandpap's tree, George slept soundly, no longer having to endure the constant jostle of the travois. The snore of the one didn't seem to disturb the other, until Grandpap finally stirred to relight his pipe.

After seeing to the horses, Will joined Emma and Mary by the fire while Josiah went to help Cora. Will and Emma watched in fascinated curiosity as mother and son set up the hide lodge, the impressively long poles pointing to heaven in the form of an upside-down cone.

"Wish they'd let me help," Will said, his blue eyes softening as he looked at Cora. "I asked, but she sent me away."

A harrumph came from the tree, and they turned to see Grandpap shaking his head at Will.

"I don't see you offering to help them," said Will.

Grandpap scowled. "It is women's work."

"That's not what Josiah said. He's over there, helping his ma."

Grandpap grunted, mild amusement playing in his elderly eyes. "Josiah is a white man."

"So am I," said Will.

Nodding, Grandpap drew out the tobacco pipe long enough to point its stem at the lodge. "Then you go help."

"I think I might just do that," said Will, straightening his shoulders with determination. Then he looked back at the construction already in progress. "Reckon I'd better not. Your daughter told me to go away."

Grandpap shook his head once more, as if Will had just proved his point.

Will turned back to Emma. "I don't think Grandpap likes me too much."

At this, the tree harrumphed.

"Which is a pity," Will said in a loud, deliberate voice, "because I think so very highly of *him*."

Emma wasn't sure if the comment had been rhetorical or not, but it stopped the harrumphing.

In the exposed open of the wilderness, the Blackfoot lodge welcomed Emma with the security that came with shelter. After the buffalo hides had been pulled taut over the smooth poles, and the inside lining had been secured, Cora and Mary carried their belongings inside. Now they had a home again, however temporary the location might be.

Looking tired but content, Josiah sauntered over to the campfire.

"George still sleeping?" he asked, looking over at the young man. "Good. He needs to get as much rest as possible."

"Are we leaving in the morning, Josiah?"

Josiah sat down, rubbed his buckskins with the broad palm of his hand and inhaled the perfume of the burning wood. "No, Emma, I reckon we'll stay here a few days. There's buffalo signs to the South, and I'm wanting to do some hunting afore we go."

"I'd like to be there for that," said Will, his face brightening at the prospect. "Maybe we can get some buffalo hides."

A grin formed as Josiah stretched himself before the fire. "That's what I'm thinking. They might earn us something at the rendezvous, especially since we've got no beaver to show fer all this trouble."

Emma crawled to sit beside Josiah, worrying her bottom lip until it nearly bled. Would this be a good time to ask, she wondered. He hadn't mentioned the subject in a while, and now that winter had passed, perhaps they could have another discussion. Not that Emma expected him to agree, but maybe he would at least agree to talk about it again.

It couldn't hurt to try.

Her lap being so handy, Josiah rested his head on the deerskin dress, closed his eyes, and with a free hand, brought the flintlock to his side. Always on guard, even in his rest.

"Tomorrow, we'll go hunting," Josiah said with a yawn. He scratched at his shirt, betraying the months he had gone without bathing.

Her fingers combed through Josiah's shaggy hair, working out the tangles he didn't bother with himself. Could he learn to tolerate civilization? she wondered. Would it be fair to even ask it of him?

The mountain man basked in her attention, his chest rumbling in a satisfied groan that signaled utter and complete contentment.

"Josiah?" She said his name with much hesitance, hoping to ease into the subject without argument. "Do you remember that talk we had, about not making any decisions before considering my opinion?"

His dark eyes flashed up at her, instantly cautious. "What of it?" he asked.

"I was wondering..." Emma bit her lip self-consciously, "if you've given it any more thought."

She could feel Josiah stiffen on her lap, saw his jaw tighten.

"Have you thought about my opinion, have you taken it into consideration?"

Lines deepened on his forehead, the eyes grew darker, and the mouth more determined. He understood. Even so, she repeated the request, blindly groping for the smallest crumb of hope.

"We talked of leaving the mountains. Do you remember, Josiah? Do you remember holding me, and telling me you'd consult my opinion? Then we tussled by the fire. Remember? Please tell me you remember."

He abandoned her lap, and Emma's heart trembled.

"Do you think I'd ever ferget, Emma?"

"Then you remember."

"I do."

"You told me you'd consult my opinion before making a final decision."

A frown creased his mouth. "I haven't fergotten what yer wanting from me."

"And?" She waited, hoping against hope his answer would be different than the one she knew he'd give.

"We ain't leaving the mountains."

It didn't come as a surprise to Emma, but the grief of disappointment that followed surged through her heart without warning. The urge to cry came strong. He hadn't changed his mind, not even in the slightest.

"I warned you not to git yer hopes up, Emma."

"I know." Her voice trembled terribly, even in those two words. If she said anything more, she'd cry. She knew it, and pressed her lips together to keep from making a scene.

Josiah groaned so loudly, the entire camp fell into a watchful hush. "This is the only way of life I know, Emma."

She nodded quickly. She understood.

"I never promised I'd leave, woman." His voice sounded almost harsh. "I told you I wouldn't change-- not on this." When she couldn't meet his gaze, he grabbed her arm and forced her to look at him. Her distress must have touched him, for his grip lessened, though his hand held fast. "I told you, Emma. I told you."

"I know," she said in a whimper. She looked at him helplessly, still pleading her cause, this time without words.

The hand let go of her. In one swift motion Josiah got to his feet, and grabbed his rifle. He rapidly moved to the outer perimeter of the camp, paused, then turned to look at her. "Emma?" He stood in the evening light, his face grieved but unflinching. "You promised to stay with me." He had spoken firmly, but the slight hitch in his voice hinted of desperation. His body froze, and it seemed even his breath waited for her response.

"I won't leave you, Josiah. You know I won't."

He looked at her, and the silence between them felt heavy. This disagreement had been long in the making, each wanting the life they knew best. Emma had already determined she would remain with Josiah, come what may; she was his wife, and her place was with her husband. But the constant fight to merely survive wore at Emma's resolve to mutely follow.

"Please, say something," she said quietly.

He opened his mouth, as if searching for his voice. When he couldn't speak, he walked away without looking back.

"Where's he going? I can't see where he went!"

"Easy there, Emma, he won't go too far." Will struggled onto his leg, balanced unsteadily and looked in the direction Josiah had disappeared. "I think he's just gone to sit with the horses. He'll be all right."

It had been there all the time, always present, though often unspoken between him and Emma. She hadn't forgotten their talk, and neither had he. He had only hoped she had reconciled herself to the future, that she had kept silent for so long, because she knew the future couldn't be changed. Josiah felt his feet were bound to the path he traveled, that to leave the familiarity of these mountains, would be akin to sawing off an arm or a leg-- to forget and toss away a part of himself. This land had known the tread of his moccasins, had soaked up his blood, had been with him throughout his entire life.

To leave, he felt, would be to die.

The ponies grazed nearby, their tails flicking at the maddening insistence of the flies. Josiah sank against the tree, watching the animals but not really paying attention to anything but his dark thoughts.

"God?" Josiah looked up at the darkening heavens. "What am I supposed to do? I sure could use some advice."

Someone cleared their throat, and for the briefest of moments, Josiah thought it was God.

"Hope I'm not interrupting anything," said Will, hobbling over to the tree. "Mind if I join you?"

"I reckon not." Josiah leaned his head against the bark. "Though I should warn you I ain't feeling much like company right now." He slanted a look at Will. "Is she all right? Is she crying?"

"Emma has gone to bed early," said Will, gingerly lowering himself to the ground. The older man looked about, his eyes taking in the broad horizon and rising mountains. "Beautiful evening, isn't it?"

Josiah didn't respond.

"Yes, sir, that's a mighty pretty sunset. It puts me in mind of a blushing woman when her man looks at her just right." Josiah heard the smile in Will's voice. "I've never had a woman do that for me, and I reckon I never will. Still, a man would do an awful lot to see the woman he loved blushing so prettily."

"You're taking a long time beating around the bush, Will. If you're going to disagree with me, I'd rather you just spit it out."

Will chuckled. "I sure don't intend to fight. Made up my mind long ago not to meddle in the private concerns of married folk."

Josiah looked at him in mock disbelief. "Then why'd you come out here? It sure wasn't to talk about the sunset."

"No, it wasn't." Will rubbed his good knee. "I couldn't help overhearing what you said back there to Emma."

Josiah chuckled grimly. "I reckon everyone else couldn't, either."

"You love that woman, don't you? Love her enough to try something new? Something you've never done before?"

"I love her more than my own life," said Josiah. "I'd do most anything to make her happy, to bring that purty blush to her cheeks that you were so busy talking about. But it ain't that simple. This life is all I've known. I just can't leave, and expect to find a way to feed my family elsewhere. I'm knowing Emma yearns to be with her own kind, but it ain't in my power to grant her wish. I'd have to give her up altogether, and I ain't willing to do that. She's my wife, she's carrying my child, and she's needing me too much."

"No one's suggesting you give her up." Will sighed, stretched out his stump and adjusted the wooden leg. "I don't know if you're aware of it, Josiah, but you could get along with white folks if you really wanted to-- folks like Emma's kind, as you put it. Yes, even her kind. People like her build churches and schools, and give their time to the poor. If you could learn to win Emma's heart, and her coming from money and all, then you could learn to be neighborly with others. It's in you. I know it is."

Josiah frowned. "How are you knowing that?"

"You get along good with me, don't you? Even before we were friends, you were neighborly enough it put me to shame."

"No, I meant about Emma coming from money. How do you know?"

Will shrugged. "I don't, exactly. I can just tell. The way you can tell a whore from a gentle woman, just by tipping your hat to her when you pass each other on the street. You know the

genuine thing when you see it-- at least I do. Emma carries herself like she's used to better; I don't think she's aware of it, for she's too sweet a woman for such nonsense. But I recognize it, and so does George."

Disbelief clouded Josiah's mind. "I've known a few women in my time, and I know what yer meaning about whores. Emma comes from gentle folk-- that's true enough-- but I don't see her in a rich house with fancy trappings."

"How many white women have you known?" asked Will, lifting a skeptical brow at Josiah. "And I'm not counting the whores."

"I reckon it's only been Emma."

"Do you allow I'd know more about white women than you?"

"I reckon."

"Then that's that." Will nodded conclusively. "If you ever find I'm wrong, then I'll take back what I said. But I don't think it's likely. I'm older than you, and I've seen more of life. I've also traveled more, seen folks of all kinds, and you get to know them from a distance, just by watching."

"Well," said Josiah, amused by Will's conversation, "I'll only add that you might know more about white women, but *I* know Emma. She's never told me anything of what you just said."

Will made no reply, but leaned back against the tree while Josiah returned his mind to the current problem.

"I'll grant you, though," said Josiah, nodding to the horizon, "it *is* a purty sunset."

Smiling in agreement, Will gave a good-natured grunt. In the silence of the wilderness, they let the sun dip behind the mountains until all rays of light were quenched by the night.

Sleep didn't come easily for Emma. She had to work for it, and even then, it didn't last for long. The others had been polite, Cora and Grandpap keeping their conversation to the buffalo, the weather, the food. She could see it in their eyes, though, the knowing understanding that something had happened between her and Josiah. Considering they were Josiah's blood relations, Emma had thought they might reprove her, but they didn't. If anything, Cora seemed sympathetic. Cora had even been the one to suggest Emma lay down in the lodge, and Emma had readily complied, grateful for Cora's kindness.

The sun had gone down some time ago, and Josiah hadn't returned. Will had limped back after supper, saying Josiah was fine, that he just needed some time to himself. But how much time? wondered Emma. She watched the flames in the fire pit, absently studied the smoke as it rose through the smoke hole at the top of the lodge. Even if Josiah were here, what would she say to him?

The sound of approaching footsteps prompted Emma to peek through the door cover. A large figure moved through the camp, pausing briefly to whisper something to Grandpap, who had volunteered for the first night watch; Will would be next, then it had been assumed Josiah would take the last watch, keeping guard over the horses and the campsite until morning.

Emma quickly lay down, and did her best to sound as though she were asleep. She wasn't ready to speak to Josiah. Not yet. She knew it now, as those footsteps came even closer. If she tried to speak, it would only result in more weeping.

Soft rustling announced Josiah's presence, then the robes tugged lightly behind her back. She felt a cold draft as he lay down. The others were sound asleep, the only one stirring momentarily being Mary, who had snuggled beside Cora. Then the lodge returned to its former silence, punctuated only by Will's snores and the crackle of the night fire.

"Emma?" Josiah breathed her name in a quiet hush.

She didn't dare move a single muscle, but kept her eyes firmly shut. His hair flicked against her ear, most probably as he came closer to see if she were awake.

"All right, Em," his tone sounded of resignation, his breath warming her cheek, "you don't have to say anything. I'm understanding."

Emma sighed inwardly. He knew she wasn't asleep, but then again, she shouldn't be too surprised for he could usually tell.

Silence once more, and then another, "Emma?" This time, he sounded more insistent. "Do you still love me? I need to know fer sure."

The beginning of tears were already pooling in her eyes. Without meeting his gaze, Emma rolled over and quickly buried herself in his arms. He moaned, wrapped himself around her, and squeezed her to his body in a tight bear hug.

"God bless you fer that, Emma." His chest heaved a great sigh, and his hand cradled her back.

He didn't say or do anything more, although Emma dearly hoped he would. She wanted him to speak, to say something to lessen the pain of their disagreement. As much as she wanted to stay awake and wait, sleep beckoned and she nodded in and out of consciousness. Each time she awoke, she found Josiah still alert, his expression fixed in deep thought. As far as she knew, he didn't get a wink of sleep the entire night.

Through the dim awareness of gradually waking slumber, Emma heard the hush of voices, the tones kept low as though trying not to disturb someone. The scent of pemmican greeted her senses, and without opening her eyes, Emma knew morning had come. Wearily, she blinked at the clouded sky, wishing she could remain in bed and get more rest.

Then she remembered Josiah. Sometime last night, he'd left her to stand watch over the campsite.

She sat up, pushed back the buffalo robe and noticed the hush around the fire lessen as people noticed she was awake. Cora, Mary and George were the only ones present.

"Where did Josiah go?" asked Emma, crawling out of bed with her blanket wrap. "Did he already leave for the buffalo hunt?"

Mary nodded, her mouth working the chewy meal. "Pa said not to wake you up until you was good and ready."

"*Were* good and ready," said George, slanting Mary a gently reproving look. The young man huddled in his blanket, someone's belongings propping him up so he could rest without lying on his back all day. The cold morning breeze blew against him, and he shivered noticeably. "Josiah said not to worry about his absence, Mrs. Brown. He guessed it would be late afternoon before his return, but said not to be concerned if it took longer."

"I wish he hadn't left without first getting some sleep," said Emma, going to the fire to warm her hands. It might be Spring, but the air still felt cold. Heat permeated her limbs, taking some of the stiffness from her muscles.

"He did not sleep?" asked Cora, handing Emma a breakfast of pemmican.

Emma smiled weakly. "I don't think so. He kept staring at the smoke hole in the lodge. I believe he was watching the stars."

Cora grunted. "He has much to think about."

Everyone in the camp knew of their argument. They had witnessed it firsthand, heard both sides, and now, it appeared, had decided to keep silent. Emma wondered if Cora blamed her for Josiah's current state of unhappiness. It would be understandable if she did. Lacking the courage to ask, Emma busied herself with the food and her own private thoughts.

"You going to keep quiet all day?" asked Will, squinting into the distance as he spoke. He patted his horse's neck, steadying the animal's skittishness. "You've hardly said two words together since we left camp."

"The white woman is giving him trouble," said Grandpap, as the three horses rode side by side into the sweeping valley. "She did not let him sleep."

Will turned in his saddle to squint at Josiah. "You are looking kind of tuckered out. Sure you don't want to go back?"

"Why?" asked Josiah, his horse's reins in one hand, a rifle in the other. "It wouldn't do any good."

Will spat at the grass. "Of course it would. She's not mad at you."

Grandpap harrumphed. "Women are a lot of trouble. White, red-- it makes no difference. When a man does not sleep, it is because of a woman."

"If she's the right one," said Will, flashing a grin at Grandpap, "her husband shouldn't mind losing a little sleep once in awhile."

"All women are the same," said Grandpap, his worn features studying the lay of the land. "Very much trouble."

"What about it, Josiah? Why don't we turn around and go back?"

"I haven't got anything to say to her, Will."

Will shook his head. "You're being just plain stubborn. Of course you do. Tell her something to make her smile. She's your woman, you know how."

Josiah didn't respond. If he talked to Emma, he'd only have her crying again, and then they'd both feel worse than before.

"Muleheaded nonsense," Will said under his breath. "I've never seen the like. Hopelessly in love with his wife, but won't even try to talk things out with her."

A thin smile stretched across Grandpap's mouth. Josiah saw it.

"I wish you two would stop badgering me," said Josiah. "And Will, I take offense at what you said."

"That so?" asked Will. "I'm surprised. Thought you weren't paying attention."

Josiah abruptly reined in his horse. Will stopped as well, and the two men stared at each other for a long moment.

"You're getting mighty thin-skinned, if you can't handle the truth," said Will. "I'm your friend, aren't I?"

Scowling, Josiah slapped the reins against his leg. "Yeah. I reckon."

"You still aim to take offense? You know I spoke the truth."

"But I already tried talking to her, Will. All I got was tears. She ain't never going to change her mind. She's dead set against being here, and all the talk in the world ain't going to change that."

Will's frown deepened. "Why does it have to be just your way, or even hers? Why can't you find some common ground so you two can be together?"

Common ground... Emma's words rushed back to Josiah. He remembered the night they had talked about his decision, and about taking her agreement into consideration-- she had said she wanted it "our way." At the time, he had thought it an odd thing to say, but now, as he faced this seemingly impossible situation, he saw wisdom in the statement.

"But what ground do we have that's in common?" asked Josiah, a new surge of frustration tugging him into despair. "She and I don't come from the same worlds. We're too different."

Will looked at Josiah, his bearded face open and frank. "If you love her, you won't give up until you find that common ground. I don't see any other way."

Her wide belly made it difficult to stoop to gather wood, so Emma tried to content herself with filling her arms with the sticks and twigs Mary collected. The girls circled the camp, each time going out a little further than before in search of firewood.

"Stay within sight!" Cora called to them, Emma's loaded shotgun at Cora's side; the weapon wouldn't do them any good if they wandered from the range of its protection.

"Ma," Mary tugged at Emma's arm, threatening to spill the carefully stacked wood. "A rider is coming. I think it's Pa."

"But it can't be, it isn't even noonday." Emma felt uneasy remaining in the open. "Come, we're going back to camp."

The child remained insistent about the identity of the rider, and when they reached Cora, Cora agreed with Mary.

"I don't understand. What's he doing back so soon?" asked Emma, shielding her eyes against the sun to see what she could. To her dismay, she saw nothing until Josiah's horse came much closer.

Mary ran out to meet her pa, jumping excitedly, plying him with requests to join him when he returned to Grandpap and Will. "I can hunt buffalo, too!" she said excitedly. "Please, Pa!"

Josiah dismounted, his attention fully on Emma. At his side, Mary continued to beg. "Hush," he rested a hand on Mary's head. "Go help Grandma'am. I'm needing to speak to yer ma in private."

"But Pa..."

He looked at her, insistent but gentle, and Mary obeyed.

After Mary left, Josiah remained silent. He studied Emma carefully, as if soaking in the very sight of her. Then his eyes darted to her shoulder, where her shotgun usually hung by its strap.

"Where's yer weapon, Emma? You know better than to leave camp without it-- even to gather wood."

Emma marveled at him. Even from that great distance, he had known what she had been doing. That man had eyes like a hawk.

"My arms were full, so Cora kept watch. We stayed close to the camp."

"Not close enough," he said, grumbling his displeasure. "I ain't comfortable seeing you without yer shotgun."

"We weren't in any danger, Josiah."

"I didn't come back to argue with you," he said, looking off in the direction he had come. "I'm needing to talk to you--" he turned, noticed George seated in some warm blankets under a tree, casually reading his law book. Josiah squinted at him, and George kept reading. "Would you walk with me, Emma?"

Bringing the shawl around her shoulders, Emma followed Josiah away from the camp. It was a beautiful day, a crisp day that beckoned a man like Josiah away from home, off to the excitement of the hunt. But here he strolled, silently burning daylight. A strong gust came through the valley, tussling Josiah's sun-streaked mane, causing her eagle feather to dance wildly in the wind. Emma's heart stirred at the sight.

"Josiah? Would you mind if I spoke first?"

"It might be best if you did," he said with a half smile. "What I've got to say ain't easy."

"I once told you I'd abide by your final decision, Josiah, and I meant it. Tell me it's been made, and I'll be silent."

"I reckon that would be mighty hard for you to do-- to keep silent," he said with an amusement Emma found somewhat annoying. "I know yer meaning it, Emma, and I'm grateful you don't want to go against yer husband." He brought her to a shady spot beside a tree, then helped her to sit down.

She looked up at him as he stared off into the distant horizon, an odd sort of wistfulness playing in his dark eyes.

"I must be changing more than I counted on," he sighed helplessly. He claimed a place beside her in the grass, turned his face to her and smiled. "I ain't giving in mind you, but I'm willing to talk about how I make my living, and where that might take us." He paused, took another deep breath and continued. "Will said we had to find common ground. I ain't rightly sure where that is, but I'm willing to consider the possibilities."

"Even the possibility of leaving the mountains?" Emma waited, pensive for his answer.

His brow creased in discomfort, but he nodded "yes" anyway. "Even that. Even leaving the mountains," he said quietly.

Emma gasped in amazement. Never in her life with Josiah would she have believed to hear him say those words. She could hope for them, yes, but not realistically. She fought back the urge to celebrate, for the fear shadowing his features turned the joy bittersweet. Josiah didn't know anything but these mountains. The mere thought of leaving everything he knew, must surely be frightening.

She touched his hand, and he grasped it in his own.

"Thank you, Josiah."

He kept his eyes on some fixed point in the distance, but his fingers squeezed Emma's hand with an intensity that spoke louder than words: He loved her. She knew he couldn't say it without betraying weakness, without admitting that the moisture in his eyes were tears and not just the result of staring into the wind. But tender words weren't really needed. The turned away gaze said it for him, that and those fingers tightly pressing her hand into his.

He loved her. He loved her.

Never before had Emma felt so at one with Josiah. She could almost believe the same heart pumped for them both, she felt it that strongly.

"Reckon we best head back," Josiah said finally, standing with a cat-like fluidity that to Emma, in her present condition, could only dream of. His hand pulled her to her feet, and when they came face to face, he seemed to forget they were leaving. "You really are a beautiful woman, Emma. It don't seem possible, but yer getting prettier and prettier."

"It isn't possible," she said with a laugh. "Love must be affecting your vision."

"I can see just fine," he said, tugging her even closer. He looked about quickly, as if to make sure they were alone.

"Josiah, surely not now. What about the buffalo?"

"They can wait." His mouth eagerly lowered to hers, but then he paused, the mention of the buffalo having awakened his survival instincts. "Grandpap and Will are waiting. They'll have found a good place to run the buffaler by now." With a loud, overdramatic sigh, Josiah released

her. He stooped for the rifle in the grass. "You win again, Emma. I don't mind saying it bothers me some," he chuckled, only half in jest. "Losing might get to be a habit with me."

She went to his side, took his arm, and smiled. "I don't want to win, Josiah, I only want agreement."

Grinning, he pressed his lips to her forehead. "Our way again?"

She nodded, grateful he had remembered.

"I'll try, Emma. I ain't promising much, only that I'll try."

Emma hugged his arm as they walked back to camp. The future still looked uncertain, but this time, whatever it held, she would have a say in their destiny. A thrill of excitement coursed through her, and her mind chased dreams she had long ignored. There were too many things to consider, too much to weigh for her to think clearly.

Josiah had opened the door and the possibilities dazzled Emma. Now, in the rush of newfound plans, she could only hold on tight, and pray God would give them wisdom to make the right decisions for their family.

"So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom... satisfy us early with Thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days."

~ Psalm 90:12, 14 ~

Chapter Twenty-five

The Big Decision

1837, in what would later become Yellowstone National Park.

"The slothful man roasteth not that which he took in hunting: but the substance of a diligent man is precious."

~ Proverbs 12:27 ~

Though no one in camp spoke of it, it was never far from Emma's mind. Josiah, Will, and Grandpap had shot enough Buffalo to keep everyone busy, so it didn't leave much energy to talk of the future while they fleshed hides, cut meat to dry and turn into pemmican. Josiah seemed grateful for the fact no one brought the subject up. He remained contentedly quiet, throwing himself into his work instead of the conversation he must've known Emma was eager to begin.

At night, everyone fell into their beds, exhausted from the labor. In the morning, they fleshed and stretched buffalo skins, until the men had amassed a rather good-sized collection. It was nothing grand or large, but still, Josiah expressed surprise at the amount of God's blessing. These were no beaver pelts, but buffalo robes could turn a tidy profit for a man like Josiah.

But Josiah was unwilling to slay the buffalo simply for their hides. When the carcasses began to outnumber the usefulness of simply the skins, he put a halt to the hunting. Others relied on the plentifulness of the buffalo, a fact everyone was reminded of when a Crow tribe made camp nearby. Josiah made no effort to stop the elderly and women who went out to gather the remnants of the carcasses he and Will and Grandpap had shot, only too glad that nothing would be wasted.

The Crows were uneasy at Grandpap and Cora's presence, for the Blackfoot and the Crows were long-standing enemies. Neither side did anything to antagonize the other, each keeping a careful distance and a wary truce. In between the silent hostilities stood Josiah, speaking for himself and the others, and putting the Crows more at ease. Very little trading was done, for everyone wanted to save their goods for the rendezvous that would happen in July. Besides, the Crows and the two Blackfoot in question, didn't seem eager to come into contact with each other unless absolutely necessary.

With all the excitement of the Indians and the Buffalo, it was easy not to speak of the future--easy, that is, for everyone but Emma. For several minutes every night, she lay awake dreaming of it, praying for it, planning for it. Then, Emma would fall asleep, too tired to think any further.

Not until some time after Josiah and Emma's talk, did the subject of leaving come up once more. There was little left to do now, but to wait for the remainder of the last freshly killed meat and the hides to dry, and of course, to rest. It was a calm, peaceful day, with everyone lounging about the fire. George rested under the tree with Mary, following her progress as she slowly read from his law book. Everyone and everything was at rest, until Mary suddenly stopped and asked George a question that had Josiah sitting up, wide awake and listening intently.

"When you leave after the rendezvous, George, can I come with you?"

George's brows shot up in surprise, and he quickly glanced at Josiah in obvious embarrassment.

"You're speaking nonsense, Mary. Please continue reading."

"But George --"

"No buts, and no arguing. Finish your lesson, or we'll stop early today."

Mary frowned. "Can't I come with you, George?"

With a frustrated groan, George wearily rubbed his eyes. "No, you can't come. You'll live with your parents."

"Then can we *all* come with you?"

"School is definitely over for today," said George, setting aside the heavy book. He folded his arms, and looked at Mary with a mixture of amusement and sadness. "Why all this talk of leaving?" he asked. "Don't you want to stay in the mountains like your father?"

"I want to go with you," said Mary, her face earnest and sincere. "Please, George, I want to come."

"That's enough," said George, hushing Mary before the girl could speak any further. "I don't want to hear any more nonsense out of you. Go sit with your pa, so I can sleep."

Mary sighed deeply, and watched as George reclined his head against the tree and shut his eyes.

"Are you still there?" he asked after several moments.

"I will be quiet," said Mary.

A frown formed on George's mouth but he said nothing.

Josiah looked thoughtful as he lay back down. He turned his head to look at Emma, and she smiled hopefully.

"I reckon you've been patient long enough, Emma. Go on and speak yer mind." He sounded reluctant, but at the same time, resigned, as though he knew this conversation had to come. He folded his arms beneath his head, and stared at her expectantly.

Emma wanted to ask if he were sure, but decided against it. She was doing good to get this far.

"Mary, come over here with me, would you? Cora, Grandpap-- this involves you both, so I'd appreciate your opinions."

Cora had to shake Grandpap awake before the old man blinked open his eyes and sat up. He didn't look as though he understood the quiet buzz of excitement that filled the camp, but Cora did. The Blackfoot woman sat with a blanket around her shoulders, her eyes sharp and alert.

Mary dropped onto the buffalo robe beside Emma, her mouth drawn into a wide grin.

"Can I go with George, Ma?"

"No, you're going to stay with us, Little One." Emma touched Mary's hand as the child sighed in disappointment. "After the rendezvous, Will and George will go home. You must accept that. It's simply the way things are."

Will leaned forward as if to speak, then shut his mouth and looked at Cora; Cora took no notice of him whatsoever, her attention fully on Emma and Mary.

"This family has a big decision to make," said Emma, addressing Mary and Cora and Grandpap, "and I want everyone to think about this very carefully. Where do you think we should go, and how can we make a living when we get there?" Emma swallowed hard as she waited for anyone to speak. Anyone at all.

Only Mary jumped at the chance. "I want to live with the white man, Ma. I want to go with George."

"I know, Mary, but I already told you that isn't possible. Remember? We must be practical. Since you can't go with George, do you still want to leave?"

Mary didn't hesitate. "Yes, Ma, I do."

Considering Mary's painful history with her people, it was understandable. If things had gone differently with Josiah in the past, the girl might very well want to stay. But they hadn't, and Mary wanted to go.

"Are you sure?" Emma asked her soberly.

Mary nodded "yes," very emphatically.

Emma glanced at Josiah. He didn't look surprised, but he didn't look too happy, either.

"I'm knowing where you stand, Emma," he said, pushing himself up to sit cross-legged on the ground. "But how about you, Ma? Grandpap? Haven't you got nothing to say about all this?"

Of all the members of her family who could sway the decision in a dramatic way, Emma knew Cora could. With a lump in her throat, Emma awaited Cora's response.

"Are you willing to leave these mountains, Ma? That's what Emma and Mary are wanting us to do."

Cora looked at her son evenly. "I know this."

"Well, ain't you going to fight to stay?"

The Blackfoot woman didn't flinch in her answer. "If you wanted to stay, Josiah, you should not have taken a white woman to wife-- a woman who had no choice. She wishes to go back to her people. I understand this."

Mary stood up eagerly. "I want to go, too, Pa."

Quickly, Emma tugged Mary down before Josiah directed his displeasure at the child. Emotions were running high, especially between mother and son, and Emma didn't want to get caught in the middle-- although that was precisely where she sensed she was at the moment.

"You brought white trappers into Blackfoot hunting grounds, knowing this would anger my people. You did not care, and now you can not return. There is nothing left for you."

"*Your* people, Ma? What about me? I'm half Blackfoot, too. My life is in these mountains where I belong, and where my people belong."

Cora harrumphed. "You have never valued your people in the past; it is too late to begin now." When Josiah's jaw clenched, Cora narrowed her eyes at him. "Do you ever wonder why I taught Mary English? Or why I gave her a white name?"

Josiah smiled grimly. "You was trying to get back at me fer what I did to her ma."

"No," said Cora, "I was preparing her to live with the white man, to become part of their settlements and their way of life."

Josiah was completely silent.

"You were not there to hold Mary, to dry her tears when the others kicked her because her father was an enemy to the Blackfoot." Cora shook her head unapologetically. "It was not good for her to stay. I prayed for a miracle, and it came. Emma came. Your soul was saved, and now Mary can live in peace."

"What kind of peace do you think she'll have in the white man's world, Ma?"

Cora inhaled deeply. "As much peace as you are willing to make for her, my son."

Silence again. The words must have stuck to Josiah for he didn't move, didn't turn away from Cora's steady gaze.

"I can't, Ma."

"There is no choice, Josiah. You have chosen your path by the decisions you have already made. You must not be afraid. God will go with you."

"Will you come with me, too?"

"I will."

Emma was surprised to see Josiah relax a little, almost like a child drawing comfort from its parent's presence. He was a grown man and no child, but still, Emma knew he drew strength from Cora's promise to go with him. A broad calloused hand rubbed the knee of Josiah's buckskin trousers. He sat quiet for several moments, before turning his eyes to Emma. She could see vulnerability there, and apprehension of the unknown.

Someone cleared their throat, as if to ask permission to speak.

"I realize this is a family discussion," said Will, "but if there aren't any objections, I'd like to ask Emma if she's thinking of returning to Indiana."

Before answering, Emma thought back to her own fears of what her neighbors would say about someone like Josiah, and poor little Mary, who came into this world without married parents. "No, I don't think that would be wise-- not under the circumstances," said Emma, unwilling to voice her concerns in front of Mary.

Will turned to glance back at George, who apparently, had never gone to sleep and had been following the entire conversation.

"When you folks began talking of leaving, George and I discussed our own views on the matter." Will leaned an elbow against some folded buffalo skins for support. "As much as I figure you want to go back to where you come from, Emma, George and I reckon it's not wise to return. Even with Josiah willing to get along with others, they might not be so willing to get along with *him*. What George and I suggest is this," said Will, now addressing Josiah, "go further West. That's where the future is, that's where this country will be heading. Why, the way is already opening up, and if we start before everyone else, maybe we can claim some of that prime land before it's all taken."

"We'?" Josiah looked at Will skeptically.

"We-- as in you and your family," said Will, dropping back with a chagrined smile. "Give it some thought, Josiah. Leastways, it's an idea."

Weariness traced itself onto Josiah's face. He didn't look ready for more talk, or for that matter, more thought. He'd been forced to contemplate the unthinkable, and understandably, it made him downcast and somewhat dark.

"I'm going hunting," he said, grabbing his flintlock as he got up. Silently, he stalked out of camp. They didn't need more meat, so it was understood he just wanted to be alone.

"What about you, Grandpap?" asked Will. "Where do you want to go?"

Grandpap shrugged lightly. "It does not matter. I am old and will die soon."

This prompted a sharp look from Cora. She said nothing, but it was evident she didn't like hearing her father say such things.

Getting to her feet, Mary moved to sit beside her great-grandfather. "I don't want you to die," she said softly.

Grandpap patted her head, pulled out his pipe, and seemed content to sit and huff on his remaining tobacco.

Solitude made Josiah's misery even worse. He wished he had asked Emma to go with him. Whenever his spirits were low, she often made him feel better.

Emma was like that.

Compounding his loneliness, a bird was singing its heart out for a mate.

That did it. He stopped, turned about, and retraced his steps back. They were probably still talking about leaving, but in his pain, he didn't care. He just wanted to be near Emma again. The sky wasn't as blue, or the mountains nearly as inviting, without her at his side. A warning sounded in the back of his brain, a warning that somewhere along the way he'd become too needy, too reliant on Emma. His happiness was tied to hers, and he, the wild son of Hiram Brown.

His pa's memory caused Josiah to frown. If Pa had been there, he would've punished Josiah for allowing himself to get so hopelessly tangled with Emma. "Never become so attached to a woman you can't leave her when yer wanting to," had been one of Pa's favorite sayings.

Maybe it was a sign of weakness that Josiah had tangled himself to the point of not caring. His mouth stretched into a grin as he thought about Emma. He needed his sunshine, and if that made him weak in the eyes of his pa, then so be it. At least his old man was dead and couldn't give him any trouble.

Josiah neared camp, paused as he thought about his father. Hiram Brown had passed on his hatred to his son, not caring that it isolated Josiah from both sides of his heritage. If they stayed, Josiah feared the same thing would happen to Mary-- not belonging anywhere, but always holding a clenched fist against an unforgiving world. Hiram had never given Josiah the chance to fully adopt the ways of one side or the other, always goading him to remember that he was nothing but a half-breed. But not Mary. God help him, Josiah would not let that happen to Mary.

In his deep thought, Josiah didn't notice Emma coming towards him. When he finally did, he opened an arm to invite her to his side. She readily accepted, stepping into his embrace as though she had been there all along.

"Are you all right, Josiah? You looked troubled."

He squeezed her gently. "I was just thinking, Em."

"So was I."

"We're leaving," he said, making it real by saying it out loud to his wife. "I've made up my mind. After the rendezvous, we'll head off to wherever it is this family thinks best."

"Truly?" asked Emma. "Do you mean that?"

"You should know by now," he said with a tired smile, "I ain't in the habit of making promises I'm not intending to keep. I should make one provision to that promise, though: we'll leave, provided I can earn a living wherever it is we go."

An odd sort of look flitted across Emma's face, one that seemed to dampen her excitement.

"I thought you was wanting us to leave."

"I was... I am." Emma bit her lip. Something about this news bothered her, and whatever it was, it was beginning to bother him.

"Emma, yer making me uneasy."

She stepped out of his arm, turned to look at him with sober brown eyes. If he didn't know better, panic lay just beneath her stoic features. It was very unlike her.

"You can't be with child again," he chuckled. "You haven't given birth to the last one yit."

"Please, don't tease me, Josiah. Not at a time like this."

"At a time like what? Yer not making any sense."

She winced, even though nothing had touched her except his words. For a moment, he wondered if she had turned yeller, suddenly become afraid of what her own kind would think of her for having a half-breed husband.

"This is going to make you angry, Josiah. I should have told you sooner, but there hadn't been any need to before now."

"Tell me what?" he asked.

Reluctance filled her countenance. "How much money do you have?"

The question surprised him. "How is asking that going to make me angry?"

"Please, Josiah, how much?"

He considered the question thoughtfully. "Well, after I trade in the buffaler robes at rendezvous, it should give us something to leave with. It won't be much, but then you've probably already guessed I ain't a rich man."

"No, I didn't think you were." Emma adjusted her blanket shawl against the cool afternoon air. "I'm afraid I've kept a terribly important secret from you, Josiah."

"How terrible?"

"Terrible enough."

"I'm moving past angry, Emma, and moving on to downright scared. What is it yer trying to tell me?"

"I buried eight hundred half eagles under our wagon."

"What?" Josiah blinked. Surely, his hearing was going out. He thought Emma had just said she had half eagles-- five dollar gold coins-- buried under some wagon. Disbelief turned to concern when she didn't laugh at the joke she had just made.

"Please, Josiah, don't look at me that way."

"You've been doing too much work," he said, touching a hand to her cheek. "Yer feeling warm."

"I'm standing in the sun, Josiah."

He grabbed her arm, pulled her toward Cora's lodge. "I feared skinning all them buffaler hides would do you harm, and now yer ailing. Yer needing rest." He tugged her into the lodge where

the others were occupied with their own matters. With a gentle but deliberate hand, he made Emma sit on some robes.

"Are you very angry with me, Josiah?"

"It's myself I'm angry with," he said, beckoning his ma to leave her work by the fire and come join them. "It was my fault fer letting you work yerself ill."

"Are you angry I didn't tell you sooner? About the money?"

He crouched, took her hand and tenderly squeezed her fingers. "Don't give it any more thought, Em. You'll feel better soon." He looked over his shoulder as Cora approached. "Ma, Emma's been working too hard; she's talking mighty strange."

Emma shook her head, insistent that she felt fine. "Pa wanted a good start in our new country, so he packed half eagles into a wooden chest. It weighed about twenty-two pounds, but we carried it all the way from Indiana. We lost most of our belongings, but not that box. Before the Indians attacked, he made me bury it as quickly as I could." Emma's eyes turned misty, and Josiah knew it pained her to speak of her pa's death. "In the end, it didn't matter. They killed him, and you took me. The chest no longer seemed important after that."

The story quieted Josiah. Emma was making too much sense, and her retelling hadn't sounded as though it came from fatigue or delirium.

"Where was you and yer Pa going, Emma?"

Cora looked at him, and he knew she was surprised he had never thought to ask before now.

He shrugged. "It never came up." He turned back to Emma. "Where, Em?"

For the second time that day, she looked reluctant to speak.

George, who had been napping, sat up to listen. Will stopped his sewing, Mary perked up and crawled to Emma, and Grandpap remained dozing with his hands in his lap.

"Pa said we'd remain at a trading post for awhile, then move on into the Pacific Northwest if things didn't work out." Emma worried her bottom lip.

"Yer pa was wanting to enter the fur trade?" asked Josiah.

"Not exactly." Emma looked at Josiah meekly. "He came as a missionary."

"Who to? The Indians?"

"No, the trappers."

Behind his back, Josiah could hear Will's chuckles.

"Pa said the trappers needed to be reminded that God was in the wilderness, as well in the cities." Emma sighed heavily, her voice touched with grief. "He just thought he could do some good, that's all. After Ma went to be with Jesus, and my beau married my friend instead of me, the years passed until Pa said there wasn't anything left for us in Indiana. Truth be told, I think he wanted to leave behind the things that kept reminding him of Ma."

Remembering something Will had said, Josiah looked into his wife's face. "Will said he and George thought you came from money. Is that true, Emma?"

"I suppose that's true, although I never felt very rich," Emma said modestly.

"And the half eagles? Are they real?"

Emma nodded. "My grandfather was a very wealthy man, so the eight hundred coins are real."

A whistle came from Will's direction. "That's four thousand dollars in gold. You're a rich man, Josiah!"

"I wouldn't go that far," Emma smiled for the first time since her confession. "It's a lot of money, to be sure, but it's only a few thousand."

"That's a whole lot of beaver in one lump sum," said Josiah, sinking onto the robe in stunned amazement. "I've spent my life trying to get up a fortune like that." A twinge of bitterness stung his pride. Over the years, he'd earned plenty trapping beaver, but had never been able to hold on to his earnings for very long. Gambling, whiskey, and women had been his weakness, as well as his wild friends. In his lifetime, he had bought an awful lot of whiskey to make his trapper friends happy.

"That's a decent stake in a new life," said Will. "If you can get back to where that wagon is, the coin chest is probably still there."

Josiah groaned inwardly. The wagon was waiting for him in Jackson Hole, or at least, what was left of it after a hard winter. But that wasn't the only thing. Josiah's friends had wintered close by, and were likely trying their luck around the area. It was possible they had even pressed into the Yellowstone by now, cursing him out for not showing up to be their guide as he'd promised the year before.

"Josiah?" Emma touched his hand. "What's wrong?"

"It occurs to me," he grinned darkly, "I've jumped out of the frying pan, and into the fire."

Emma thought it had been an odd thing to say, especially after finding out he was four thousand dollars richer than the day before. After lunch, she took him aside to a quiet area just outside of camp to talk.

"You're angry at me, aren't you," said Emma, choosing to stand instead of sit.

The flintlock rested in Josiah's arm in the casual manner he had of looking dangerous and relaxed at the same time. "I ain't angry, Emma. You guessed wrong."

"I wouldn't have to guess at all, if you simply talked to me."

He harrumphed. "Yer a one fer talk. You had all them coins buried away and you never even told me."

Instead of a biting retort, Emma pressed her lips together. She refused to speak rashly, for she could never take back the words once they had been spoken. Forgiven, yes, but nearly impossible to forget.

"After you first found me, what would you have done had I told you about the money?"

Josiah shrugged. "I'd've dug it up."

"And you would have spent it on your vices. I couldn't trust you, Josiah-- not like now."

A scowl parted his mouth. "What are you meaning? There wouldn't have been any place to spend it until rendezvous."

"That's not the point," said Emma, "and you know it."

He sighed wearily. "All right, I ain't disagreeing with you. I would've spent it on sin if I could've."

"Josiah, I thought you said you weren't angry."

"I ain't."

"Then why are you shouting at me?"

"I ain't shouting."

She inhaled a patient breath. "I didn't tell you about the coins later on, after you were saved, because I feared it would change you. I love you the way you are."

He darted a quick glance at her, obviously interested in hearing more.

"There's one complaint I have about wealth-- it changes nice people into people who aren't as likable. Before Pa inherited his fortune, he operated a wheelwright shop and made a modest living from the sweat of his brow. I was still little when we became wealthy, but I remember Ma talking to Pa about how some of her friends were whispering cruel things behind her back, but when they came calling, they gave her nothing but flattery. Ma had never been an outgoing woman to begin with, and it all frightened her. For years afterward, she never could trust a compliment without fearing an ulterior motive."

Josiah frowned. "Ulterior?"

"Another reason than the one they gave," said Emma. "Our dearest friends did their best to treat us the same, but money did change things between our families." She stopped, realizing this was probably the most she had ever told Josiah of her life before him. "I feared what even four thousand dollars might do to you, so I simply ignored it. I pretended to myself that it didn't exist. Truly, it almost doesn't for I don't know if the chest is still there. I only know that when you said we were definitely leaving, I had to tell you my secret."

His brow creased thoughtfully, and he nodded that he understood. "Sorry I shouted at you, Em. I shouldn't have."

She inspected him carefully. "Something else is bothering you."

"Careful, Em, yer turning into Grandpap; you both think you can read my mind."

"Please, Josiah, talk to me. I want to help."

He looked at her, reached out and drew off her blanket wrap. "You ain't needing to be modest when it's just me to see you," he said, laying aside his rifle long enough to spread the blanket in the sunny grass. "Sit down. I can see yer feet are hurting."

She wanted to deny it, but couldn't. He didn't miss much, not even her sore feet. Obeying, she sat down, and smiled when he joined her.

"Always my sunshine," he said, brushing away a strand of hair from her mouth.

"I'll try to be, Josiah."

His smile came easier now. "You don't need to try, Emma, you just are." He set the rifle across his lap. "My friends are likely in the Yellowstone by now."

Emma didn't have time to show her shock. Mary came running up to them, a scrap of paper flapping in the wind.

"See what I wrote!" she cried happily, dropping beside them on the blanket. When Mary straightened the paper for Josiah, he looked to Emma for help.

"It says, 'Miss Mary Brown,'" read Emma. "Did you write this, Mary?"

The girl nodded enthusiastically. "George held my hand, but I wrote it. He showed me how to use his quill and ink, Ma. And after this prak-tice, he let me write my name in his journal." The girl traced a finger over the strokes of her name, her face aglow with pleasure in her accomplishment.

"Josiah," Emma turned back to her husband, "about your friends--"

"They may be a rowdy lot," he said, interrupting her worry, "but they won't hurt you. I'll see to it that they don't."

"Actually, I was worrying about what they might do to *you*."

Josiah looked hurt that she would even think such a thing. "They're my friends, ain't they? Aside from you and Mary and the people in our camp, they're the best I've ever had. You ain't having to worry on my account."

Even if those words could convince Emma-- which they couldn't-- she had the strong suspicion Josiah was trying to convince himself that what he had said was true. He remained to admire Mary's writing a few moments more, then got up on the excuse the horses needed to be checked.

Before he left, Josiah paused to look over his rifle. "Things are sure pushing in around me," he said quietly. "Wish we could stay in these mountains." Emma didn't know if he intended her to hear him, though he didn't seem to care if she had or not. He walked away, his feet heavy, his face long.

When Josiah joined everyone for supper, he announced he would take three horses, and go after the gold.

"Do you feel up to going with me, Emma?" he asked, his mouth working some buffalo meat as he spoke. "I ain't knowing where to dig."

Emma nodded readily. She had hoped he would ask her to come. "It's not much of a hole, so you won't have far to dig. I'm afraid I didn't have time to hide the chest very well."

"I wish I could go with you," said George, leaning forward for more food. "After two months of camping in the same place, I'm ready for a change of scenery."

"Two months?" Emma looked at him, startled by how much time had gone by while she hadn't been paying attention. They had been working to dry buffalo meat, prepare the skins, give George a chance to rest properly. Now the weakest member of their party wanted to move on.

"According to my journal, it's the end of June," said George, popping a handful of berries into his mouth that Mary had gathered "just for him."

"That reminds me"-- Josiah gave George a long inquisitive look-- "just what have you been scratching about in that book, that journal, of yers?"

George shrugged, though it was hardly a casual gesture. Emma saw the trace of nervousness in his face, and knew he didn't really want to answer the question. "Just some private thoughts, that's all," he said, hurrying to fill himself with more berries.

Mary beamed at her pa. "George has been writing stories about you, and where you've been and what you've been doing. They're awfully good, Pa."

"Stories, huh?" Josiah eyed George with suspicion, and the young man shrank back.

"Mary was supposed to keep it a secret," said George, shooting a reproachful look at his small friend. "I just did it to keep myself busy and give her a little entertainment."

"Maybe you could read one of the stories to us sometime," said Emma.

George swallowed hard. "Maybe. Sometime."

Not wanting to press that sometime into now, Emma nudged Josiah and he backed off from questioning George. Emma didn't fear the stories George had penned, for if he had been reading them to Mary, they had to be flattering of Josiah.

From Mary's happy smiles, Emma knew she had nothing to be concerned about.

The next morning, Josiah and Emma set out to retrieve her father's coin chest. Every step of the way, she noticed Josiah looking about for signs of his friends. She tried to recognize the terrain, for she and Josiah had passed this way before, on their way to the mountain cabin. To her distress, the landscape looked very different cloaked in the mantle of late spring, early summer. At last, she resigned to simply following Josiah's horse and to stop straining so hard to see her surroundings.

They made camp before the sun travelled too far into the horizon, then started off again before sunrise. Josiah kept asking Emma if he were going too fast, and she continually assured him that she could keep up. In the intimacy of their bed, he would rub her back and work out the aches that had accumulated over the day. She did her very best not to slow their progress. The need to press on, find their treasure, and get back to the others, weighed heavily in her prayers. Besides the easing of her aches, she didn't know why she should feel so urgent-- though she had to privately confess that there would be more safety in numbers, especially where gold was concerned. They ate dried buffalo jerky, and kept moving, day after day until Josiah announced they were nearing Jackson Hole.

Of course, Emma didn't recognize it-- she couldn't, with her weak eyesight. Even when Josiah declared he could see the wagon, she couldn't. Not until they were close, did Emma recognize her pa's weathered wagon, bleached wood and metal wheel rims scattered about the ground. A crumbled pile of rocks marked her father's grave, or at least, where Josiah thought he had buried him. It was hard to tell after so much time had passed.

"I ain't trying to rush you," said Josiah, as Emma knelt to touch her pa's grave, "but I'll feel a whole lot easier after we've got that chest safely tied to our pony."

Emma nodded in understanding. Her grief must wait for later.

Only one side of the wagon still stood, the other side having fallen from its axle long ago. On her hands and knees, Emma scanned the ground, searching for any familiar landmarks. It felt surreal to be here, back where her life had changed in such a dramatic way. Her pa had died here, and here, she had been kidnapped by the Blackfoot. She tried to recall those days, the panic of hurriedly digging, the numb fear as her father shouted that the Indians were attacking.

"I don't know," she sighed heavily, secretly wondering what they would do if they couldn't find the coins. "I can't remember. If only I could remember." A hand lightly touched her shoulder and she looked back to see Josiah staring off into the distance.

"Did you hear that?" he asked, his voice pensive and alert. "Thought it came from behind us, off toward the Yellowstone."

"No, I heard nothing."

"You best keep looking," he said, urging her back to the task at hand. "Just give me a place to start digging."

"Do you think someone's nearby?"

He grinned sheepishly. "More than likely, I'm just getting a mite jumpy."

Emma pointed out the most likely spot she could, and Josiah started in with a shovel. The hole came up empty, but on the second try, after just two shovelfuls of dirt, Josiah's blade struck something wooden.

"I think it's the chest!" Emma cried in relief, as Josiah brushed aside the dirt. When he lifted out the compact wooden container, she recognized its metal fittings as commissioned by her father.

Josiah tugged at the heavy lock. "Don't suppose you have the key?"

"Pa had it in his pocket," said Emma, picking the caked dirt from around the lock's opening. She was about to ask Josiah what he was about to do, when he nudged her hand aside, grabbed a large rock, and burst open the lock with a powerful blow.

Josiah threw back the lid, grinning when the gold coins sparkled up at him, winking and glinting in the sun. He dipped his hand inside, letting the coins fall from his fingers. "I've never touched so much money in my life," he said, his voice approaching awe.

Emma grabbed his arm. "Josiah, its only money."

He didn't pay her attention until the second admonition. Then he turned his eyes on her and she could see the first rush of excitement had passed. "All right, Emma, I won't let it git to my head. But ain't it a sight? Eight hundred gold half eagles."

Something sounded in the far distance, and his face turned sober.

"What is it, Josiah?"

He shook his head. "We ain't alone. Whoever it is, ain't close by, but we definitely ain't alone. Let's git this chest tied to the third pony, and get out of here. You got yer shotgun?"

Emma brought up her weapon. "I thought they were your friends."

"First off, I ain't knowing if that's them or not, and second, if it is, we're both knowing they'll be hankering after this gold." Josiah got to his feet, pulled Emma onto hers, then hefted the heavy chest onto his shoulder.

It didn't take long before they were heading back toward the Yellowstone, toward the noises Josiah had heard. When night came, they endured a cold camp. In the morning, they resumed their journey, all the while keeping a close watch over their treasure. They saw no one, and for all they knew, no one saw them; even so, Josiah couldn't shake the feeling that more than one someone was there, somewhere in the surrounding areas, just missing them as Josiah and Emma passed through.

That feeling was soon confirmed.

A few days into their return, Josiah drew the ponies to a sudden stop. He crouched low on the horse, held a hand up to signal silence. Emma followed his gaze. Just off on the horizon, she could barely make out several black blurs, moving about as though they were alive and not stationary trees. From the way Josiah behaved, Emma knew those blurs weren't animals, but men.

"We'll take a wide berth around them," whispered Josiah, "and continue on and get back to our camp without them taking notice of us."

"Who are they?" asked Emma.

Josiah half grimaced, half smiled. "They're free trappers."

"Who?" Emma wasn't sure she understood the impact of Josiah's statement, other than the fact that white men were in the Yellowstone.

Urging the horses along, Josiah muttered beneath his breath. "Those are my friends."

"If riches increase, set not your heart upon them."

~ Psalm 62:10 ~

"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

~ Matthew 6:21 ~

Chapter Twenty-six
Fair of the Wilderness

1837, in what would later become Yellowstone National Park.

"A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly..."

~ Proverbs 18:24 ~

To keep themselves concealed as much as possible, it had been necessary to keep quiet, and for that reason Emma and Josiah said very little to each other as they moved further into the Yellowstone. As far as Emma could guess, they had yet to be discovered, and when she pressed the question to Josiah, he would only shrug and say that he didn't know.

Days slipped by, and as they moved further and further away from his friends, Josiah remained quiet long after it was no longer necessary. He rode ahead of her, so that she could do little else but stare at his buckskin clad back and observe him in silence. Over the many months of their being together, his buckskins had grown dark with the grease of buffalo fat, and from the passage of time itself. They no longer carried the fringe she had admired when they'd first met, when she had been slung over his shoulder as a new bride, and could do nothing but watch his backside and the leather fringe that danced as he hauled her to their camp. But that fringe was gone, cut from his clothing to soothe his hunger when the buffalo and deer had been scarce. They had been through much, and his deerskin clothing betrayed it.

The memory of food caused Emma to pull some pemmican from the small bag at her belt. Cora had made sure they came well prepared, that there would be no want for food during their journey. The smell must have gotten somehow to Josiah, for he reined in his horse long enough to jam his large paw into Emma's bag and retrieve some for himself.

"Will we stop for lunch?" she asked. Ever since they had spotted Josiah's friends, they had eaten while on the backs of their horses, only stopping for nightfall and when it was necessary to rest the animals.

"We keep going," said Josiah, turning his horse about to resume their pace. "It won't be long now."

Emma gave a start when she heard this, at first thinking he had meant his friends would soon discover them. Then she realized he had referred to rejoining the rest of their family, and quieted herself without Josiah ever knowing he had frightened her.

When at last they neared their old campsite, Josiah had no need to tell her they were home. Emma heard a girl's war whoop, and immediately knew it was Mary. The child ran out to meet them, the first to spot them, and the first to greet them.

Mary had to wait until Josiah had helped Emma down from her horse, before the girl could fly into Emma's arms for a hug.

"Don't I git one, too?" asked Josiah. He grinned broadly as Mary gave him a hug of his own.

Mary beamed excitedly. "We sure missed you, Pa, and so did Will. He said if you didn't get back real soon, he and Great-Grandpap were going to come looking for you."

Josiah squinted a playful look at Mary. "He did, did he?"

Mary nodded. "George said he'd go with them, but Will said someone had to stay and look after the women and it might as well be him. George didn't like that too much."

"No, I don't suppose he did," said Josiah, pulling at the bridles of the three ponies he led. "Is everyone all right? Did you see anyone while we were gone?"

"No, Pa." Mary happily hugged Emma's arm as they walked into camp, oblivious of the reasoning behind Josiah's last question.

"Good to see you!" Will limped toward them as fast as his stump could move. He shook Josiah's hand, smiled quickly and then sighed in relief. "I was getting a mite worried. Thought maybe you ran into some trouble."

"We hurried as fast as we could," said Josiah, casting a glance in Emma's direction.

For all her efforts not to, Emma knew she had slowed Josiah down and was thankful when he made no further mention of it to Will.

"I have some news--" Josiah was cut off by the "hello" of George, who stepped forward with his shirt untucked and flapping in the breeze; he looked as though he had just gotten up from a nap.

"Did you have a safe journey?" asked the young man, reaching to shake Josiah's hand even before it was offered. "Did you run into any trouble? Grandpap said he thought he saw some Blackfoot a few days ago, but couldn't be sure."

Will grunted. "They were very far away, and in spite of what Grandpap says, his eyes are very old. They could've been anyone."

"Mary said you saw no one," said Josiah. Emma could hear the strain immediately return to his voice. "Did they see you?"

"We didn't want to worry the child," said George, ignoring the pout on Mary's face, "so we kept it to ourselves in case it meant trouble. But they kept moving, and didn't seem to notice us so we didn't worry about ourselves. Will was concerned for you and Mrs. Brown, though."

"We're all right," said Josiah, turning to nod to Cora. "Did you see them, Ma? Were they Blackfoot, or something else?"

"I did not see them," said Cora.

"What's this news you have to tell us?" asked Will, as Grandpap came to greet Josiah. "I got an uneasy feeling you know something we don't, and that it isn't exactly good."

This prompted a double-take from Josiah.

"I know you well enough," said Will, grinning a half smile, "to know when's something's sitting on your shoulders like a bag of rocks. By the look on your face just now, I'd say you're toting a lot of them. Now what do you know that we don't?"

"Mary," Josiah patted the girl's head, "go gather more firewood."

"Aw, Pa!" Mary kicked at the ground with the toe of her moccasin. "Can't I stay and hear? Can't I?"

If Josiah had wanted to, he could have made Mary leave; but with that sweet pleading look in Mary's eyes, Emma knew Josiah wouldn't. He gave Emma a helpless glance that hinted of a smile. "I reckon you can stay," he told Mary, and then went to tie the ponies to a nearby tree before talking. "I noticed no one asked if we found the gold coins," he said over his shoulder.

A grin parted Will's mouth until his teeth showed. "Did you get them?"

"We did," Josiah answered with a grin of his own. He strode back to the group, folded his arms and let the grin slip from his face until he looked quite sober. "The thing is, Emma and I saw some free trappers as we were heading back into the Yellowstone."

"I see," said Will, first staring at the ground and then at Josiah with a knowing look. "Would these be ones you'd call friends, or enemies?"

"I don't know how to rightly answer that," said Josiah. "Some of both, I reckon."

"Did they see you?"

Josiah let out a deep harrumph. "With all that gold tied to my pony, and no where to hide it? I ain't a fool."

"Never said you were," said Will, looking at the others with a very thoughtful face. "Do you reckon they'll be coming this way?"

"No," Josiah shook his head with a certainty Emma didn't share. "It's too close to rendezvous, so they'll be heading for the *Siskadee* real soon."

"The what?" asked George.

"The Green River," said Josiah. "We'll be going that way ourselves, come morning."

It made sense to Emma, now that she heard Josiah's reasoning. The idea of going to the same place as those wild men, however, didn't make her feel like smiling when Josiah looked at her with those dark eyes of his.

"You knew we were going to meet up with them sooner or later, Em."

"I know." She gave Josiah the smile she knew he needed, and then went into Cora's hide lodge to lay down and rest her sore back. Sitting a horse had a way of making her sore all over, but it hurt her back especially.

Through the walls of the lodge, Emma could still hear Josiah. "When we meet up with my friends, I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention the gold. Some things are better left unsaid."

"I understand," said Will. "You can count on George and me to keep our mouths shut. Isn't that right, George?"

"Yes, of course," said George. "Do you expect trouble, Josiah?"

"What do *you* think?" Will asked promptly. "Sometimes, George, I worry about you."

"I only wondered," said George.

"Still a greenhorn," Will said with a weary chuckle. Emma imagined he directed the comment to Josiah, for he added, "All this time in the Rockies, and he still doesn't know any better."

"He's man enough," Josiah said with a smile in his voice. "I'd trust him with my life, any day of the week."

There was quiet, and Emma didn't have to be present to know George wore a big grin.

When the men continued talking, Emma didn't pay attention. She kept thinking and praying, until her eyes grew heavy and she fell into some much needed sleep.

Before sunup, Josiah had everyone packed, mounted and on their way South, back through the Yellowstone one last time on their way to rendezvous. From what George understood, a Rocky Mountain rendezvous was a kind of fair in the wilderness, for there people could find all manner of trade goods and amusements that weren't as readily available elsewhere. This was the event the mountain men looked forward to all year long, the one time they could kick up their heels and have some fun and not be fearful of losing their scalp. According to Josiah, at rendezvous, many Indian tribes who were usually hostile to one another, came together to trade at this event, and for the most part, have a good time, themselves.

Upon hearing Josiah's few remarks about where they were headed, George was thankful the coin box lay hidden in Cora's travois, deep in the folds of the hide lodge where no one could see it. The Brown family would need that money to start life elsewhere, and George and Will had together determined to make sure no one would steal their gold.

Despite George's protests that he was strong enough to travel on foot, Josiah gave his horse to him and insisted that he ride. George felt somewhat better when Josiah lifted Mary up on the horse with him; at least he could do something useful, besides deprive Josiah of his mount.

Even in the semi-darkness of early dawn, George could see the eager excitement in Mary's eyes, hear it in her voice as she told him she could hardly wait until they reached the *Siskadee*. It would be her first rendezvous, and most likely her last. Mary was so young-- just a small child-- and she had so much to learn about the world she would be entering. George wished he could share in her unreserved excitement, for he had never been to a rendezvous, either. But whenever he thought of Josiah and Emma, and Grandpap and Cora, his heart beat slower and his thoughts grew heavy. He wished he could spare Mary the knowledge of the world around her,

preserve her childish innocence by stopping her ears whenever an unkind word was spoken against her.

These thoughts were followed by pangs of guilt. Not so very long ago, George could have been one of her tormentors-- though that was not the way his prejudice usually worked. He preferred to be friendly, even to those beneath his notice. Even to a half-breed who had dug him from the snow, warmed him, given him hope when all hope had been lost. But George had found that it was one thing to be friendly, and another to actually mean it. To mean it with every fiber in his being, with every breath he took and then released back to the sky.

These people were his friends, but *especially* Josiah.

George smiled as Mary tried to get the reins from him, to coax the horse to move faster.

There was one more logical step George needed to make, and he knew it quite well. If Josiah and Mary were his equals-- no less human than himself-- then that would also have to be true of everyone else. "All men are born free and equal," would logically have to be true, giving new meaning to "Love thy neighbor as thyself." It was all fine and good for the Massachusetts Constitution and the Bible to say, but in practice, it was a difficult thing for a Virginian born on a cotton plantation to accept. Especially when that Virginian thought about his father.

It was hard to accept, but not impossible. In that moment, listening to Mary's chatter, George accepted the ugly truth about himself. It wasn't pleasant, and he abhorred himself for the hatred that had twisted his heart into a version of his father's. It shamed George greatly, but he refused to shut his eyes any longer to the truth.

He'd been on the wrong side of his own conscience long enough.

Resolve is relatively easy when it's done silently, on the back of a horse, miles and miles away from those who would fight him. His insides melted at the thought of being put to the test, of proving the veracity of his repentance-- for that was what George figured this was, repentance. He'd been raised from a child on the Good Book, and didn't have to run to his Bible to search the Scriptures for a text to calm his soul. It shamed him to know the words were in his mouth, in his heart all along. All he had to do was be honest, and live by them.

"The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart..." George quoted the words from Romans chapter ten, whispering them to himself and to God.

"What, George?" Mary craned her neck up at him until her nose pointed straight into the dawning sky. "Are you hurting any?"

"What makes you ask that?"

"Yer crying," said Mary.

George checked his eyes, and sure enough, his fingertips felt wet.

"No, I'm not hurting." He sniffed back his feelings, preferring to divert Mary's attention to something less painful. "Let's review your lessons," he said, summoning his teacher's voice so Mary would understand it wasn't a suggestion.

Mary seemed content with his answer, and started in on her alphabet, and then some spelling. By the time they stopped for lunch, George was feeling much better and praying for an appropriate opportunity to speak with Josiah.

They made slow but steady progress as they traveled, for everyone had to keep an easy pace for Josiah and Cora's sake, who were both on foot. At every moment, Emma expected to see the free trappers, but the way they had passed through earlier was now quiet, and Josiah left the Yellowstone with the firm conviction that his friends were on their way to the rendezvous.

Sometime in early July-- Emma couldn't be sure of the date and didn't feel a need to ask George to check his journal-- Josiah stopped their caravan beside a lake and announced they would remain for a day or two to rest. This came as an unexpected surprise to Emma, but even more so when Josiah produced two blocks of soap he'd traded from the Crow back in the Yellowstone.

"I reckoned you'd want to get cleaned up afore anyone saw you," he said, grinning as he passed a block to Emma. The other, he tossed to Will. "It may take a good deal of scrubbing to get clean, but you only got two days. Then we're leaving."

The women immediately took their soap, Emma's shotgun, some blankets, and went a short distance from camp where they could bathe in privacy behind the cover of some trees. Josiah kept watch over the area, hollering at Emma every so often to see if they were all right. This frequently occasioned a yell from Mary to not come any further, for she was in the lake, or drying off, or combing her hair; even at nearly six years old, she possessed a great deal of modesty and Emma could not get her to fully relax until she was back in her deerskin dress and her hair had been braided.

After all, Mary repeated Emma's own instructions back to her, "It isn't seemly to wear your hair unbound in the presence of men." Grand words from such a small girl, and yet Mary had remembered every one.

Soap made Emma's hair shine as it hadn't in a long while, and her skin rejoiced as the grime and dust of the past months washed away into the cool lake water. It was a beautiful day, a tranquil lake surrounded by green trees, sheer walls of mountain rock, and everywhere the feel of summer. She inhaled the fragrant air, dipped herself into the water to rinse away the last of the suds, and came up feeling refreshed.

When they arrived back at camp, they found Will and George wrapped in blankets, for they had not only washed themselves, but their clothes as well. Their store bought clothing was spread on the grass to dry, and according to Will's mutter, they couldn't dry fast enough.

"Thought you ladies would take longer," he said with a flush of crimson showing beneath his shaggy beard.

A smile flitted across Cora's mouth, but she said nothing and pretended to not even notice Will's blanketed condition. Emma knew Cora pretended, for the woman deliberately kept her back to him until Will had his shirt and trousers back on.

Josiah went down to the lake as well, though not as modestly as everyone else. He stripped off his buckskins in plain view, so that Emma had to avert Mary's eyes until he dove into the water. Will hooted something to Josiah, and Josiah laughed and slapped water in Will's direction. Cora shook her head at their boyish conduct, for these were grown men and not children.

Hat in hand, George approached Emma. "Mrs. Brown?" he asked, as though already apologizing for his intrusion, "may I ask a favor?"

Emma looked up from her sewing. She was letting out some of the seams of her blue one-piece dress, mainly to allow for a larger bosom. The waist would be no problem, for it was higher than her natural waistline, and would allow for a large belly. If the alterations went as smoothly as she hoped, she would wear it at the rendezvous. At her side, the ornate sewing box lay open, scissors and spools of thread stored alongside lengths of buffalo sinew.

"I was wondering," asked George, turning his eyes to the box, "if you'd do me a great favor and cut my hair. I'm probably as overgrown as Will and Josiah by now."

"No one is as overgrown as Josiah," Emma said with a small laugh. George's brown mane had grown until it nearly skimmed his shoulders, while Josiah's was almost half way down his back.

"Sit down, and I'll do my best. I must warn you, though, I haven't given a man a haircut since my Pa."

Smiling, George sat down. Not to her surprise, he wanted it cropped short, the way men often looked out of the wilderness, in more polite society. She made quick work of it, and when she had finished, offered her mirror to George. He admired her handiwork, then asked if he could borrow the mirror a little longer.

"Well, now," said Will, as George went to join him on the other side of the campfire, "don't you look fashionable!"

"You could do with a haircut, yourself," said George. "You look like you just crawled out from under something, and that you were there for some duration."

Will harrumphed, though the teasing left his face. "Emma, I don't suppose--"

"I'd be happy to, Will," she said, brushing George's locks from her lap.

Mary crouched beside George, and watched as he lathered his face for a shave. His scant beard wasn't much, but Emma was in the habit of seeing George scratch his face now and again, and knew he was eager to be rid of it.

Using Emma's mirror to guide his knife, George scraped his cheek until he paused to look at Mary peering closely over his shoulder.

"Don't you have something else better to do?" he asked.

"No," said Mary, and remained where she was until George had finished. "You look real pretty," she told him after he'd washed the lather from his face.

The young man didn't look as though he knew how to take the compliment, and scowled. "Thanks," he said, and hurried to return Emma's mirror.

Emma was so preoccupied in cutting Will's hair, she didn't notice Josiah leave the lake, dress, and come to watch Will get his haircut. It was only when Will made some passing comment to Josiah, that Emma looked up to see Josiah intently watching.

Josiah didn't remain there long, for Cora called to him, and he went to go see what she wanted. Cora held a blanket in her hands, and said something Emma couldn't hear.

"My trousers are fine the way they are," Josiah said loudly. Cora persisted in her mission, whatever that was, and Josiah finally swiped at the offered blanket with a brooding grimace. He took off the pants, tossed them at Cora, then wrapped the blanket around his waist as though she were putting him to unnecessary bother.

With a sigh, Emma returned to Will's haircut. She wished Josiah and Cora got along better than they sometimes did. It was as if past disagreements couldn't quite be overcome, though Emma thought mother and son probably had a much better relationship now than in the past. She smiled to herself when Josiah paused to say something reconciliatory to Cora. Cora nodded, then sat down to work on mending Josiah's trousers. They were both trying.

After Will's haircut had finished, Will borrowed Emma's mirror and went to go shave his face clean, just as George had done earlier. He lathered his face liberally, took the blade to his skin, and soon came away looking quite the gentleman. Emma watched as Will deliberately passed in front of Cora, lingering until the woman looked up to acknowledge his presence. If Cora liked him without the beard, she didn't show it. Instead she gave him one of her stoic looks, then returned to her work. Will's shoulders slumped in a defeated sigh, and he limped off to go sit with Grandpap and talk of the coming rendezvous.

Emma dusted her lap of yet more hair, was about to return the scissors to their box, when Josiah sauntered forward with the blanket absurdly tied about his waist. He nodded to the scissors.

"Reckon you got enough time fer one more, Emma?"

"One more what?" she asked. Surely, he couldn't mean a haircut. Emma waited for him to say something about mending his hunting shirt, which had needed her attention ever since he'd descended a vertical rock shelf the day before. He was impossibly hard on his clothing, either ripping holes, or tearing apart seams that needed to be rejoined with sinew. It was no wonder Cora wanted to repair his trousers.

"I'm meaning one more of them haircuts," said Josiah, frowning at her difficulty to understand him. "What did you think I meant?"

"You *do* know what a haircut is?" asked Emma, holding up the scissors and giving them a quick warning snip. "It means your hair will be shorter."

"I'm knowing that," he scowled. He came forward as though he were saving someone's life by taking their place in a firing line, grimly seated himself before her and waited.

She stared at his back, not daring to touch his locks with the scissors.

"Well?" he asked, twisting about to see her. "What are you waiting fer?"

"You want me to cut your hair." Emma looked at him seriously. "You're sure about this."

He gave a puzzled sort of scowl. "I wouldn't have asked you to, if I wasn't."

"You want it cut short?"

Josiah nodded. "Just like you did fer George and Will."

Still she hesitated.

"I've had my hair cut before, Em. Stop looking like yer about to take off my arm. It won't hurt me none."

"Very well," said Emma, taking a deep breath before starting in. She sectioned off his still damp hair, lifted the first piece, put her scissors to the lock... then snipped it off. Josiah didn't flinch, though when she dropped a handful of hair near his elbow, he took it and looked it over as though it were a discarded appendage and not simply hair. Emma knew Josiah was taking a big step toward entering the white man's world.

A step he couldn't easily take back.

Then came the lock of hair that held her eagle feather. Emma cut it off, and Josiah raised his hand to accept the feather.

"I'm keeping that," he said with a grin in his voice. "I ain't needing a feather to remember who I belong to, but I reckon I don't want to give it up just yet."

She caressed the back of his neck, and was rewarded with a sigh of contentment.

This haircut took much longer than the others, simply because there was so much hair to sort through. By the time it was over, Emma was buried in a massive lion's mane of tangled semi-curls, knots, and sun-streaked hair.

"I don't know if you're going to like the way you look," said Emma, as Josiah turned about to face her with his new haircut, "but one thing's for certain-- you'll be cooler in the sun."

"I feel cooler right now," he said, touching the back of his head.

His eyes met hers, and they held, as though waiting for her reaction.

Emma took her time to look him over before giving a verdict. It only required a moment's observation to see that Josiah's face had sharpened by the removal of all that hair. His dark eyes were more penetrating, the mouth more noticeable. The sharp, chiseled angles of his face gave him a startling handsome appearance. Josiah had always been a handsome man, but now, since she could so readily see his face, that quality was now devastatingly obvious. No wonder he had little difficulty talking women into his bed.

At once, Emma shook the thought from her mind, determined to concentrate on the present, and not the past.

"That bad, huh?" asked Josiah, mistaking her determination as a sign that he looked worse, and not better.

"You look very handsome," said Emma, digging her lap out from under all the hair.

Josiah didn't look at all convinced. "Yer just saying that to make me feel good," he said, touching his scalp this way and that. "I feel naked, Em. Like I don't have something on that I should."

Emma smiled. "Your trousers would be a good place to start."

"Ma won't give them back until they're finished." He sighed as he stared at the huge pile of hair. His eyes flicked back to Emma's, as if to check whether or not she were looking. Since she was, he broke into a smile-- one of those confident male grins Josiah gave with great ease. Whenever he did that, Emma felt very aware of herself as a woman.

"Go wash your head in the lake," she said, tossing a handful of hair at him to make him leave. "I don't have time to frolic. I have work to do."

He leaned forward on all fours and approached her like a grizzly bear, wild and untamable.

"Now, Josiah," Emma tried to smother a nervous laugh but failed miserably, "please, don't--" He pushed her onto her back, gently but deliberately, until he looked down at her with all the calm assurance of a man who knew he was loved. Josiah lowered himself and kissed her, until their surroundings became a dim blur to Emma. She ran her fingers through what remained of his hair, felt his heart quicken into a rapid thump, then withdrew her lips before his kisses grew more insistent.

He peered down at her, his expression as tender as any she had ever seen.

She brushed the hair away from his forehead, as was the fashion, and let herself admire him without embarrassment. He grinned, and hugged her until she insisted that he let her return to her sewing.

With an expert eye, Cora mended Josiah's trousers, cutting off the irregular stumps of any remaining tassels, tying shut any seams that were close to splitting, and overall, making them more presentable than Emma had thought possible. They were still dark with grease and wear, but they looked tidy.

After Josiah had pulled on his pants, Will hobbled to him with something white folded in his hand. Without any ceremony, he presented it to Josiah.

"What is it?" asked Josiah, staring at the cloth as though anything not made of leather couldn't be trusted.

"It's a shirt," said Will. He thrust it at Josiah. "Now that you've gotten a haircut, you're looking downright civilized for a change. All that's missing is some cloth on your back. I have two shirts to my name, and I'm giving one of them to you."

"Why?" asked Josiah.

Will glared as though he'd just been insulted. "You've accepted me as a friend until I feel like family, and you have to ask why?"

"I was only asking," said Josiah, opening the folded garment until Emma could see an off-white linen shirt. It was of the pullover variety, and had generous sleeves and a broad collar. It was easily Will's best clothing.

Josiah nodded to him gratefully. "I'm much obliged."

Promptly dismissing the thanks, Will turned about and resumed his place by the fire.

Though Will didn't notice the look of approval on Cora's face, Emma did. Any suspicions Emma entertained of Cora favoring Will for his kindness to Josiah, were later confirmed at lunch, when Cora gave Will more food than any of the others.

The next day, after Josiah had plunged his head into the lake to wash the sleep from his eyes, he returned to camp only to have everyone stare at him.

"What?" he asked.

"Your hair," said George.

"What of it?" asked Josiah.

"It's curling."

"It always does."

"Not as much as it is right now," said George.

"Thought something looked different," said Will. Fun glinted in his eyes, putting Josiah on his guard. "Now that you come to mention it, George, you're right. Josiah is curling something terrible."

"No, I ain't," said Josiah, rising to his own defense. "My hair is just shorter, that's all. Ain't that right, Emma?" he asked, turning to his sunshine for agreement. "I ain't curling, am I?"

To his horror, Emma tried very hard not to smile. "I'm afraid you are, Josiah."

"Let me have the mirror."

She looked hesitant to hand it over. "Maybe you could comb your hair with your fingers. Maybe it might take some of the curl out. And remember, I could always cut it shorter."

"The mirror, Emma."

She took out the looking-glass, then handed it to him with an expressly loving look. "Whatever *you* may think," she said, not releasing the object just yet, "I think your curls are very endearing. They make you seem not quite so intimidating."

"That's what I'm afraid of," he said tugging the mirror free. He would never admit it, but those comforting words from Emma made him feel much easier, even after having glimpsed himself in the shiny surface of the mirror. It was as he had feared. His shorter hair curled much easier than when it was long, but at least Emma thought they were endearing, whatever that meant; it probably wasn't something he wanted to know. It was enough Emma kept looking at him, until

he felt as warm as if he had been sitting fully in the sunlight and not beneath the shade of some trees.

The results of her compliment didn't last very long, though Emma guessed Josiah's brooding had little to do with his hair, and everything to do with the upcoming rendezvous. The restless quiet that had seized him upon first discovering his friends in the Yellowstone, seemed to afflict him yet again as they resumed their trip. He kept his thoughts to himself, though by now Emma didn't feel the need to encourage him to speak to her. She knew him well enough to know what he was thinking, what he was feeling, without having to ask. She prayed and watched during the day, and at night, in the privacy of their robes, she comforted him with unspoken love.

Emma had yet to grow accustomed to Josiah's appearance. His short curls and store bought shirt, made him look more like a tradesman, and less like a trapper. At first, she found it disconcerting to see her husband in such a different light, but then, his dark eyes would flash their intensity, and she would see the old Josiah just below the surface of the new one. It reminded her of something Josiah had once said: "You can take the man out of the mountains, but you can't take the mountains out of the man." She prayed the mountains in Josiah could be tamed enough to allow for a life elsewhere.

Not long after their rest beside the lake, Josiah spotted a trail of smoke in the distance. He made everyone stop, and taking his horse back from George, quickly mounted to see what was up ahead. When Josiah returned, he announced they were nearing the confluence of the *Siskadee* and Horse Creek, and that the smoke they had seen had been from a Shoshone encampment.

A heightened sense of danger and excitement filled the air as they pressed on. The sound of barking dogs, the smells of cooking meat and burning fires, the crowded din of many people in one location, all announced the rendezvous long before Emma had gotten close enough to see it clearly. A long line of Indian lodges for as far as she could see, followed the contours of the *Siskadee*, or Green River as it was sometimes called. Here the verdant grasslands could feed the many horses that the Indians had brought to be traded, and the trees crowding the riverbanks gave the villages shelter while they watched their herds. Even to an outsider such as Emma, it was abundantly obvious why such a desirable location had been chosen for the gathering. Smells, sounds, the awareness of people were all about her, overwhelming her senses. After so long in the mountains with only a handful of faces to look at, even five more would seem like a surplus. Here, they were everywhere. They spoke English, French, native tongues she couldn't even guess.

She saw Indians and white men alike, though it was frequently impossible to tell them apart until they were close, for some of the white men dressed even more fantastically than the Indians.

A group of men wearing store bought shirts passed Emma's horse, more than one gasping in astonishment when they saw her.

"Ma," Mary whimpered from the pony she shared with George.

Though Emma wanted to do more, she could only give Mary a smile of encouragement. George patted Mary's shoulder, and to Emma's gratitude, the child seemed comforted. Emma couldn't blame her daughter. There were more people here, than Mary had probably seen in her entire life-- thousands of Indians, and at least hundreds of white men-- all in one place. It was enough to make Emma feel bewildered, let alone a frightened child.

The sound of gunshots burst from up ahead, and Emma strained to see what was happening. Wild war cries, terrifying whoops, and even more gunfire filled her ears until they hurt. Mary cried out, but George hugged her from behind with his arm and she quieted. For all the sounds of alarm, Emma couldn't detect anyone appearing frightened. On the contrary, she glimpsed Josiah shoot off his own rifle with a loud whoop, then go to heartily shake hands with a wild looking man. Dogs barked excitedly, one yelping as someone's horse came too close. Men appeared from their lodges, women paused their work, and children crowded around their elders as Josiah greeted more men.

With a quick check of her blue woolen dress, Emma summoned her courage. She knew she would need it.

"You ornery breed!" she heard an older, rather heavy man shout to Josiah with a shocking amount of affection, despite the harshness of the words. "I gave you up fer dead when you didn't show up at Jackson Hole!"

"What happened to you?" asked another, dressed in crude leggings and a hunting shirt. "You been sick, Josiah?"

"I had my hair cut," came Josiah's stony reply.

"Don't you know," Mr. Heavy joked with Mr. Leggings, "a squaw cut off his hair in his sleep, and now he don't have any strength left! Just like Samson and Delilah!" Mr. Leggings didn't appear to understand the joke, prompting an impatient jab in the ribs from Mr. Heavy. "You heathen! Ain't you ever been taught from the Bible?" Mr. Heavy ignored the continued blank stare of his companion, and turned back to Josiah with renewed interest.

Other wild looking men pushed their way through the gathering crowd, until Josiah was completely surrounded.

"What've you been up to?" asked Mr. Heavy, the genial tone of his voice giving way to a chiding reprimand. "I thought we agreed to meet up before winter, then start spring trapping in the Blackfoot country before anyone else."

"He kept all the beaver to himself!" shouted a lanky fellow in buckskins; he wore a felt hat with a feather stuck in it, and when he turned to one side, Emma saw the man must be like Josiah-- a half-breed.

"Calm down, Three Guns," said Mr. Heavy, obviously the leader of the group, "give Josiah here a chance to speak. Maybe he was mauled by a griz, and decided to pass the winter in a snug lodge with some beauty of a squaw. He's done it afore."

"Well, Josiah?" pressed Three Guns. "We came to rendezvous without any prime pelts to trade. It is because of you."

"Something came up, and I had to change my plans," said Josiah. For the first time since Emma had known Josiah, she saw naked fear behind his eyes. He relaxed his stance a little, grinned, though both looked forced. "I was with a woman, all right, and David here is right-- she's a purty one."

"I knew it!" David, the heavy one, said in half glee, half disgust at his own lost fortune. "Josiah, boy, one of these days, women are going to be the death of you."

"Not this one," Josiah grinned lazily. "I got myself a wife."

Mr. Leggings gave out a hoot, yelping his head off like a man who's just had someone set fire to his britches. But instead of looking as though he were in pain, he wore a grin. "You reprobate, I never thought you'd go and get yourself hitched!"

"Where is she?" asked David, settling his hands on his large belly. He looked about the crowd, his expression fixed, as though he were determined to approve of whatever woman Josiah had chosen. "Bring her out, so we can congratulate the new Mrs. Brown!"

Some of the wild men had noticed Emma by now, gaping at her as though they'd never seen a white woman before; she wondered at their astonishment, for by the looks of them, they most likely had one in their immediate family.

Josiah moved toward her, and a murmur started through the crowd.

"Em, I'd like you to meet some good friends of mine," he said, carefully helping her down from the horse.

Emma smiled at Josiah, but he didn't smile back. With a solid grip, he took her by the hand and led her through the crowd to David.

It would be an understatement to say David's jaw fell open. Complete and entire shock covered his face. He stared numbly at Emma, turned his eyes to her belly, then looked to Josiah for an explanation.

"We're expecting," said Josiah. His manner was carefree, but the muscles grasping Emma's hand were pulled tighter than wet sinew drying in the sun. "Emma, this here is David Lambert. He's been trekking these mountains fer ages, and more than one trapper owes his hide to the steady aim of his rifle. My life included."

Emma curtsied politely, and David, who didn't look as though he trusted his eyes, gave an awkward bow that betrayed he was unused to polite society.

"At one time or another," continued Josiah, his hand still clasped around Emma's, "David's worked for almost every fur company there was, until he decided he liked the freedom of going where he liked. Ain't that right, David?"

There must have been an invisible stick holding David's mouth wide open, for besides her own presence, Emma couldn't explain the bewildered shock on the older man's face.

"I'm very happy to meet you, Mr. Lambert," said Emma, with what she hoped was a warm smile. "I've never been to a rendezvous before. I must say," she said, looking about the crowd, "I'm quite impressed. Josiah never told me it would be anything as grand as this."

Gunfire on the opposite side of the camp announced the arrival of more attendees, and Emma inched closer to Josiah.

"They're just saying howdy to each other," said David, taking notice of her apprehension. "Excuse me, ma'am-- Mrs. Brown-- but I can hardly believe my eyes. Are you truly Josiah's wife? This Josiah? The man standing right next to you?"

"Of course I am," said Emma, in a tone of astonishment that anyone would ever think to question it, "who else would I be?" Emma smiled sweetly, and David and the others looked

dumbfounded for a response. "Oh, Josiah, your friends are the most fascinating gentlemen I've ever met. You never told me they were this hospitable!" Emma batted her eyes at Josiah, and Josiah looked at her as though she'd lost her mind.

Emma would have agreed that she had, but something warned her to turn on every charm she possibly could. Instead of timidity, she behaved as a woman who confidently expected others to treat her as she treated them. With polite respect.

Her endeavors were quickly rewarded.

Shoving past David, Mr. Leggings gave Emma an exaggerated bow. "I'm Nehemiah Bell, ma'am," he said, flashing her a toothless grin. "We're honored beyond measure to have you here, ain't we fellers?" He jabbed an elbow into David's gut, perhaps to get even for the same thing having been done to himself a few moments before, and David, who was still overcoming shock, stammered out his agreement. "Won't you come this way and take a load off yer feet?" Nehemiah asked, grandly sweeping a hand over to a pile of skins beneath an open tent-like structure. "It isn't everyday we're favored by the presence of a real lady," he added, as Josiah helped her to sit down.

"Yes, yes, that's true," stammered David, finding a place to sit in the shade beneath the tent. He looked at Emma, shook his head, then turned to Josiah as Josiah squatted beside Emma. "I knew you've been hankering after a woman of your own, Josiah, but I never expected *this!* Where did you get her?"

Emma laughed graciously. "Why, Mr. Lambert, you do have such a way with words. To hear you say it, I was an interesting object Josiah found and decided to keep." She smiled, though it wasn't far from the truth.

"How did he get you?" Three Guns asked pointedly. His question had been directed at Emma, but his dagger-like stare was aimed squarely at Josiah.

"I met my husband after the tragic death of my father," said Emma, letting sorrow lend weight to her words. "Josiah rescued me when I needed it most, and our love bloomed and continues to bloom so much, I'm certain God directed our paths to cross when they did. I'm a very blessed woman."

No one there-- not even Three Guns-- looked willing to contradict such prettily said words. Taking advantage of their speechlessness, Emma fanned her brow and commented on the warmth of the weather. Actually, the weather was mild and the breeze cool, and her woolen

dress felt comfortable in the shade. But the others, still amazed at her being Josiah's wife, only nodded that it was indeed a very warm day.

"If you gentleman will excuse us," said Emma, preparing to get up, "Josiah needs to set up our lodge, and I must tend to our family. Can we expect to have the pleasure of your company later, after we've settled?"

A round of, "Yes, ma'am," and "Anything you say, Mrs. Brown," sounded from the men. Only Three Guns remained silent.

With a marked look of respect in his dark eyes, Josiah helped Emma to her feet.

By the time Emma left the free trappers, she felt more exhausted than when she arrived. The men had been taken off guard, and she knew the shock of her arrival was still new. Her prayers were earnest, urgently coming before God for favor and for help. She prayed Josiah would still be blessed with the same kind of peace, after the free trappers had a chance to think over what had just happened.

"If it be possible, as much as... [it is] in you, live peaceably with all men."
~ Romans 12:18 ~

Chapter Twenty-seven

Fair of the Wilderness (Part Two)

1837, the Green River Valley, in what would later become the State of Wyoming.

"Discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee."

~ Proverbs 2:11 ~

Already conscious of the stare of so many, Emma struggled not to buckle under the pressure as even more arrived to gawk at the paleface with the yellow hair and the blue dress. People crowded around Emma, onlookers jostling themselves to get a better glimpse. She did her polite best to ignore them, and with a tenacious grip, clung to Josiah's arm as they passed through to where the family waited with the horses.

None of them had dismounted yet, especially Will. In a deliberate show of relaxed vigilance, he remained on the pony with a shotgun resting in the crook of an arm. His easy gaze roamed the crowd for trouble, until it fell on a pretty Indian girl whose bold stare betrayed unembarrassed admiration. He returned her admiring stare with a surprised smile, then slanted Cora a sheepish, highly apologetic look. From Will's odd behavior, Emma guessed he didn't want Cora getting the wrong impression. Even in Emma's embarrassed fluster of being the center of attention, she noted the stern, possessive look Cora shot to the young woman. All this happened within the space of a few moments, giving Emma much to think about.

"There ain't any room fer our lodge here," said Josiah, giving out instructions to his family. "We need to head further up the river a short ways, so no one make camp just yit. Will, I'd appreciate your keeping an eye on the travois."

An old Indian draped in a thin robe listened intently, as though he had an active part in the discussion. He followed Josiah's horses as they were led to an area large enough for Cora's impressive Blackfoot lodge. The old man made Emma nervous, but he wasn't alone in his persistent curiosity. Many of the others took an active part in observing where they would make camp, what food they had brought, what they had to trade. Only when Josiah had told them they would trade later, did the people begin to disperse.

Before they arrived at rendezvous, Josiah had the foresight to conceal the coin box in animal hides. Even so, excitement fluttered in Emma's stomach when he lifted the gold from the travois. Who could possibly guess that so much gold lay hidden in plain sight? Josiah nodded to her to stay by the gold, then went to help Cora set up the lodge.

It felt strange but somehow exhilarating to sit on a box worth four thousand dollars. The thought of what it could mean to their future, made Emma extra careful to guard the box every second of every moment until it had been safely hidden in Cora's lodge.

When Josiah told Mary to gather firewood, the girl's timid refusal prompted George to volunteer to go with her and help carry wood. With such friendship as this to guard Mary, Emma felt a little easier about letting Mary out of her sight. There were no longer very many watching them, though from the rowdy shouts of distant revelry, Emma remained on guard against any drunken troublemakers.

Jugs of whiskey and overly jovial grins were abundant at rendezvous. Whiskey came at a steep cost, but most seemed more willing to pay such a dear price for a few days of frolicking and merrymaking. When a half naked man ran past them with a jug slung over his shoulder, Grandpap joined the men who chased after the jug. It would have been funny to see an old man hurrying to get a taste, had the jug not been full of liquor.

The flurry of activity excited Josiah's sensibilities, and Emma saw him straining not to go join them. She knew the attraction pulled at him, for he had told her nearly everyone at rendezvous drank. All around them, she could see men and even some of the women, getting drunk little by little. They drank when they played, they drank when they bartered, and of course, they bought more whiskey from the fur company that held the rendezvous. Will looked as though he hankered for a taste of it himself, though from the way he kept his distance from anyone who offered, it was clear he intended not to indulge. With everyone getting merry with strong drink, and everyone expecting everyone else to do the same, Emma understood when Josiah felt left out of the festivities.

Josiah hobbled the horses nearby, careful to keep them within easy sight of camp. Blackfoot were known to run off with unguarded horses at rendezvous, and Josiah did all he could to make sure his would still be there the next day. The tired animals fed on the grass so abundant on the banks of the *Siskadee*, their tails flicking away flies and mosquitos.

Inside Cora's lodge, away from prying eyes, Emma and Cora set about making the shelter a home. A snug fire burned in the center of the room, while thick hides lined the floor to guard against the damp of the ground. Belongings were stacked against the walls, and blankets were folded, ready to be turned into beds come nightfall.

The men stood outside, talking with each other until Josiah squatted and poked his head into the lodge.

"Me and the others are going to look around, Emma. Will you womenfolk be all right on yer own fer a while? We won't go too far."

Emma hesitated to answer.

"Don't worry, Em," he flashed a confident grin. "I won't get into any mischief."

Giving Josiah to the Lord, Emma consented. She reminded herself that she trusted her husband to do the right thing.

The men left, and the women decided to remain in the lodge until they returned. Cora didn't look timid about leaving, but Mary certainly did, and to be fair, Emma relished some time away from the inquisitive eyes outside. While Emma took the opportunity to get some rest, Mary sat by the open flap of the entrance and watched the people as they passed.

The maze of lodges held sights both familiar and comforting to Josiah. A familiar face would stop him every now and then, and as usual, he was plied with whiskey, and asked when he would return to Blackfoot country. The questions were mostly lighthearted and filled with half drunkenness, so Josiah had little difficulty changing the subject. He tried to say something about the new life he'd found in God, but they moved away from him before he had many words out of his mouth.

The chanting that accompanied an Indian game of "hand," caught Will's curiosity, and he called Josiah over to a circle of people to watch. An object passed from person to person, hand to hand, and someone had to guess who had it. In this manner, they gambled for the prize laying in the center of the circle-- at present, three necklaces of fancy glass beads and some pipe tobacco. The people lost themselves in the chanting, the risk involved in the game, the whiskey that invariably found its way to the players.

Not far from this scene, white men occupied themselves with their own game of chance. A lively game of poker had men laughing and hollering at each other, while others lingered nearby to see who would win.

"Is that you, Josiah?" one of the players squinted at him, his bearded face pulled into something very much like a grimace.

"Henry." Josiah nodded to the man.

"I got a bone to pick with you, Josiah." Henry jammed his cards into a fist, more intent on Josiah than the poker game.

"Are you playing, or ain't you?" asked the annoyed player beside him.

"I fold," said Henry, glaring at Josiah as he threw the cards onto the buffalo hide they all sat on.

"Henry's fixing fer trouble!" shouted a player, his face split into a broad grin.

"You owe me," said Henry, scrambling to his feet and advancing toward Josiah at such a quick rate Josiah had to stop Will from raising his shotgun. "I want my calico back, and my knives, and the coffee and that jug of whiskey you stole. I want them back."

"I didn't cheat you, Henry, and you know it."

"I don't know anything of the kind." Henry stopped several feet before Josiah, his broad shoulders squared for a brawl. "You owe me, half-breed. One way or another, I'll get my money out you if I have to skin your hide and sell it."

"Stay where you're at, George," said Josiah, reaching out to push back the young man who had come to his defense. "This ain't yer fight."

"But, Josiah--"

"If it ain't Will Shaw!" Paul Tomlinson, a face familiar to Josiah, rose from the poker game; the others protested to yet another interruption and threatened to toss Paul out if he didn't sit down. "We gave you up for dead when you went off with that Indian guide," said Paul. "I see you're minus a leg now. What happened?"

Will rested the shotgun on his shoulder. "That thieving guide left me and George for dead. Almost succeeded, too, if Josiah here hadn't cut off my leg when it caught gangrene."

"You're fortunate to be alive," said Paul.

"I know it," said Will.

Paul gave a slow smile, though his eyes kept traveling between Josiah and the still very angry Henry. "You're in over your head," Paul told Henry. "Time you figured that out."

Henry flashed Paul a puzzled look.

"Josiah's got friends." Paul nodded to Will and George. "If you haven't been listening, he saved their lives."

Henry still didn't look as though he understood.

"You're denser than a post sometimes," sighed Paul. "Josiah's new friends aren't going to stand by while you try and beat him up. That ain't exactly a toy Will's got perched on his shoulder." Paul tossed his cards onto the buffalo robe and stepped away. "If I were you, Henry, I'd leave well enough alone."

Alarmed at being deprived of the opportunity to get even, Henry appealed to Will's sense of justice. "That half-breed cheated me at poker."

"So you told me last year." Will's flinty demeanor remained unchanged. Will wasn't a man anyone wanted to tangle with lightly. Even with one leg and a wooden stump, Will made an imposing figure.

"Time to cut your losses, Henry." Paul gave him a friendly smile, then walked away as the other men in the poker game grinned to see who would win the brawl. Already, bets were being placed, the odds stacking up in Josiah's favor.

The men could have saved their bets, though, for the fight left Henry; he grumbled, made a few faces at Josiah, but backed off from further confrontation.

Disappointed in their hopes of a fight, the men returned to their poker game with renewed zeal. Everyone determined to have fun, and when one prospect went bust, another soon took its place. That was rendezvous.

"Let's go see what's going on over there," said Will, pointing to a crowd gathering north of the encampment. "Maybe we can find someone to trade with. I'd like to see what we can get for our buffalo hides."

"I don't think they're trading," said George. "I think they're listening to someone."

"I'm obliged fer what you did back there," said Josiah, as they pushed past the gambling on their way to the crowd, "but I could've handled Henry by myself."

"You didn't have to do it alone," replied Will. "Not as long as I'm around to say anything about it."

They joined the crowd to listen to a man speak, though Josiah didn't pay any attention to what the man said. Josiah knew he could've handled Henry. He didn't fear getting into a fight, not being able to defend himself. But that wasn't the point. When had he ever had such a faithful friend as Will? Or even George? Men who were willing to share his fights, partake in his troubles without being asked? He'd had mountain friends before, men he could count on to help him when help was needed. But this went deeper than aiding someone to be sure they'd aid you. Josiah couldn't put it into words, but something deep within his soul bound himself to these two men.

"What have you got to grin about?" asked Will, slanting Josiah a quick glance. "That parson up there is mighty longwinded, and far as I can tell, you're the only one here who's smiling."

"Parson?" Josiah jolted to attention. He observed a rather young man standing on a crate before the crowd, one hand waving in the air, the other gripping a black book. "Is that what he is? A parson?"

"Near as I can tell," shrugged Will.

"I wouldn't mind speaking to him after he's done," said George, moving a little closer to listen.

Josiah's smile widened. "I have something to discuss with him, myself."

The sermon waxed long, and though the parson sounded with the inexperience that inevitably came with youth, Josiah appreciated his sincerity. When things came to a conclusion, Josiah couldn't help but notice the disappointment in the parson's face when so many returned to their pursuits without being visibly touched by his warning; the evils of gambling, immoral women and whiskey had seemingly gone unheeded-- some going as far as to voice their rebellion as they left.

Even before speaking to him, Josiah sensed the parson struggled with discouragement.

"Interesting sermon," said Josiah, stepping forward as the last of the assembly dispersed.

"'Interesting'?" the young preacher looked horrified. "I pray to God it was more than that."

"Whether they hear you or not," Josiah assured him, "they were warned. I'm thinking that has to be worth something in God's eyes."

"Yes, I suppose that's true," he replied, his features crestfallen at the solitary prospect. "I had prayed for greater success today."

"The day ain't over, yet," said Josiah. "This here's my friends Will Shaw and George Hughes. I'm Josiah Brown."

"*The* Josiah Brown?" the young parson stared at him in amazement. "I hadn't been long in these mountains when I'd heard of your exploits. You're the last person I expected to see in this morning's congregation."

This news gave Josiah great pain. "I hope I've done a heap of changing since then. You keep warning them people to do what's right, to follow after God and give their hearts to Jesus. I'm living proof that a man can change fer the better." Josiah hesitated, pleading with God that this sincere man would understand the situation. "I was wondering... would you be willing to marry me and my wife-- officially, I mean?"

The parson narrowed his eyes, cautious to give an answer before he'd heard more.

"Me and Emma-- that's my wife-- couldn't get someone to wed us, so we've had to do without. There ain't many parsons in these here mountains."

"Not many doctors, either," said Will, leaning forward to pat his wooden leg. "A man's got to be everything in these parts to survive. Josiah is a good man, parson. He's doctored me, hunted and tanned his own hides, been guide to me and George, and is a real good husband to a fine, upstanding woman. Has the smartest little girl, too-- isn't that right, George?"

"She's a very good student," George readily agreed.

With so much momentum behind him, Will took in another breath to continue his praise. In that wild moment of dread, Josiah thought of throwing Will to the ground, clamping his mouth shut until all the compliments had left him and he was back to his normal self. It didn't matter that Will had only one leg and such a maneuver might be unfair. What man would blame him for defending himself against such high praise as this?

The moment for action was lost, however, almost as soon as Josiah was able to justify his plan. He heard Will say, (with a great deal of enthusiasm), "*There isn't a better man in these mountains than Josiah Brown!*" and shut his eyes in deep chagrin.

"That's an awfully big stretch, Will." Josiah turned to the parson. "I don't pretend to be a good man, deserving of such well-meaning friends as Will and George. But I *am* trying to be a better man than I was before."

"Before what?" the parson asked, his face showing curiosity.

Josiah couldn't help grinning. He wasn't proud of himself-- not by a long shot-- but he *was* justifiably proud of what God had accomplished through the woman who had so dramatically changed his life.

"A better man than I was before Emma," he told the parson. "She's a very special person. They don't come any better than her."

It didn't surprise Emma when Mary remained by the lodge entrance. For all of the child's timidity, Mary held a deep curiosity for the people outside. Even Emma found them fascinating. Nearly everyone wore animal skins, though an article of cloth every now and again appeared on someone-- especially blankets. Some wore feathers in their hair, some adorned themselves with bright face paint, and some had quill trimmed garments with tassels of what looked to be human hair. The strangest sight of them all however, belonged to a white man dressed in a suit of armor! He clanked by them in obvious enjoyment of the spectacle he made.

"That Jim Bridger!" someone remarked, their tone laughing but at the same time respectful. "William Stewart sure is going to be sorry he gave him that armor. Hear tell it was shipped all the way from England, just fer this occasion."

But Jim Bridger wasn't the only white man making a scene at rendezvous. An artist by the name of Mr. Miller went about with a sketch pad, "taking down a likeness of everything he saw." Thankfully, Mr. Miller never happened by their lodge, for Emma didn't want to attract any more excitement than she already had by her arrival.

"The men are back," Mary called over her shoulder, "and they've got someone with them."

"Who?" asked Emma.

Before Mary could answer, the girl scrambled to Emma's side.

They heard Josiah's approaching voice before they saw any of the men. "I wasn't so sure I could find anyone at the rendezvous willing to do it," said Josiah, as Will fit himself through the entrance. "I call this Providence-- I surely do. Yer certain you know all them fancy words that

goes with it? My Emma likes those kinds of sentiments, although I'm not very big on them, myself."

Will shifted himself to the fire as George entered the lodge. Both men wore big smiles on their freshly-shaven faces, though why they grinned, Emma had no idea.

"I brung you some company, Emma," said Josiah, as a man even younger than George passed through the entrance. The man had no chin hair whatsoever, and his soulful mouth and jug-handle ears gave him a rather comical appearance despite his sober expression. His nervous, sad eyes darted about the room-- first to her, then to Cora, then to Mary hiding at Emma's side. "This here's Parson Gray, Emma. Parson, this is my wife."

"You're very welcome here," Emma smiled to the boyishly young man. He had to be sixteen or seventeen. Maybe even younger. He nodded to her with a nervous smile. "I didn't know there were any parsons at the rendezvous."

"Just one," said Josiah, kneeling between the parson and Emma to reach into the open bag beside Mary. "Anyone hungry?"

Will and George both said "yes," and Josiah tossed them each some pemmican.

"Parson?" Josiah held out some food to him, and the parson blinked in bewilderment. "It's food," said Josiah, placing it into the parson's hand. Josiah paused to pray over the food, folded his legs Indian style before the fire, and spoke to the parson who just sat there with the sticky substance in his fingers. "So when do you think you can do it?" asked Josiah. "I don't want it rushed or nothing. Emma deserves better than that."

"Better than what?" asked Emma. "What's happening?"

"I'll tell you later," said Josiah, his focus still on the boy. "I can pay you fer your trouble. I ain't asking fer any handouts. What's wrong? Why ain't you eating?"

The parson warily looked at the sticky wad in his hand. "I don't want to offend you," he said shakily, "but what is it? Are you sure its edible?"

"It's pemmican," George said with a knowing laughing. "How long have you been in the Rockies?"

"A few days, I suppose," the youngster shrugged. "I don't know."

"May I ask how old you are?" Emma inquired in a kind, gentle voice; she didn't want to hurt his feelings.

"Fifteen, ma'am," said the parson, slowly raising the pemmican to his lips. He nibbled, then finding it good, ventured to take a full bite.

"Fifteen is very young to be a minister," said Emma.

His expression firmed, and in that moment, he no longer looked so very young. "I assure you, Mrs. Brown, I'm old enough to do the Lord's work. I've had years of instruction from my adopted father and teacher, Parson Benjamin Gray of St. Louis, and am fully prepared to handle your husband's request."

"Request?" Emma fought back a question when Josiah waved her to be silent. Oh, that man!

"I fully understand the unique circumstances people find themselves in these mountains," said the young parson, taking another bite and addressing Josiah once more. "I consider you and Mrs. Brown to be already married, for indeed, from what you tell me, you have both already consecrated your union to God. All that is lacking is a formal ceremony to make the vow official in the eyes of-- how did you put it?-- the white man's world."

"Thank you fer understanding, parson," said Josiah, as Emma covered her mouth in stunned surprise. A marriage ceremony! Josiah was arranging for them to have an official ceremony. She had already been married the Blackfoot way, or at least, the half-breed way, for some months and yearned for a ceremony to acknowledge their vows before God. In her rush of gratitude to Josiah, she forgot to be irked with him for shushing her questions.

"I'll be ready at your convenience," said the parson, readily accepting more pemmican from Josiah. "This is remarkably good food! What did you call it?"

Sometime during the talk, Emma noticed Will and Cora leave the lodge together. No one asked why, for everyone's attention fastened on the wedding, the youth of the pastor, what pemmican consisted of and how it was made. No one thought to question Will or Cora why they left, and though Emma had the opportunity, she chose not to ask.

On the first afternoon of their arrival at the rendezvous, Josiah waited outside the hide lodge with Will, George, Grandpap, and Parson Gray.

The women were inside.

"Hurry up in there, Emma!"

"I thought you wanted this done properly," came the reply from the lodge.

"Proper, yes," groaned Josiah, "but I was hoping it wouldn't take all day. I got business to see to Em--" he stopped as Emma appeared from the entrance, her yellow hair brushed, the braids pinned up in her usual sense of tidiness. The blue dress had been brushed clean, and at her ankles, he could see the hem of her petticoat as she moved toward him.

"I'm ready," she breathed in a deep sigh.

"Yer mighty purty, Emma."

"No, I'm not, but I thank you for the compliment," she said with a very fetching smile.

For a reason known only to Parson Gray, Josiah had to stand on a particular side of Emma before the ceremony could begin. It made no sense to Josiah, and even less sense to Grandpap who harrumphed when the parson wouldn't begin until Josiah had moved. All this fuss over nothing!

Having gotten the bride and groom in correct order, the parson opened a book and rubbed a finger over some writing, as if to find his place.

Nervous, Josiah ran a hand through his cropped hair to make himself more presentable. A party of four Shoshone men had stopped to watch the proceedings, their inquisitive faces making him feel unnerved and self-conscious. He tried staring back at them, to give them the hint to move on, but they only sniffed and remained where they were. He sure hoped this ceremony wouldn't require him to make a buffoon of himself in front of those Shoshone. It didn't feel so good being easy entertainment to anyone who cared to watch.

The parson cleared his throat. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this company..."

Josiah shot a sideways glance at four members of "this company," and noticed one of the Shoshone take out some meat to gnaw on while he watched. A group of rowdy people passed close by, their hoots and hollers directed at some member of the rendezvous on the other side of camp.

The parson paused, waited a few moments for the noise to cease, then continued reading. "If any man can show just cause," he offered out loud to anyone listening, "why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter for ever hold his peace."

Josiah couldn't believe his ears. What was this young parson doing? Was he actually giving someone a chance to put a stop to the ceremony? Josiah glared at the four Shoshone, but they simply pulled out more food and went on with their meal. No one else said a word, and when the parson lost his place in the text and began to repeat the "just cause" offer, Josiah reminded him that he'd already read that part and to please move on.

It took some doing to understand the parson's educated words, but Josiah thought he understood at least as much as Emma did. He looked at her, saw the eyes and long lashes trimmed with tears, and realized he was wrong. Emma had to be understanding more than him to look so moved.

As Josiah redoubled his efforts to work up a fierce concentration, the Shoshone began muttering amongst themselves, gesturing and pointing to both groom and bride. Maybe they wanted to know why the white woman cried and looked happy at the same time-- Josiah didn't know. He just wished they'd leave.

Somewhere along the way, the parson had stopped speaking and Josiah found himself the sole object of everyone's attention.

"What?" he asked, feeling somewhat defensive, especially after having put in such an effort to follow every single word of the ceremony.

"I'll re-read the question," said Parson Gray. "Wilt thou have this woman--"

"Sure, I'll have her," interrupted Josiah. "Ain't that why we're here?"

"Please, let me finish."

"There's more?"

The parson cleared his throat, choosing to ignore Josiah's question. "Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour her, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

"Of course I will," said Josiah. "I wouldn't call myself a man if I didn't take care of my wife."

"The customary response is simply-- 'I will,'" said the parson, looking up from the book.

"Oh. Then *I will*."

"Atta-boy," Will said under his breath, tossing a wink of encouragement to Josiah as the parson addressed Emma.

"Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

Without missing a beat, Emma said, "I will."

Then Josiah had to repeat some words the parson read from his book. They were fancy white man's words, but Josiah more than caught the impact of the vow he was making to Emma. He would take care of her and love her, come what may. Then Emma repeated the vow back to him, her voice a thick haze of tears and tremulous whispers. Josiah hoped the ceremony would soon be over, for Emma was fast dissolving with too much joy.

When Emma had finished her vow, the parson asked God to bless their union. The thoughtful words were interrupted by the thunder of gunfire as someone was welcomed to the rendezvous. Out of pure instinct, Josiah took hold of Emma's hand, gave her a quiet squeeze to let her know he would protect her. Her fingers gripped his, and when the prayer ended, so did the ceremony.

To Josiah's surprise, Grandpap stepped forward to be the first to offer his congratulations-- if it could be called that.

"I guess you will not hang, after all."

"Thanks, Grandpap."

The old man grunted.

As George shook Josiah's hand, Will moved Grandpap off to one side to speak in whispers. The urgent look on Will's face intrigued Josiah, but he didn't have time to think about it. Emma needed a hug in a desperate way, her emotions of happiness so powerful she looked on the brink of fainting. Josiah hugged her, freely offering his strength and support.

"We did it, Em-- the white man's way. I figure we're about as married now as two people can git."

Grandpap walked away from Will, the old man shaking his head with a resigned sort of smile on his tired face. Josiah thought Grandpap would go inside the lodge for a nap, but instead the old Blackfoot pulled out his pipe, loaded it down with recently traded tobacco and took an expectant seat on the ground.

"Something's going on," said Josiah, letting Emma lean into his shoulder to enjoy the happiness of the day. A hand clutching Josiah's hunting shirt, Mary stood at Josiah's other side, closely watching the four Shoshone who watched them.

"Excuse me, parson," said Will, tapping the young man on the shoulder, "I'm afraid your work isn't done yet. We've got another job for you."

"Excuse me?" The fifteen year old stared at him. "I don't understand."

"We've got another wedding for you," said Will, hoisting up his britches with an important smile. "Figured it might be some time before we found another parson who'd be willing to marry us, so Cora and I have decided to tie the knot-- that is, if you'll oblige us."

"You're going to *what*?" Josiah released Emma, swung about to face Will. Surely, he hadn't heard his friend right.

Steady sky blue eyes leveled with cobalt steel, and to Emma's surprise, neither backed down.

"Grandpap just gave his blessing-- well, sort of. Said his daughter was old enough to do what she wanted without asking her father's permission. So Cora and I are getting hitched. Wanted to ask what you thought about it all, but Cora said it wasn't your decision and to leave you out of it."

"*Ma!*" Josiah turned to a very calm Cora. She looked at him mildly, her expression so fixed Josiah knew everything had already been determined. "Don't I got anything to say about it?"

"I am the one Will is marrying, Josiah-- not you."

"But, Ma!"

"If you've got any objections," Will intervened, "best get 'em out in the open. Maybe you don't like your ma's choice?"

"I never said that. I've got nothing against you, Will. But I brought Ma to help out with Emma, not to go off and leave with someone we likely ain't going to see again after rendezvous! I was looking forward to keeping ma with us!"

Frantic, Emma tugged at Josiah's arm, but he felt too agitated to pay her any heed and persisted in getting an answer from Will.

"I wasn't trying to rob you of your ma," said Will. "She only said 'yes' after I promised not to take her from her son's family." He shrugged, though a faint smile formed around his mouth. "Guess you're stuck with me."

"Josiah--"

"Not now, Emma. I'm thinking."

"But, Josiah--"

"Em, I've got a lot on my mind."

"I'll do my level best to take care of your ma, Josiah. I'll pull my own weight in this family, work my hardest to do what's best for everyone."

"I don't know where we'll be heading," warned Josiah. "Nothing's settled. I only know we won't be staying *here*."

"Won't matter to me," Will said with a shake of his head. "I've got no family but this one. So how about it?"

"Josiah," Emma gripped his arm so tight he had to listen. "Let them marry."

"Emma, aren't you following any of this? Will and Cora are hauling off and getting hitched!"

She smiled warm sunshine. "I know, Josiah. Let them go through with it."

"But they don't even like each other, Emma!"

"Yes, they do. You just haven't been paying attention."

Skeptical, Josiah pivoted to Will. "I don't suppose you've got anything to say for yourself?"

"I like her," Will said quickly.

"How much?"

"Enough to ask her to marry me."

Cora moved to Will's side and gave Josiah a stern look. "It is enough, Josiah. We will marry now."

"I like her plenty," said Will, bravely taking Cora's hand.

"Enough talk," said Grandpap, prodding Parson Gray. "Marry them."

With a gentle tug, Emma pulled Josiah away to let Cora and Will take their place before the parson.

"They're making a terrible mistake," Josiah whispered to Emma as the parson began the ceremony. "Just look at them, Emma."

"I *am* looking," she smiled, squeezing Josiah's hand.

He stared at the bride-- his ma!-- standing beside Will, her eyes glinting with something Josiah hadn't noticed before. Happiness. He struggled to remember when he had last seen his ma so happy, and was hard pressed for an answer. The groom held onto her hand until his fingers turned white-- Will Shaw of all men!-- his own joy plastered across his face as though he were the most blessed man in all creation.

"Don't they make a lovely couple?" Emma whispered, her eyes brimming with fresh tears. "Oh, Josiah, I'm so happy for them!"

A thought occurred to Josiah. He looked down at his wife. "This didn't come as a surprise to you, did it, Emma?"

Emma smiled knowingly. "Hush, I can't hear the ceremony."

Wrapping an arm around Emma, Josiah laughed in silence as Emma listened to the very same words she had heard only moments before when it had been their turn. Life certainly had a way of surprising him. More accurately, God had a habit of making things turn out in ways Josiah hadn't thought possible. As he watched Cora and Will-- hadn't even thought probable. And yet, there they were, giving Parson Gray plenty of business and everyone grinning ear to ear as though they were the first brides and grooms the world had ever seen.

After the second wedding, George shocked everyone by giving Will such a hearty handshake, it took even Will by surprise. Without the slightest trace of reserve, George offered Cora his best wishes for a long and happy marriage. For someone who had in the past objected to mixed unions, George was giving an awfully good imitation of someone who'd had a change of heart.

They didn't have meat ready for a wedding celebration, so Emma urged Josiah to trade one of their buffalo robes for some freshly slain venison from the Shoshone. Inside the lodge, everyone including the parson enjoyed the meal, made even more special by Cora's savory herbs. Everyone ate their fill, relishing full bellies and the opportunity to celebrate with friends. They told stories, ate more venison, and lounged about to laugh and comment on what the others had said.

The skies faded with the retreating sun, until the hides stretched above their heads darkened with night. The parson thanked them for the hearty meal, good conversation and sound fellowship, then prepared to return to his own camp. His sister was waiting for him, he explained, and needed to return before his brother-in-law came looking for him. Everyone shook his hand, and then the young parson left, his spirits more encouraged than when he had arrived.

"It takes a good deal of courage to do what that youngster is doing," Josiah said matter-of-factly. "I've got no reason to fear for him, though. He's got uncommon good sense fer a boy."

"I agree," said Will. He waited a moment, then gave a loud yawn. "Reckon it's getting close to bedtime."

"Reckon so," said Josiah. "It's been a long day."

"Eventful, too," said Will.

A long stretch of silence filled the lodge, and when Josiah remained silent, Emma kicked Josiah's foot. They both knew what Will wanted, and what Will was too embarrassed to ask.

A quiet, lazy grin spread over Josiah's mouth. He studied the hide walls, slid Emma a knowing glance, then pushed himself upright.

"George, I ain't knowing about you, but I'm hankering to sleep under the stars, tonight."

"I think I'll join you," said George, gathering his rifle and a heavy law book from his belongings. "It's a pleasant night for star gazing, don't you think, Grandpap?"

Grandpap stared directly at Will. The old man said nothing, but set about collecting his pipe and tobacco to take outside.

Relief touched Will's face. "Much obliged to everyone," he said, nodding to Emma as she passed him to take the first load of bedding outside. "Feel badly about tossing you folks out of your lodge."

"It ain't our lodge," Josiah flashed Will a grin. "It's Ma's."

Outside, Cora built a fire pit while Emma unrolled buffalo robes and blankets a short distance from where the fire would be lit. The air felt cold, but not frigid, so they would have no need to move closer to the fire pit. The women could hear the men inside, lingering to talk before parting for the night.

"Are you sure about this?" Josiah's deep voice asked. "You know what you'll be called, don't you? Squawman."

At this, Cora straightened. She stared at the lodge to await Will's answer.

"I know that," said Will. "I know it, and I don't care."

A smile parted Cora's lips as she went back to work, though from her slow movements, Emma knew she still listened.

"My pa was always ashamed of having a Blackfoot wife," said Josiah, his voice hushed though not so hushed that Cora and Emma couldn't overhear. "He beat Ma like an animal, then left her fer another woman. I was too small to put a stop to him, but I'm a man now and I won't let that happen again. Are you sure you won't be ashamed?"

The reply came strong and clear, without any hesitation or pause. "That woman is the finest I've ever had the good Providence to meet. She's accepted me as her husband, wooden leg and all. I won't betray her-- I give my word, I won't."

"That's good enough fer me," said Josiah.

When Emma moved some belongings to use as backrests by the fire for tomorrow's breakfast, she noted the smile had not left Cora's face. Tonight, Cora didn't seem haunted by her usual reserve. Some people show their emotions easier than others, and tonight, such a happy display came easy to Cora.

With dawning understanding, Emma felt this was a testament to Cora's difficult life.

They made a good match, Emma decided, going back to make sure Mary's bed would be comfortable. Cora had quiet strength, and Will, the sensitive heart to take advantage of that strength, and give something back to Cora that she hadn't had in a very long time. A husband who loved her.

After wishing a good night to Will, Josiah and George and Grandpap left the lodge for the newlyweds.

Her heart warmed when Emma saw Cora approach Josiah. The mother placed a hand on her son's shoulder, and though they never said a single word, in that quiet moment, Emma knew Cora was thanking Josiah for what he had said to Will.

The fire ready, the beds made, Cora stepped into the lodge, then tied the entrance shut behind her.

"I'm not tired," Mary protested, her eyes struggling to stay open as Emma tucked her into bed. She cuddled into the blankets with her two dolls, said her prayer, and smiled sleepily when Emma gave her a kiss on the cheek.

It had been a long day for Grandpap. He lay down on the bed beside Mary's, the tobacco pipe still in his hand; if he wanted to light it and have a smoke, he fell asleep before finishing his purpose. Reclined on his side with one of Emma's blankets tucked about him, it didn't take many minutes before he snored loudly, an old man who very much needed his rest.

As George stretched out on his buffalo robe and said goodnight to an already fading Mary and a snoring Grandpap, a group of men moved through the encampment, and stopped at Josiah's fire.

"Howdy," said a male voice.

In an automatic reflex, Josiah reached for his flintlock. His posture relaxed as the men stepped into the ring of firelight. They gathered round the fire with Josiah, the mood friendly though not without a hint of danger in the air.

"How's rendezvous been treating you fellers?" asked Josiah, as David and the four men with him took seats on the ground.

From behind Josiah, Emma sat on her blanket and watched the posturing of the men. Josiah's back directly faced her, but the others she could see without obstruction. Even to her poor eyesight, they looked restless.

Their presence made George wary. He leaned forward, whispered across Mary and Grandpap. "Do you think there will be trouble, Emma?"

"I don't think so," said Emma, grateful Mary had slipped into a peaceful sleep and couldn't hear their conversation.

His expression thoughtful, George lay back down, braced the rifle across his chest, and propped his head up to keep a level gaze with the men around the campfire. This manly posturing reminded Emma that George had done a great deal of growing up since he first came to the mountains. Considering the relative safety of the situation, Emma decided to let him drift into sleep, as his heavy lidded eyes were doing at this very moment. If Josiah needed help, many could come to his rescue at a second's notice.

"Where will you be trapping next?" asked the large man named David.

"I want to know something first," said another, his tone angry to the point of belligerence. "We found a settler's wagon at Jackson Hole, but there were no settlers. That woman was one of them, ain't she."

It wasn't a question-- more of an accusation-- but Josiah simply tossed another twig into the already blazing campfire and remained silent.

"I told you," said the angry man, thrusting a finger in Josiah's direction. "He took the woman and killed her family."

Josiah's back stiffened. "The Blackfoot got to her pa before I could help. I buried him as best I could."

"And kept the woman for himself!"

"Hush up, Three Guns." David cast a withering glare at the half-breed. "Take your jealousy somewhere else. We came to visit a friend, not make an enemy."

A cold wind blew into the camp, casting flames into the sky with sparks and embers, ruffling Josiah's curls and sending a shiver into Emma. She drew a blanket about her shoulders, waited to see what would happen next.

"Is the trapping very good in the North?" asked David, resting his large hands on his knees. It looked awkward for a man of his bulk to sit on the ground with his legs crossed like an Indian's. His head tilted, revealing a side profile with two large chins. "When will you be guiding us back to the rivers, Josiah? When can we go back into Blackfoot country?"

"You'll have to find another guide," Josiah said after a long pause. "I can't take you. I'm leaving the fur trade."

"*What?*" David's voice rose in irritation. "Of course you'll take us! We're yer friends, ain't we?"

"You are," said Josiah, his tone growing helpless and tense, "but I can't take you into Blackfoot territory anymore. I ain't welcome."

"You were there all winter, weren't you? And yet you came out alive." David tossed aside Josiah's words as though they meant nothing. "You'll take us again."

"I'm leaving the Rockies, David."

The camp came to a complete hush.

"Leaving?" David asked finally. "Where will you go?"

Josiah shrugged. "I ain't knowing yet, but me and Emma have plans. As soon as rendezvous is over and all our robes have been traded fer supplies, we're leaving these mountains and heading West."

"So much fer beaver," said Nehemiah Bell, the man with the leggings and toothless grin. "All that waiting around for nothing."

"Sorry, Nehemiah, but I got plans."

"What about *our* plans? What about your friends?"

When Josiah didn't have an answer, someone remarked about the fickle two-faced nature of half-breeds; then, one by one, Josiah's friends left the campfire until only David and Three Guns remained.

The men sat in silence for a long while, the crackle of the fire mingling with the distant drunken shouts of rendezvous.

"She'll leave you, Josiah." David looked at him with a direct gaze. The light from the fire blinded the men from seeing outside their ring, though Emma could see them just fine. "You do not belong in her world, Josiah. You know this is true. She'll see you don't belong, but by then it'll be too late fer you to come back. You'll be stuck in some settlement, far away from yer real friends, and we won't be able to help you."

"I'm going, David."

David stared at Josiah, thought creasing his heavy brow. "She'll leave you the first chance she gets."

"No, she won't." Josiah sounded adamant. "She loves me."

"If that ain't the dumbest thing I've ever heard you say, then my name ain't David Lambert. I've already told you before there ain't such a thing as love in marriage. Love won't keep a man in bed after sunrise, or turn his thoughts to a woman he's stuck with fer the rest of his life. What you need is a whore. Whores don't tie a man down."

Josiah was silent.

"You aren't good fer anything besides trapping and hunting. Look at you-- you can't even read or print yer own name. Give her up, Josiah, before she leaves you fer someone else. You'll never be able to keep a woman like that for long."

To Emma's dismay, Josiah's head bowed, and his shoulders slumped as though discouraged. The attack had grown deeply personal. David's aim seemed obvious, his objective clear: to remove her from Josiah, to shake Josiah's confidence in their relationship. Then David could have his guide, his old fun-loving Josiah back as before.

Leaving George to doze with his rifle, Emma got to her feet. She had heard enough. This called for a desperate measure, something not typical of her usual conduct around strangers. Her marriage under attack, Emma refused to be silent and watch Josiah's heart bleed at the hand of an old, influential "friend." David Lambert had to be stopped.

Movement outside the ring of firelight caught Josiah's attention. He gasped when he recognized Emma, boldly moving between Three Guns and David to come to his side of the fire.

"Why ain't you sleeping?" asked Josiah, as he helped Emma onto the ground beside him.

Pulling Josiah's arm around her, Emma snuggled against his hunting shirt. "I can't sleep without you," she said in a small, quiet tone that made him instantly protective. "When are you coming to bed, Josiah?"

"I'm busy talking to David and Three Guns."

"Don't let me interrupt," Emma yawned with a cozy snuggle.

Unexpected feminine warmth made Josiah's insides glow. He leaned his cheek against the top of her head, held his breath as Emma moved her hand to his chest.

"It won't last, Josiah." David's onslaught came again, this time with more forcefulness than before. "It ain't possible fer a man to feel so much fer his wife."

Warm breath kissed Josiah's face with Emma's presence. Her fingers caressed him. He moaned, pressing his lips against her hair.

"One woman will never be enough. It was never enough in the past, and it won't be enough in the future. You'll always want more than what she can give."

Emma's head tilted back, and her mouth brushed against Josiah's. Her lips parted, the kiss dramatic and deepening until Josiah's senses were crammed to overflowing with Emma: the smell of her, the taste of her, the feel of her. David was saying something, but he couldn't follow the words to make sense of what was being said. Her hand was in his hair now, shattering the last of Josiah's concentration.

"Come to bed," she whispered. He grinned, knowing those words would only be said to him, and to no one else. "Josiah." She breathed his name-- nothing more-- and his heart hammered like an anvil in his chest.

"Where did you find her?" asked Three Guns, in obvious admiration.

Josiah sucked in a breath of cold air. "Sorry, but my wife is ending yer visit. Maybe tomorrow--" Josiah's breath caught as Emma moved her hand to the back of his neck for another kiss. "This is goodbye, men." Josiah dropped his mouth over hers, and didn't come up for air until her passion had been soundly answered. With a free hand he pulled Emma's blanket shawl over their heads and soon had the satisfaction of hearing David and Three Guns leave.

"Yer quite a woman, Emma," he breathed into the intimate darkness. "Thanks fer saving me."

They could not be alone, but Josiah and Emma enjoyed quiet kisses and more than one secret caress that night. They cuddled by the fire, happy in each other's arms, content to let the world think what they wanted of two people half hidden under a blanket.

To anyone who cared to pause and watch them in the firelight, only a few moments of observation were needed to realize the reality of Josiah and Emma's happiness.

It was plainly evident they were terribly in love.

"Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?"

~ Song of Solomon 8:5 ~

"My undefiled is but one; she is the only one of her mother, she is the choice one of her that bare her. The [trappers] saw her, and blessed her; yea... they praised her."

~ Song of Solomon 8:9 ~

Chapter Twenty-eight

Land of the Broad-Shouldered Mountains

1837, the Green River Valley, in what would later become the State of Wyoming.

"Sing unto the LORD with thanksgiving... Who covereth the heaven with clouds, who prepareth rain for the earth, who maketh grass to grow upon the mountains."

~ Psalm 147:7, 8 ~

After having spent the night cuddling with Josiah, Emma noticed him in considerably good spirits the next morning. He chuckled when Will and Cora didn't emerge from the lodge, and told Emma to just let them be; they would come out when they were good and ready for company.

A contented whistle on Josiah's lips, he and George went to see about trading their buffalo hides for supplies for the next leg of their trip. Wherever that trip would be. For all the struggle of getting Josiah resigned to leave this magnificent land of broad-shouldered mountains, Emma knew they would need a plan very soon. A plan as to where they wanted to go, and what they would do for a living after they got there.

With this on her mind, and Mary stacking more wood for the fire, Emma felt a sensation of mild alarm when she saw David Lambert standing on the outskirts of their camp.

Hat in hand, he nodded to her as she took notice of him. "Mrs. Brown?" The wide man moved hesitantly toward the campfire, his face almost contrite. "Might I trade words with you? I promise, I won't offend you more than I already have."

Skeptical, Emma smiled. "My mother advised me never to make any promises I wasn't fairly sure of keeping, Mr. Lambert. I might offend easier than you think."

The mountain man's face crimsoned. "This time I ain't liquored up, ma'am. I swear I'm stone sober."

"So it was the liquor talking last night, and not you?"

The crimson deepened. "I'm begging yer pardon, ma'am. I underestimated you-- if you don't mind my saying. Yer a woman to contend with, that's fer certain, and I don't aim to get into another shootout with you over Josiah. I figure I'd lose before I even got started."

In the light of morning, and without the influence of whiskey to fuel him, David seemed tame, close to likable. Not trusting him still, Emma invited him to sit by the fire. He wanted something, or rather, to tell her something; when he promised to behave, Emma said she would listen. She braced herself for an argument that her marriage to Josiah was doomed to failure, but instead, she heard something quite unexpected from the likes of one of Josiah's wild friends.

"I never thought that young griz would up and get himself a mate," said David, placing his rifle across his round knees. "He talked about it, but I never thought he'd do it. Then to find out he got a woman with some fight in her," David grinned in open admiration, "well, let me say Mrs. Brown, I envy the ornery brute. I surely do. Even Three Guns told me he wished he was in Josiah's place; if you only knew how much pride that breed has, you'd know just how big an accomplishment that is."

"Mr. Lambert, I'm sure you didn't come here to flatter me."

"No, ma'am, I surely didn't." He slanted his head, looked at her with one eye. "I can see you ain't just a petticoat, but a real woman. One that can make up Josiah's mind for him."

"I don't manipulate my husband, Mr. Lambert."

"You don't, eh?" David chuckled, rubbed his bearded chin. "After last night, ma'am, I saw the handwriting on the wall. Unlike Josiah, I can read, and I know when I'm licked."

Emma crossed her arms. "Please get to the point, if you have one."

"Josiah said you hadn't fixed on a destination yet."

"No, we haven't."

Brows raised in evident pleasure, David continued. "Sometime back, I used to know a breed by the name of Ezekiel Thompkins. His pa worked for the British fur companies, and to his everlasting pride the son followed in his footsteps. Then this Ezekiel-- this half-breed-- up and quit his former occupation, turned his back on trapping, and now owns a farm in the valley of the Wallamut." David paused, and Emma smiled.

"I believe I understand what you're getting at, Mr. Lambert. If Mr. Thompkins can do it, then so can Josiah."

"That's my thinking." David rubbed the knee of his britches, a manner that reminded Emma of her husband. "Of course, Josiah doesn't know much about farming, but if you've got him leaving

the fur trade, I reckon he'll be willing to learn something different. At any rate, they allow breeds to own land in the Wallamut. I hear the farming's good there, if Josiah is willing to stick it out until he learns how. It'll be hard going for a while. But then, if I'm guessing right, you don't give up easy."

The compliment only distracted Emma for a moment. "Where is this valley?" she asked.

"In the Oregon Country." David watched her, as if trying to gauge what she thought of his suggestion.

"Why is it so important to you that Josiah goes there?" asked Emma. "Why are you trying to be so helpful?"

"Say what you want about me, Mrs. Brown, but Josiah and I go back quite a spell. Me and him are fine friends. I always figured we'd tramp these mountains long after the furs disappeared, living the free life for as long as we could. It's just as well that he's made other plans. In spite of all the high talk at rendezvous just now, this way of life is disappearing fast. Josiah would be hard pressed for somewhere to go, something to do. I hear this country will be needing guides to lead settlers West, but don't you let Josiah be one of them. For all his attachment to you, he's mighty fond of women and I fear he won't last long without tussling his wife."

"Do you claim to know Josiah that well, Mr. Lambert?"

"Beg pardon, ma'am, just speaking my thoughts. For his sake as well as yer own, keep Josiah close."

"These are very private matters, sir."

"As I said," David rubbed his knee again, the movement impatient, awkward, "Josiah and I go way back. But you do what you think is best." For all his bulk David climbed to his feet with more grace than Emma had thought probable. "I don't want to overstay my welcome, so I best be leaving now. There's a jug waiting for me somewhere, and I aim to find it. Good luck to you, Mrs. Brown." And with that, David left in search of that morning's whiskey.

In spite of the commotion around her from the merriments of rendezvous, Emma lost herself deep in thought. She watched Mary play house with some sticks the girl had bound and then covered with remnants of buffalo hide to create a lodge for her dolls. Emma touched her belly, felt the baby move inside her and wondered if David's visit might be God showing them their future.

Around noon, Josiah and George returned, a big grin plastered across Josiah's face.

"George and I have done some trading," said Josiah, dumping an armload of supplies onto the robe. George did likewise. "We didn't part with all the furs, just enough to outfit us with some necessities. Lookit, Emma-- I got more ball, powder, and another flint to replace my old one."

"And we purchased some coffee," said George, pulling out a small bag of coffee beans and then holding it up for Emma's inspection. "It's not much, I'm afraid. The prices here are enormous."

Josiah shrugged. "Them mountain prices are mainly so high, because it costs something dear to freight it out to rendezvous. We didn't get any luxuries except that coffee, Emma. I knew you wouldn't approve of spending more than we have to."

Momentarily ignoring the dread of high prices, Emma pressed on with her small bit of news. "David Lambert paid me a visit after you left camp this morning."

Though Josiah didn't look pleased, his attitude remained unafraid, as if he knew David wouldn't have hurt Emma. "What'd he have to say?"

"He suggested we settle in the Wallamut."

To Emma's surprise, Josiah took this news in stride. Face thoughtful, he leaned back on his elbows, stared at the clouds until at last breaking his reverie. "I reckon he's thinking about Zeke."

"If that's short for Ezekiel, then yes, that's the gentleman Mr. Lambert mentioned."

Brow cocked, Josiah looked at Emma. "Gentleman? Zeke's been called a lot of things, but that's the first I've heard of him being a gentleman."

The hide lodge opened, interrupting Emma's response. Cora emerged with leftover venison, gave it to Emma to serve for lunch, then went about collecting the stacks of bedding to be returned to the lodge.

Unspoken merriment danced in Josiah's eyes as he watched his mother go about camp as though nothing had happened.

When Will emerged, Josiah found his tongue.

"How's everything?" asked Josiah.

Not answering, Will let himself down to the ground, adjusted the wooden leg, then shot a wary glance at Josiah as though he didn't quite trust the question. "Well enough, I reckon. And you?"

"Same with me," said Josiah. By now, George was grinning, too.

"Looks like we're in for some nice weather," said Will, looking up and inspecting the sky. "Yes, sir, tonight will be a good night for watching stars again." Will turned, looked at Josiah.

"I reckon," said Josiah.

"I'm obliged," said Will.

The teasing out of the way, George showed Will the wares they had traded for that morning. "We didn't touch your share of the skins," said George. "Josiah thought you should have the right to make your own decisions."

Will shook his head. "I've thrown in with this family, so I expect to do my part. Take whatever of my hides you need, Josiah."

"I got enough without taking yers, too," said Josiah. "George here already gave me his share, providing I help pay his way to go back East when he's ready."

Will sat up straight, stared at George. "Thought you was going back after rendezvous."

"I am-- just not all at once." George fiddled with a blade of grass before looking up to face Will. "I asked Josiah if I could come with him and help him settle in his new country. I figured everyone could use the help."

"You aren't still running from your pa, are you?"

"No, simply postponing my trip." George tossed aside the blade. "I'm a grown man, and I have the right to make my own decisions. There's nothing I can do back East that I can't do later. If I was a slaveholder, I wouldn't put off my return..." George took a deep breath. "I've been meaning to speak to you, Josiah. I suppose now is as good a time as any, maybe even better than most."

"I'm listening," Josiah said between noisy mouthfuls.

"I want to apologize for what I said about not all men being equal. I was wrong, and I ask your forgiveness."

Eyes fixed on George, Josiah swallowed the meat in a large gulp.

"When I killed those two Blackfoot to save Mary, I knew I had killed two men-- not two creatures who were somehow inferior to myself. They were men, and their blood was every bit as red as mine."

"You know what yer saying, don't you?"

"I know." George sucked in another deep sigh. "When I return, my father will be livid with anger. I can only imagine what he'll say, what he'll do to me. I'm going to stand for everything he's against, and I don't pretend it's not part of the reason I'm delaying the trip. I need more time to prepare myself for what I have to do." Resolution set into George's young face as he locked eyes with Josiah. "When you need to make friends with your new neighbors, I want to be there."

"I can stand on my own."

"You don't have to."

This time, when Josiah swallowed again, he didn't have food in his mouth. "Yer going to finish law school, ain't you?"

"I intend to," said George. "Aunt Dorothy will pay my way, even if my father won't. I'm her favorite nephew, and she won't deny me another chance at Harvard. Even if I take some time before returning."

Quiet descended over the small camp, the friends and family eating their lunch in peaceful companionship. Then Josiah told the others what Emma had heard from David, and they began to discuss in earnest the wisdom of such a move. Will and George had already advised going further west, and when Josiah told them of Ezekiel Thompkins, they cast their vote in approval. Will declared it a grand idea. Before Will's brother had died, Will had worked the brother's farm, and knew all about crops and harvesting. Will had experience farming, and could be of great help with advice and counsel.

The Oregon Country. Even Emma's pa had thought the land sounded promising, having planned to go there himself if things didn't transpire well in the mountains. They hadn't, and now Josiah contemplated the same destination.

Having discussed the prudence of the situation with Emma and the others, and having admitted to seeing God's hand in the matter, Josiah stepped out in faith. They would go.

It had been a monumental day. In the space of a few hours, they had decided their destination and who would accompany the family. An air of excitement hovered in the lodge, around their camp, in the quiet conversation as they spoke about the future.

Before retiring into the lodge for the night, Will drew Emma aside and asked for a favor.

"After our talk today about going to the Oregon Country, Cora wondered if it would be possible for her to get a dress like yours-- you know, one made of cloth, like the other women will be wearing. If I trade for some material, would you tailor a dress for her?"

"I'd be happy to do it, if that's what she wants. I've been considering the same thing for Mary. She's been begging for a white man's dress for some time, ever since she's seen my blue woolen."

"Then I'll make certain you have enough cloth to do both jobs," said Will, grinning ear to ear. "I told my Cora she didn't have to dress different if she didn't want to, but she's made up her mind to make the change. She's a strong one, all right. Strong willed, too. Don't know how I ever deserved her, but I got myself a real good woman."

The next day, Will took the ladies to see the material available for trade. Emma suggested a dark brown fabric for the outer garments, sturdy and serviceable for everyday wear, while an off-white linen was chosen for the petticoats. Mary's thrill at having a "twirling gown" as she called it, only made Will grin the harder. He had always doted on Mary before, and now he was a grandparent by marriage and would be living with Josiah's family, Mary would be assured of continued kindness.

Not long after acquiring the cloth for Cora and Mary's dresses, they had a visit from Parson Gray's sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Donaldson. Mrs. Donaldson traveled with her younger brother and husband as visiting missionaries. After evangelizing the trappers at rendezvous, they would head South, their destination being the Republic of Texas. Mrs. Donaldson had a very plain face, polite manners, and treated Emma's extended family with the same civility she gave to Emma. She talked of how she and her brother had been abandoned as very young children, and how Parson Benjamin Gray had adopted them as his own. While she talked to Emma, the younger Parson Gray spoke to George about the abolition.

The two youths spent hours in deep discussion over religion and the barbarity of slavery; Emma shuddered when she overheard Parson Gray's impassioned retelling of how in St. Louis, it wasn't a crime to rape a female slave unless it was deemed a "property trespass" against her owner.

When the evening concluded, and the guests returned to their own camp, Emma noticed the hardened resolve in George's demeanor. She couldn't help thinking George was destined to do great things.

The end of rendezvous made Josiah yearn to go back to the Rockies, hunt and trap and resume his former life as a mountaineer. The yearning didn't pull at him as much as he thought it would, but still enough to acknowledge that old habits are not easily changed. He had been glad to speak to David again, to part as friends and not enemies. With his usual mix of good humor and doses of practical advice, David had wished Josiah and his family luck. David reckoned they would need it.

Josiah had heard of the Oregon Country, knew the general direction and how to get there, and had often crossed the easy terrain of the South Pass that had been made popular by Jed Smith. The Indians had known about the Pass for as long as the mountains had stood, but to the white man, this was a new discovery, a way to cross the Great Divide in wagons that had been previously unknown. While the rendezvous had been in full roar, Josiah gathered as much pathfinding information as he could from anyone who knew of the valley of the Wallamut. He would be pushing further into the Pacific Northwest than he'd ever gone before. Much further. He remembered one of his pa's favorite jokes, a quote taken from Ole' Daniel Boone himself: "I can't say as ever I was lost, but I was bewildered once for three days." In spite of his knowledge, Josiah figured he'd have his own share of bewilderment in the coming months.

With Emma getting bigger with every passing week, Josiah packed up his family and began the long journey to their new life. It was a grand feeling, a splendid start, but they made little progress for Josiah didn't want to press Emma too hard. Her back hurt, her feet swelled, and after all of two months, Josiah made camp just south of Bear Lake. From here on out, he'd be more or less following the route Lewis and Clark had made during their heroic 1804 expedition. For now, just looking at Emma made Josiah anxious, so here they would camp for as long as Emma needed. Mountain men had held at least two rendezvous here in the past, and it would be a good place to let Emma rest and take care of her coming travail. Although trappers had fought with Blackfoot here in past history, Josiah had no concern of further trouble. They were far enough from his ma's village, it gave him no worries.

What did worry him though, was Emma, and the potential for a difficult birth.

Cold wind swept down the foothills, through the open lodge entrance, stirring the night fire into long flames that danced in the strong breeze. Leaning over, Josiah tied the opening shut, reclined and checked the woman beside him. After a difficult night of aches and not being able

to get comfortable on the buffalo robes, she had at last fallen asleep. Mary lay curled next to Cora, both taking their rest so soundly, that when Will whispered to Josiah from across the fire pit, they didn't stir. Not even Emma budged a muscle.

"Can't sleep?" asked Will, folding an arm beneath his head after smiling at the woman beside *him*. "Reckon I know what's keeping you awake. Emma's getting close to her time, isn't she?"

"She is." Josiah pulled a blanket over Emma's shoulder, tucked her in to keep in the warmth. "I'd appreciate yer prayers in the matter."

Will grinned. "You've had them for some time now." George groaned in his sleep, yawned, turned on his other side then fell into a faint snore. The men smiled at each other, and left off talking so the others could rest.

How long Josiah had been asleep before he felt the shove against his chest, he couldn't reckon. He only knew that when he opened his eyes, Emma was breathing hard.

"Wake Cora."

"Why?" asked Josiah. "Is it time?"

"I don't know." Emma gasped, doubled on her side and gripped the buffalo robe beneath her. "Just wake her!"

Throwing aside the blanket, Josiah stared at Emma. He couldn't move, couldn't think straight or even remember to be brave. Facing down trouble with nothing but bare hands and the will to survive, didn't move him to fear. Wrestling with a grizzly didn't even strike as much dread in him, as seeing Emma writhe in pain. His hands felt damp, the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Helpless as a day old cub, Josiah called to his mother. "You'd best wake up, Ma. Emma's calling fer you."

A snore caught in Will's throat as Cora sat up, then shook her husband awake. "Take your beds outside," she instructed Will. "George, get up." She kicked at the young man's foot and he woke with a protest. When George saw Emma's pale face and measured breathing, his eyes grew wide like two harvest moons. "Help Will take the beds outside," Cora told him. He nodded his head, agreeing even though Josiah knew he wasn't fully awake yet.

Everything felt like a dream.

Mary crawled about, collecting bedding, and then pushing it through the entrance. Grandpap, George, and Will managed to get outside without disturbing Emma, and then, to Josiah's surprise, Cora waited for him to go, as well.

"I'm staying, Ma."

"You are not needed here. Leave Emma to me."

Josiah had an arsenal of argument left in him, objections and plain old insistence that he would stay. He was about to unleash them on his ma, when Grandpap's urgent voice traveled through the walls of the lodge.

"Someone has made a camp near us."

Kicking off the last of the blankets, Josiah paused to kiss Emma before snatching the flintlock and rushing outside. "I'll be praying fer you, Em. You want me, you just holler and I'll come running."

"Go," she said, gasping for breath before giving him a brave smile. The pains weren't strong yet, and she still had the presence of mind to offer him comfort. "I'm fine, Josiah."

He flashed her a grin, then ducked out of the lodge.

"Over there," said Will, pointing to a spot of light in the distance. "Someone's keeping a warm camp, tonight. Reckon they think they're alone. Our lodge is tucked behind this foothill, so they can't see our fire."

"Who are they?" In the darkness, Josiah could hear the frightened caution in George's voice. For all the boy's growing up, he still had a way to go before he was as seasoned as Josiah or Will.

"I ain't sure, but I aim to find out. Mary, stay with Will. George, you and I are going to pay that camp a visit." Josiah knew Will wanted to protest, but with that wooden leg, he would do more good keeping an eye on the women than trying to stumble about in the dark. A sharp groan came from inside the lodge, and Josiah heard Emma ask God for strength. Josiah felt weak. Then something moved between him and the distant fire, and Josiah's attention snapped into focus.

With a raise of Josiah's hand, he signaled George to follow.

Stars shot across the darkness overhead, and dry unseen grass crunched beneath his moccasins. The faint cry of a woman sounded behind him, lending Josiah more resolve to find out who

these unexpected neighbors were. If they were enemies, he wanted to find out before getting a surprise night visit of their own.

Crouched in the blackness, with only the moon for light, Josiah could see the dark outline of George's silhouette against the sky. Careful to maintain his stealth, Josiah edged closer to the encampment. At first he had thought this might be a brigade of trappers, but the closer he came, he realized the skins these people wore were distinctly Indian. More than that, they were distinctly Blackfoot. Two men, a woman, and a child lay in bundled buffalo hides, their faces gaunt from want of food.

Without warning, one of the men shoved the butt end of his rifle against his shoulder and aimed it at Josiah. He hadn't been asleep after all, and Josiah suddenly wondered if he hadn't led George into a trap. His eyes darted about the camp, trying to make out the presence of more men with weapons; Josiah half expected to see them rushing forward, ready to take him and George. But Josiah saw no one, just the people crowded by the fire and the man with his rifle aimed at Josiah.

"We mean you no harm," Josiah said in Blackfoot. He motioned to George, indicating his friend's presence so as not to take the startled Blackfoot by surprise. The sound of his voice woke the second man and the woman, though the child remained motionless.

"Something's not right," said Josiah, as George came to his side, rifle at the ready. "Look at them, George. Look at their faces. They're scared stiff."

"We surprised them," said George, by way of an explanation.

The three Blackfoot said nothing, but their eyes held dim terror. They made no invitation to come join them at the fire, no offers to trade or discuss where the buffalo were grazing. They seemed intent on keeping their distance from Josiah and George, but not simply from fear of strangers. Blackfoot were too proud, too much the warrior to display such weakness.

The second man struggled to his feet, wavered a little as he stood, then picked up his rifle. He kept the barrel pointed at the ground-- either as a show of bravery, or out from a lack of physical strength.

"We come as friends," Josiah said in their common tongue. "We saw the fire, and came to see who you were."

The slack look of futility in the once proud warrior's face stunned Josiah. He stumbled, fell to his knees and stared helplessly at the child. It was the look of a father, unable to do anything

more for one of his own flesh-- a look Josiah not only recognized, but also felt. With Emma struggling back there in the lodge, his heart beat in sympathy for the man.

In a show of defeat, the first man dropped his rifle, and the woman closed her eyes. It was as though they were surrendering to the inevitable.

"Do you need food?" asked Josiah. "Stay where yer at, George," he added in English, halting the young man from moving any closer. "Go back to our camp and get half of our pemmican."

Even though George clearly wanted to ask questions, he did as Josiah asked.

At last, the child moved, and the watching father slumped in a look of utter desperation.

"Is the girl sick?" asked Josiah.

The man turned to stare at him, but still said nothing.

Before long, George returned with the food. "What do you think is wrong with them?" he asked, handing a leather bag over to Josiah.

"I'd say they're starving to death." Josiah looked at George, saw the shock register. "I don't know why, but from the looks of them, they haven't eaten in a mighty long time." Josiah tossed the bag to the father. The man made no move to touch it, then, with great reluctance, he opened it but with such wariness as astonished Josiah. Surely, he could smell the food.

One by one, the pemmican was passed about the camp, until even the child had roused enough to hungrily munch Cora's dried meat.

"How's Emma doing?" asked Josiah.

George groaned in self-reproach. "I don't know. I was in such a hurry to get the pemmican, I forgot to ask."

Biting back his impatience, Josiah squatted to watch the Blackfoot. He couldn't leave-- not yet. George did likewise, only he sat direct on the ground, getting his britches wet from the dew.

The father pushed himself up, approached Josiah as though he would speak to him. Josiah did likewise, though he noticed the man would not come any closer than several feet.

"Water?" asked the man, his voice shaky, uneven.

Josiah turned to George. "Go fetch some water. And this time, ask about Emma."

Eager to obey, George raced off, leaving Josiah and the thin Blackfoot to stare at each other in silence.

"Show your hands," the man said finally. Then he proceeded to inspect not only Josiah's hands, but also his face. And all from a distance.

The pain was worse than anything Emma had ever felt before, or even thought a human capable of feeling. Surely, the human race had not come from this-- this indescribable pain that wrapped around her like a clenched fist. If all women had the same experience bringing children into the world, surely there would be fewer people in it.

Pain filled Emma's senses, another contraction took hold and she forced herself not to scream.

A cloth pressed against the perspiration on Emma's face. She thanked Cora for the kindness. Considering the pain, Emma thought she was handling things fairly well. When she voiced this to Cora, the woman smiled.

"It will get stronger."

"It will?" Emma wondered how it could possibly get any worse, when the force of another contraction squeezed her body into a wrenching tightness. Shouldn't Cora be preparing to receive the baby? Weakening with fatigue, Emma attempted to raise her knees and begin pushing to get the process over with, when Cora stopped her with a firm hand.

"This is only the start," warned Cora.

Emma's heart sank. She had been afraid of that. Her eyes drifted to Mary, sitting cross-legged at Cora's side. "Send Mary outside. I don't want to frighten her."

"This is good for her to see," said Cora, dabbing Emma's face with the cloth. "It is good for her to learn early, but if you wish, I will send her outside with Will."

Confused, Emma dropped her protest. Perhaps Blackfoot had customs of their own, or perhaps Cora had made one of her usual practical decisions; perhaps Cora was right and Mary should be there to learn how to help. Another wave of pain took hold, and all rational thought gave way to a surge of panic.

If this was only the start, Emma realized she must calm down. She must save her strength for later. Forcing down the fear, Emma willed herself to relax, reminded herself to trust in God's mercy and remember the Bible promises she had memorized for this occasion.

Voices sounded outside the lodge, then George scrambled inside. "Do we have any water to spare?" he asked, looking first to Emma, then seeing her distress, directing the question to Cora. "They could really use some water."

"They?" Cora arched a brow.

"They-- the ones we gave the pemmican to. Do we have any water?"

As Cora gave George an animal skin bulging with fresh water, Mary crawled to look out the entrance but remained inside. Emma's own curiosity was quickly forgotten when a new contraction squeezed her sides. She gulped in air, gripped the buffalo robe and moaned. George's eyes grew wide with alarm, but before he could panic, Cora sent him away with a promise to leave them alone.

Breath came easier now, and Emma thanked God for the strength to see this through. True, she had wavered at first, but now that she was getting some experience in dealing with the pain, she felt it manageable, and nothing to overreact about.

The struggling went back and forth, on and on, until Cora sat Emma up, placed a tightly waded bundle of furs before Emma, then told her to get on her knees and lean forward.

"What's happening?" asked Emma, as Cora proceeded to look under the leather gown Emma had been wearing on the trail. Then Emma felt it, the unsettling wetness running down the inside of her thighs. The pain grew worse, the tightness unbearable. She screamed, clutched Cora's arm and begged for Josiah.

Jumping to her feet, Mary ran off-- Emma prayed, to go find him. Urgent voices came from outside the lodge, but Emma didn't care who they belonged to, as long as it meant Josiah was coming.

"Make this go quickly, God. *Please!*" Emma sucked in a breath, held it, then let it out as the contraction weakened. She closed her eyes, relishing the few moments of peace between the pains; it came again, and Emma cried out. "Where is Josiah? Where *is* he?"

"You must breathe," said Cora, her voice firm, and without panic. She rubbed Emma's back, helping to ease the tightness for just a moment. Emma leaned forward, and more fluid ran down her legs. Emma worried that if this didn't end soon, she would run out of strength and pass out.

Someone started wailing in the distance, intruding on Emma's misery with plaintive tones that rose and fell in a repetitive chant. It sounded of grief, heartbreak, and rending despair. The wailing prompted a serious look from Cora; she turned her head to look at the entrance, though Emma knew Cora couldn't possibly see anything unless she left the birthing.

"What is it?" asked Emma. Pain crashed in around Emma, swallowing her in a terrible scream that drowned out the wails. She doubled forward and put her weight on the bundle.

"Daughter." Cora squeezed Emma shoulders. "Remain strong and the baby will come soon."

"Oh, I pray--" Emma's wish was cut short as another wave of contractions grabbed her with more intensity than before.

Something moved through the entrance, but Emma didn't care. She bore down on the contraction, knowing that this time, she had to push. Her head threw back, and a cry surged from her lungs.

"Push, Em," a deep voice coaxed her. "The baby's coming."

Ignoring the speaker who seemed so intent on getting in her way, Emma bore down and pushed for everything she was worth. A strong arm braced her as another contraction forced her to push yet again.

"Yer doing good. Keep going, Em. Don't stop."

In the great flood of pain, Emma realized Josiah was at her side. She gripped his hunting shirt.

"When will it be over?" she asked. Before he could answer, Cora gave the command to push. Emma felt Cora's hand between her legs, and with that sensation, came the awareness that something was indeed, being pushed out of her and into the world. She hoped it was a baby.

The chanting outside had grown louder, just barely squeezing through Emma's already crowded senses. Cora commanded her to push, just one more push, and Emma screamed to obey.

Then Cora scooped something up, and Emma fell forward into Josiah's arm.

"Is it over?" asked Emma, her voice only a whisper. She tried to turn and see what Cora held, but didn't have the strength. With great tenderness, Josiah lowered Emma onto the buffalo robes. "Where's my baby?" Emma clenched Josiah's shirt, not releasing him when he tried to pull away. "Why isn't the baby crying?"

Josiah kept looking at his mother. "I don't know, Em."

A slap of skin against skin sounded in Emma's ears, then a tiny cough, followed by tiny, tenacious cries that sent unspeakable relief into Emma's soul.

"It's all right," said Josiah, easing Emma's hand from his shirt. "The babe's all right, Emma."

Dizzy with gratitude, Emma closed her eyes. "I want my baby," she murmured, amazed she had any strength left to make the request. To her dismay, Josiah and Cora didn't comply. They raised her arms, pulled the deerskin gown over her head, then covered her with a thick blanket.

"My baby," whispered Emma. The blanket moved back, then something lifted onto her chest. It felt unbelievably small, writhing at first, then calming as its skin came into contact with hers. The blanket came up again, covering them both in warmth. Emma opened her eyes. A tiny crown of thick black hair greeted her. Her baby. Her precious, long awaited baby had finally come. Weariness overcome by sheer joy, Emma lifted her hand to touch the head, caress the wrinkled face, and marvel at this new life that had begun with her and Josiah. The feelings were powerful, unlike any force she had ever experienced.

"Ain't it a wonder, Em?" Josiah crouched over her, his eyes caressing the newborn in utter delight.

Weakness took hold of Emma, and she found herself unable to respond with anything but a smile. She lacked the strength to move the baby, but Cora seemed to understand and positioned the infant so it could begin nursing.

"It is a boy," said Cora, when Emma's eyes met hers and the unspoken question passed between them. "He is in good health."

"Thank You, God." Emma breathed the words in a faint prayer, hugged the precious bundle to her chest and then fell asleep.

When Emma's eyes opened, she found her son still on her chest, cuddled against her under the warm blanket. The smell of cooking food filled the air, making Emma realize just how hungry she had become.

"Are you needing a trip outside, Emma?" Josiah rolled onto his side, touched the infant's head with a gentle caress. "Would you look at that-- he's still sleeping. I reckon he's tuckered out from all that pushing."

"Where is Mary?" Emma struggled to sit up, and Josiah hurried to place something behind her to support her back. Emma's eyes caught the girl by the fire pit, occupied by George and the law book open on his knee. Motherhood sharpened Emma's instincts, and she had the uncontrollable need to hug Mary.

"Yer looking weak," Josiah moved himself into Emma's view.

Not knowing whether to ask for Mary or for food, Emma reveled in the love that swarmed around her as the infant began to cry. She cradled it in her arms, brought it to her breast, tucked the blanket around her son to keep out the cool air. Her son. Emma felt so happy she could faint.

"You need this," said Josiah, pressing a warm cup into her hand. Without looking to see what it was, Emma sipped its contents. She sighed as the beautiful warmth spread throughout her. Broth. Wonderful venison broth.

"It comes with compliments from George," grinned Josiah. "He and Mary went hunting this morning, and low and behold, he shot himself a deer. Ma and Mary helped him skin the animal, then he gave them Blackfoot half his kill."

"Blackfoot?" Emma must be weaker than she had supposed. Nothing made sense. Her eyes focused on the entrance, to the retreating daylight leaving the sky. Shouldn't it be morning? Confused, she looked to Josiah for help.

"You were in labor half the night and most of the day," said Josiah, touching Emma's face with a calloused finger. "There's some Blackfoot camping nearby, but there ain't anything to be concerned about. They aren't of ma's clan, so me and George is safe."

The baby moved, and Emma clutched it with an ever growing love that engulfed her. Instincts Emma had only thought she had, came to the surface in a tide of motherly affection. She wanted to hug Mary, touch the infant... get more sleep. But the food had to come first. She sipped the

comforting broth, enjoyed the closeness of her family and quietly thanked God over and over. Truly, He was good.

"Are you feeling well enough to listen, Emma?" Josiah sat cross legged beside her, and for the first time she noticed the heavy weariness in his features. His handsome mouth crooked in a smile, and he leaned forward to touch a kiss to her forehead. "I love you so much, Emma-- you and the children-- I know I'd die if anything ever happened to you."

"What's wrong, Josiah? Why did I hear chanting last night? Was that Grandpap?"

"Yes, it was him. He and them other Blackfoot are in mourning. Truth be told, we all are. There's some bad news, Em, but afore you go and get yerself anxious, we're fine. Nobody's hurt, and the baby's healthy. You just keep remembering that."

The cup trembled as she drank the last bit of broth; he reached out, steadied her as she set the cup down.

"I'm ready," she said.

Taking a deep breath, Josiah let it out in a long sigh. "There's trouble on the upper Missouri. Them Blackfoot outside heard news from other tribes that the Rotting Face has returned."

"'Rotting Face'? I don't understand."

"That's what the Indians call it-- Rotting Face, but I reckon yer kind know it as smallpox."

At the mere mention of the nightmarish word, Emma covered her mouth in horror.

Josiah's chin pointed at the entrance. "People are falling by the score, and them Blackfoot are running fer their lives."

Emma knew about smallpox, or at least thought she did. There had been periodic outbreaks back East, ever since she could remember; her grandfather-- Major Jacob Perkins-- who had fought in the American Revolutionary War against the British for independence, had survived many a fierce battle, only to almost die in bed of the fearsome disease. Emma knew stories, of family and of others, who had lived or died of smallpox; even so, her own life had been virtually untouched, so her experience was limited.

"This ain't the first time my people..." Josiah's voice broke. Emma touched his hand, and he brought her fingers to his lips and kissed them. "My people have endured Rotting Face before."

Twice before, so far as Grandpap can recollect. The last time was like a visit from hell. Grandpap watched kinfolk and friends die around him, their death so painful and slow that some of them killed their children and then themselves, instead of watching their loved ones swell with the oozing blisters. And now it's happening all over again, and Grandpap is anxious that we should leave. He wants to head fer the Oregon Country as soon as we can."

"You can't run from the epidemic forever, Josiah. Not if it's a large outbreak."

"Indians die quicker than the whites, and as fer as I know, most of the Blackfoot who get it, dies."

"Then it will only be the mercy of God that will save us from such a fate," said Emma, rallying her courage as well as her strength. "God delivered me in childbirth, and He delivered your daughter, mother, and grandfather so they are with us, instead of with the others in the upper Missouri where all this is going on. I can't believe God has gone to so much trouble with us, only to wipe us out. It reminds me of a passage in the Book of Judges: 'If the LORD were pleased to kill us, He would not have received a burnt offering and a meat offering at our hands, neither would He have showed us all these things.' He's showed us a lot, Josiah. We have every reason to remain hopeful."

A grim smile tugged at a corner of his mouth. "Leave it to you to shed sunlight where there ain't any."

She leaned against him, sighed when he wrapped an arm about her shoulders. They peered into the tiny face that reminded Emma so much of Josiah. This boy had sturdy lungs, and a strong grip that wouldn't stop.

Seeing they were awake, and after getting permission from Josiah to finally come for a closer look, Mary came to visit the baby. Emma took the infant from under the blanket, wrapped it in another to keep it warm, then delicately placed the boy in Mary's careful arms.

"Is he my brother?" asked Mary, her voice full of wonder. "Can I name him, ma? Can I?"

"I believe it's customary fer the parents to git that honor," said Josiah, hugging a blanketed Emma close. "What about it, Emma? What are we going to call him?"

Having set aside the law book, George came to marvel at the baby. "Josiah, he sure takes after you," remarked George, letting the boy grasp his finger and hang on. "Would you look at all that hair!"

Josiah peered down at Emma, and she snuggled into his shirt even more. If it were possible, Emma would have crawled inside Josiah and closed her eyes to sleep in his safe warmth. "What was yer pa's name, Emma?"

She blinked. "Jefferson. Why do you ask?"

"Let's name him after yer pa."

"But what about yours? It's not fair to give all that honor to just one man."

"My pa doesn't deserve such honor," said Josiah, looking back at the baby in Mary's arms. "Yer pa was a good man. I know that, because he and yer ma raised up a good woman." He squeezed Emma. "I want to name him Jefferson."

Cora came through the entrance just then, followed by Will.

"Well, well, the new mother is awake!" said Will, hobbling on his leg to sit down by the fire. "That's a strapping boy you've got, Josiah! What do you think of him, Mary?"

"He's wonderful!" said Mary, hugging the baby so tight both Emma and Cora cautioned her at the same time to do it gently.

"Decided on a name yet?" Will eyed Emma and Josiah with such persistence, Emma felt the need to make up her mind. "We've decided on Jefferson Brown."

"Has a nice ring to it," smiled Will, as Grandpap came through the entrance.

The old man looked distant, as though his thoughts were far off, and not here with everyone else in the lodge. He sat down, was about to draw out his pipe, when Emma offered to let him hold the baby. In such overwhelming grief as he must be feeling, Emma expected him to turn down the offer. But he put away the pipe, held out his arms as Mary lowered the boy down to him.

Emma held back advice about how to hold the infant, for Grandpap seemed to know what he was doing. He cradled the boy in the crook of his arm, combed the thick head of hair with his free hand and stared at Jefferson through ancient eyes. Emma wondered what he saw, what he thought. It didn't escape her, that while they were here, celebrating a new life, death was taking untold numbers to the grave.

Cora said something in Blackfoot to her father. Grandpap sighed, then nodded in agreement.

"What did she say?" asked Emma.

Smiling, Josiah planted a kiss on top of Emma's head. "Ma said that where there is life, there is hope."

Hope. Emma prayed she would always remember that word, and where true hope came from. Life spread before them a challenging picture, but then, when had life ever promised to be easy? Her pa had settled on the edge of the wilderness to become a wheelwright, back when Indiana had yet to find statehood, and he had proved that the Perkins came from sturdy stock. The Perkins had come from England, and Emma's mother's family hailed from Germany. Little Mary had the American blood of her Blackfoot ancestry, mingled with the frontiersman that came from Josiah. And now this baby, Little Jefferson, had a blend of them all. Hope. Emma had plenty of it. Her family-- every single blessed one of them-- had been selected by God, and this Oregon Country, the land where they would settle, would be their new home.

Where the past and the present separated, Emma had difficulty determining. She only knew that the future held promise. A promise given by God, to be waited upon, much as a baby awaits to be born.

"Lord, protect us," prayed Josiah, as everyone gathered hands in the hide lodge to offer up thanks to Heaven, "give us health to live long lives, give us wisdom to live them wisely, and give us courage to live them well."

The baby cried in Grandpap's arms, and the old man rocked Jefferson back and forth, speaking to the boy in hushed Blackfoot until Jefferson quieted and went to sleep. This baby signified hope to everyone, and in those quiet moments of watching Grandpap hold his great-grandchild, Emma knew the old man had been comforted.

"The [children] of the righteous [Josiah and Emma] shall be delivered."

~ Proverbs 11:21 ~

Chapter Twenty-nine

Five Years Later

1842, The Willamette Valley (the valley of the Wallamut), south of Oregon City, in what would later become the State of Oregon.

"A new heart also will I give you, and a new Spirit will I put within you... And I will... cause you to walk in My statutes, and ye shall keep My judgments, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land... and ye shall be My people, and I will be your God. I will also save you from all your uncleannesses: and I will call for the corn, and will increase it, and lay no famine upon you."

~ Ezekiel 36: 26-29 ~

The dark May heavens still held a blanket of stars as Josiah closed the barn door on his way to the house for breakfast. As usual, Emma had gotten up before him, and he could smell the result of her labor wafting toward him through the crisp morning air. Chores had a way of making his stomach growl something fierce, and without fail, Emma's cooking always managed to tame it.

A light shone from the second story of the snug log cabin, calling Josiah's attention to its owner as he moved across the yard, around the house to the back door. He smiled. George was up, no doubt getting ready for the journey that lay before him. At least they would have George for a short while longer, before it would be time to say goodbye. While Josiah wasn't looking forward to it, he was grateful George had waited as long as he had before going. It had been wonderful having him here, not only his willingness to lend a hand with the building and the planting, but also for his unreserved friendship. It had meant a lot to Josiah.

George had done a heap of maturing in his twenty-four years, and Josiah had an unshakable confidence in George's future. Despite what waited for him back East, George had a solid backbone, a good deal of conviction of what was right. Even though Josiah wished he could somehow help George face the coming months, he knew the young man would weather his troubles and come out the stronger for them.

Stepping into the mud room, Josiah began the struggle to remove his boots so he wouldn't track mud onto Cora's clean floor. This cabin bore little similarity to the one he and Emma had wintered in during that first year together in the Rockies. Here, they had floorboards instead of dirt, actual glass for windows, separate rooms for sleeping and a comfortable, if small, main room for sitting and cooking. The second story consisted of a loft, where George slept and studied over the books he'd purchased in Oregon City.

Jefferson, who would turn five this coming Autumn, had recently been allowed by Emma to climb the ladder to the loft and make his room with George. The boys were getting along so well that Washington, who had just turned three, thought it unfair that older brother Jefferson could climb the ladder while he couldn't. Until the Brown boys, who included two-year-old Adams, were old enough to climb the ladder, they had to share a room with Mary and one-year-old Rachel, who at present had a cradle in her parents' bedroom so Emma could nurse in the middle of the night. Five healthy children. Josiah couldn't help feeling God had given him a great deal more than he deserved. They were still three short of Emma's original plans of eight, but if they had more boys, Josiah knew what to call them. What had started with Emma's father, later became a tradition of naming their sons after American presidents. Men with such names could be looked up to, and Josiah wanted his children to see themselves as Americans-- full-blooded Americans with a double heritage worthy to be respected.

Free of the boots, Josiah wiggled his toes in their socks. He missed the freedom of moccasins, and once every so often, he'd put them on for old time's sake. Not long after arriving in the Oregon Country, Josiah had exchanged his buckskins for woolen trousers and linen shirts; but those items hadn't been missed as much as his moccasins. No amount of breaking in of store bought boots could compare to his old deerskin moccasins. They were just downright comfortable.

A young girl's protest carried from inside the main room, breaking in on Josiah's thoughts. Ever since George had announced his intentions for departure, Mary had been dragging her feet around the house as though her life was coming to an early and fatal end.

Sucking in a bracing breath before entering the conflict, Josiah ducked past the mud room and into the main room where Emma stood by the fireplace, working a griddle hanging over the flames. A healthy stack of pancakes waited for him on the table, along with an open jar of strawberry preserves. His stomach rumbling, Josiah made his way to the table.

"And what do you think *you're* doing?" asked Emma, as Josiah scooted out his chair.

He harrumphed at being asked such an obvious question. "What does it look like? I'm going to eat."

"Not with those filthy hands, you don't." Emma waved a cooking utensil at him with such animation, he couldn't help smiling. "Go back to the mud room and use the washbasin."

"Emma, when you get yer bristles up, yer mighty purty," he said with a grin.

"Oh, you!" An absent hand pushed back a tendril of yellow hair, almost as though she couldn't help herself from making sure everything was in decent order. Josiah grinned all the harder as a self-conscious smile touched Emma's lips. "Oh, go wash your hands."

He chuckled, then returned to the mud room to get himself clean enough for breakfast. Despite having spent the night walking the floor with Rachel, and getting up before the crack of dawn to start breakfast, Josiah thought Emma had never looked purtier. Even the thick spectacles that gave her clear vision, only served to add to Emma's already good looks. Josiah couldn't help smiling as he bent over the basin to splash water onto his face. Being so in love with Emma as he was, Josiah allowed he wasn't an impartial judge. But Emma had to be the most striking woman this side of the Rocky Mountains, and that was just pure fact.

"But why can't I, Ma?" came Mary's voice, as the girl resumed her debate with Emma. Josiah turned his head enough to see Mary move past the mud room entrance in her dress and apron. "Why not?"

"Because I said so," came Emma's predictable response.

"But, it isn't fair! Why can George go and I can't?"

"Because George isn't my child, and you are. Mary, we've gone over this a hundred times. You can not go with George, and that's final."

"But, Ma!"

Emma sighed deeply. "You're only ten-- all right, almost eleven-- but there is no way on God's green earth I'll let you leave home until you're much older. And even then, only if you're traveling with family."

Wiping his hands on a towel, Josiah stepped back into the house. Mary came to him immediately.

"Pa, can't I--"

Josiah held up a hand to stop his daughter from saying a word more. "You heard what yer ma said. Don't git me to contradict Ma. Do that, and you'll be visiting the woodshed."

Mary hung her head, and she nodded that she understood. The brightest of all Josiah's children, and certainly the most strong-willed, Mary slumped into her chair at the table.

"I'm going to miss him, Pa. Who's going to teach at the schoolhouse if George isn't here? And who's going to read with me, and tell stories, and help me with my penmanship, and who will I find to discuss civil liberties and the absolute rights of individuals?"

Josiah raised his eyebrows. "That's a mouthful, all right. Pass the jam."

Her sweet face clouded over by the approaching loss of her best friend, Mary placed the jar beside Josiah's plate. "Can't you get him to stay, Pa? Just until I'm old enough to go with him?"

"Older or not, he still wouldn't take you." Josiah couldn't help teasing. "Cub, you best face facts. George is going back to his way of life, and there ain't a thing you can do about it but to wish him well. He's been a good friend to this family, and I don't want you making him feel guilty about leaving." Josiah spread butter onto his pancakes, then smothered them with strawberry preserves.

The rocking chair creaked in the corner of the room as Cora sat with baby Rachel in her arms, the baby half-asleep but still needing the constant motion of the chair for comfort. Poor Rachel had spent most of the night crying, and between Cora and Emma, and even after some help from Josiah, had given everyone a long several hours. Thankfully, it turned out to be nothing more than colic, but it had been hard to explain to the small children in the family.

For half the night, no one could sleep. Jefferson had finally managed to get some rest with a pillow stuffed around his ears, while Washington and his two-year-old brother, Adams, had fitted themselves into Will and Cora's bed to escape Rachel's tenacious cries. Will hadn't complained, though Cora had found her up-and-down assistance with the baby rather difficult, seeing her spot kept being filled by small sleeping bodies that protested whenever moved. But moved they were, and when they were sleeping soundly enough, Josiah had lifted them back to their own bed to give Cora the rest she needed.

After a prayer over his meal, Josiah dug into the pancakes without mercy. The long night made Will understandably late for morning chores, and Josiah expected his father-in-law would remain in bed awhile longer before tying on the wooden leg. If Josiah could manage it, he'd try to talk Will from going out at all. Lately, Will's leg stump had been giving him trouble, his skin raw from being rubbed against the padding he used to cushion the wooden leg. Josiah knew with enough rest the pain would go away, but Will had to actually rest for that to happen. The older man had a great deal of patience for the situation, never once complaining, and more than once reminding everyone when their "I'm sorry's" got too thick, that he was happier than he deserved, and was more than a little thankful the leg had come off so he could still be "stumping about." "Rather this, than an early grave," he kept saying.

Mary sighed heavily, ignoring the plate of pancakes Emma placed before her. "If Great-Grandpap were alive, he'd find a way to make George stay."

"If Grandpap were here," Josiah put in with a mouthful of food, "he'd tell you to hush up and eat your breakfast."

"First Great-Grandpap, and now George. Pa, everyone's leaving."

A hearty laugh sounded as George strode to the table, his sleeves rolled up as though ready for a long day of work in the field. "I hope I'm not leaving the same way Grandpap did. I'm not ready to meet my Maker just yet."

"Thank God, Grandpap was," smiled Josiah, placing the jam where George could reach it. The old man had passed on two seasons ago, but had survived long enough to see more than one great-grandchild come into the world.

Indignant, Mary folded her arms and stared at George from across the table as he bowed his head in prayer. When he had finished, and reached for the butter, Mary spoke up. "You won't be here, so what's the difference?"

"A lot, I'd think," said Josiah, stuffing more pancake into his mouth. "George is going to school, not Heaven."

"But we're never going to see him again, so what's the difference? Pa, can't I--"

"No," said Josiah, pinning Mary with a warning look. If she didn't stop her arguing, the woodshed would be in her future.

"Yes, Pa." Mary hung her head. George pushed the strawberry preserves toward Mary, finally coaxing the first smile Josiah had seen from her in over two days.

George smiled, and began shoveling in food at the same rate as Josiah. "I'm mostly packed. As soon as your friend arrives, I'll be ready to leave with him."

Josiah grunted. "Tom Peters is a good friend of mine from a long way back, and knows his way about the Rockies like it was the back of his hand. He'll git you to Missouri in one piece all right, but then it'll be up to you to find someone to take you the rest of the way to Massachusetts. I reckon you got a respectable six month trip ahead of you-- that is, if you can stay healthy and keep moving."

"I'll make it," said George with a determined grin. He opened his mouth for a large bite of Emma's pancakes, then chomped away like his stomach didn't know when its next meal was coming. "I've got a lot to do today," he said with his mouth full, then paused to take a gulp of milk before resuming work on the food. "I'd appreciate your help, Mary."

Mary smiled at being included in George's plans, though Josiah knew her joy would be short-lived. If Zeke Thompkins had located Tom Peters the way Josiah reckoned Zeke would, then Tom would be due to arrive any day now.

Then it would be time to say goodbye to George, once and for all.

After demolishing breakfast, George went up to the boys' loft to get a surprise. Mary waited for him at the bottom of the ladder, smiled when she saw the canvas bag dangling from his hand. He opened the bag, pulled out one book after another, and placed them into Mary's surprised arms.

"I can't take these with me, so I want you to have them," said George, noting the wonderment filling Mary's eyes. "You love reading almost as much as I do, so I know you'll take good care of these books. If you'll notice, I included 'The Pilgrim's Progress,' and our old favorite, Blackstone's 'Commentaries on the Laws of England.' I wish I had the other volumes of Blackstone to give you, but--" George cut short his speech when he noticed that it wasn't wonderment filling Mary's eyes, but tears.

A shaky sob escaped Mary's lips. She shoved the books into George's arms, then fled the house without answering his calls of what was the matter.

Having seen the whole thing, Jefferson came over to George with a sad shake of his head. "Girls," he breathed in sympathy, as if the one word explained everything. "Pa said us men can't git along without 'em, but I sure wish we could. Girls are trouble."

George couldn't help smiling. Whenever Jefferson wanted to be big and grownup, he would imitate his pa's mountain-talk. George handed Jefferson the pile of books. "Put these on Mary's bed, would you?"

Jefferson looked over the stack, then turned his dark eyes on George. "Whatcha giving *me* when you go?"

George laughed. "You'll be doing good if I don't make you write out, 'I will always use proper English,' one hundred times on Mary's slate."

The boy wrinkled his nose. "Can't make me. I can't read."

"Give it a few more years, Jefferson. Your ma will have you reading before you know it. Why, Mary was only a few months older than you when she started reading. You're not going to be bested by a girl, are you?"

Jefferson gave a heavy sigh. "I reckon not."

As Jefferson went to place the books on Mary's bed, George stepped outside to see if he could find Mary. He knew all of her favorite places, and didn't have any doubts that with a little searching, he could find her before long.

Busy chopping wood by the side of the house, Josiah paused his work to speak to George. "If yer looking fer Mary, she was heading to the creek."

"Was she still crying?"

"She was." Josiah wiped the sweat collecting on his brow. "I'll be glad when Tom gits here and you leave. No offense, but the sooner you go, the sooner Mary can start fergitting you."

Hands in his trouser pockets, George nodded in understanding. "I know. I've come to think of Mary as my little sister, and I guess she looks up to me like her big brother. I sure feel like one. I was thinking about making a promise to Mary, but I won't say a word to her or the others unless I get your permission first..."

Sure enough, George found Mary weeping beside the small creek that ran through a wooded area of Josiah's 640 acre farm. Most of the fertile land had yet to be cultivated, but that would come later. The house had been built, and the Browns were putting down roots that would last for generations to come. George could already see it happening.

A fresh sob erupted from Mary as she drew her knees up and buried her face in the clean apron. She had noticed his arrival, so dispensing with quiet footsteps, George located a spot beside Mary and sat down.

"I'd hate to think all those tears are for my sake," he said, slanting a look at the ten-year-old. "You've known for years that my staying here was only temporary."

The tears slowed. Mary sniffed but said nothing.

"I intended to stay a year or two, but then it turned to three, then four, and now I've been here about five years. I have important work to do, and I must leave."

"Couldn't the rights of mankind wait a little longer?" she asked, drying her cheeks against the apron.

"My whole life has been leading up to this, Mary. You know how important it is-- not only to me, but to the others I'll one day be able to help."

"I could help, too." Protest rose in her voice, but George sensed Mary was struggling not to argue. No doubt because of her pa and the woodshed.

"As a matter of fact, you could help me a great deal. I'd feel better knowing someone was praying for me, and counting on me to do the right thing. There's a lot in front of me, Mary. I don't mind telling you I'm a little scared."

Her head bobbed up from the apron. "You aren't scared-- at least, not enough to stop you from doing the right thing. You're not a coward, and if anyone says different--"

"You'll what?" George shook his head with a small chuckle. "You've got more fight in you than most boys, Mary. I wish I had your spunk." He felt a twinge of sadness. "I expect when you become a lady, that will change. It's a great pity."

"I won't change, if you don't want me to, George."

Chuckling, he tugged at her braid. "Don't be silly. Changing is part of growing up. Now what about being my helper? Will you pray for me, and remind God that I'm going to need all the grace and attention He can give?"

"I'll pray, George."

"I appreciate it. And now I'll make *you* a promise. I'll write it down later, so you can look at it whenever you want. Five years from now, I'll send a paid courier-- someone I trust completely-- to travel across this fine country, all the way from Massachusetts to Oregon Country, and deliver to you and your family some of the best presents I can get my hands on. I'll send bolts of cloth and books-- as many books as I can manage, and the courier will tell me how you and your family are doing, and he'll tell you how I'm doing."

Mary brightened. "Could I give him letters? I could write to you, and he could give you my letters."

"He could," George admitted, gladdened by the hopeful turn in Mary's countenance. Encouraged, he went one step further with the offer. "I could write you, and every five years, I'd send out the courier and he could exchange our correspondence. Of course, it'll take him time to travel such a great distance, so don't expect him all at once."

"It'll cost you a great deal of money, George."

"My aunt gives me a generous allowance," he smiled, "so when I get back, I'll be able to afford such luxuries. I'll be able to keep in touch with the Brown family, even if it *is* on the other side of the continent."

The sound of quick approaching footfalls had both looking up. Jefferson rounded some trees, huffing to catch his breath while at the same time trying to get out his news.

"Rider's coming!" he said, doubling over a moment before saying more. Face reddened from excitement, Jefferson carried himself with the importance of someone bearing news. "Pa said to come get you! He said it was most likely Mr. Peters!"

Getting to his feet, George helped Mary up, then nodded to the still panting Jefferson. "Tell your pa I'm coming."

The boy ran off to deliver the message, and George turned back to Mary. "There's a few more books in the loft, and I want you to have them. Just remember your brothers and sister when they become old enough to want to read them, too."

Somber again, Mary nodded. "I'll remember."

As George and Mary approached the log house and they saw the horse tied up out front, the identity of their visitor became clear. It wasn't Tom Peters. With a smiling face that spoke of relief, Mary ran inside to greet their guest.

A short balding man with spectacles and a kind smile, Quincy Kirkwood was the manager and part owner of Oregon City Bank, located in the heart of Oregon City. It had been Emma's idea. Josiah and Emma Brown were Quincy's silent partners in business, having invested much of Emma's gold in the partnership. Quincy had a savvy sense for money, and Josiah and Emma had the capitol to start the enterprise. Together, they made a tidy profit, and with the promise of a growing city, their investment had every chance of becoming quite lucrative.

Not wanting to break in on Quincy's report to Josiah and Emma, George sat on the front porch and admired the panoramic view of Willamette Valley. Rolling hills in the distance, sapphire skies that spread out for as far as the eye could see, land that held a future for anyone willing to earn the right to pull a livelihood from the ground.

George had to admire Josiah and Emma's decision to farm despite their success as bankers. "The money is good," Josiah had said, "but the land will always be here. The children will always have the land." That practicality carried over to how they cautiously spent their money, although George knew Emma had to constantly convince Josiah not to spend just because they could.

If Josiah had his way, Emma would already be cooking over a wood stove instead of sweltering before an open hearth, and Josiah planned on a pump by the back door, so Emma would never have to go down to the creek for water again. A better barn for livestock, a traditional frame house to hold their growing family, turning more and more acreage into cultivated fields and cash-crops-- Josiah had many dreams yet to be realized, but he was well on his way. That mountain man was making a place for himself in this valley, and George felt certain that what Josiah didn't finish, his children would.

Two riders on a single horse ambled up the road, obviously not in any hurry to get where they were going. The man on the creature's back lifted a hand to George, and George reciprocated the gesture. Getting to his feet, George climbed off the porch to greet their neighbors.

"Thought you might be gone by now," said Alfred Bellamy, owner of the farm next to theirs. "I'm right glad you're still here. We're short on company as it is, and when you leave, things are going to be on the quiet side."

"I'm still here," said George, trying to smother a groan as the rider behind Alfred dropped to the ground in her bare feet. Sally Bellamy was Alfred's eldest, and considered by many to be the most handsome eligible girl in this part of the Willamette. While George had to admit a certain beauty in Sally's features, her scatterbrained chatter and forward behavior put an end to any interest George initially felt. After only a day's acquaintance, the fact that the Bellamys had to ride a few miles whenever they visited, became a matter of gratitude for George. Any closer, and George felt certain he would have packed up for Massachusetts long ago.

"Sally's been real excited about being the new schoolteacher," said Alfred, tying his horse to the hitching post in front of the house. "Who's that?" asked Alfred, jerking a thumb to the horse already there. "That belong to Quincy?"

George nodded in the affirmative, and without ceremony, Alfred found a seat on the porch to wait for the business meeting to end. "I thought so. Ella Mae saw his horse go past our place, so me and Sally thought we'd come over and hear all the news. I need to get up to Oregon City one of these days and look around." Alfred shook his head with a glum sigh. "Hard to get away from the farm, but one of these days..."

The great distances between farm communities, and the muddy winter roads, all made for rural isolation. Whenever someone came from somewhere else, curiosity was natural, and the willingness to share news, a necessity.

Sally stepped in between her pa and George, forcing George's attention. "Do you think you'll need to give me instructions about the schoolhouse again?" she asked, her voice irritatingly hopeful. George had only gone over it a dozen times, and none of it had seemed to make an impression. He wished he didn't have to hand over the school to Sally Bellamy, but until a better candidate could be found, the children would have to make due.

Maybe when Mary was older, she would become a teacher. Looking at Sally, George could only hope.

When the young woman began preening herself right in front of George, straightening the woolen dress and pinching color into her already rosy cheeks, George turned and went inside. He smiled his greetings to Quincy, who sat at the table with Josiah and Emma, then headed straight up the loft ladder for some peace and quiet.

Having recognized the annoyance on George's face as he passed through the room on his way to the loft, Emma announced they had company outside.

"It appears Alfred brought Sally, again," said Emma, closing the ledger their partner had been showing them. "The books look very impressive, Quincy. We appreciate the time it takes you to keep us abreast of what's going on."

"It's only fair," said Quincy, pushing up his spectacles with an index finger. "You and Josiah are, after all, the primary owners of Oregon City Bank."

"We never would have been able to get this far without your expertise," said Emma, accepting the small bag of money from Quincy. As usual, the large remainder of Josiah and Emma's profits would remain in the bank.

Josiah leaned back in the chair. "Has anyone objected to my having an interest in one of the city's primary financial institutions, yet?" he asked, plying some of the big words Quincy had used during his last visit.

A small, practical smile upturned Quincy's mouth. "Since my face is the one they see, day in and day out, the fact of your ownership doesn't bother them too often. There hasn't been any real objection, and by now, I don't anticipate one in the future."

"As long as I keep my distance, and don't keep reminding the good folks that Josiah Brown is a half-breed." Josiah nodded in understanding, annoyed, but accepting of what could not be changed all at once. Changes in perception and prejudice took time, and Josiah must be content with the local successes he had, rather than concentrating on what had yet to be accomplished.

"You'll stay for lunch, Quincy?" asked Emma, handing over the money to Josiah for safekeeping.

The balding man nodded, seemingly happy to accept the invitation to rest awhile before making the return trip to Oregon City. He tucked the ledger in the bag by his feet, then settled back in the chair, his hands folded in his lap, as Josiah got up to invite the Bellamys inside.

With baby Rachel cradled in one arm, Cora began helping Emma get lunch ready. Recuperating from the sore on his leg, Will sat in the rocker without his wooden stump and carried on a friendly conversation with Quincy. When things became too hectic in the food preparations, Cora placed the baby in Will's arms, then herded the boys to the washbasin to clean up for lunch. One by one, Jefferson, Washington and Adams cleaned their faces, scrubbed their hands, and had to pass Cora's inspection before being allowed to sit at the table.

As Emma set a platter of cold beef on the table, she saw George emerge from the loft, one of his books tucked under his arm. Mary took her place beside George at the table, while the Bellamys stepped inside the house with Josiah.

Upon seeing Alfred, Quincy opened the bag, and pulled out a folded newspaper. Quincy waved it to Alfred with an amused smile. Living as he did in the city, it was difficult for Quincy to appreciate the rarity of news.

"I was hoping you'd remember," Alfred said with a smile. He prepared to hand over some money to pay for the paper, but Quincy turned him down.

"I read it on my way here, so I already got my money's worth." Quincy smiled as Emma placed a loaf of freshly baked bread before them on the table. "You sure can't get a meal like this in the city. Josiah, you're a lucky man to live with such good cooking all year round."

Josiah grinned at the compliment to Emma. "Blessed is more like it, Quincy, but you're right, no one can cook like my Em."

Emma hoped she didn't blush at Josiah's praise. And in front of company, too!

Alfred and Sally sat down, the young woman trying to gain George's attention by turning the discussion toward the schoolhouse. Emma noted George's aversion to the subject, and how he chose instead to talk to Mary about some passage from a new law book he had been studying. Although it amused Emma, she was glad George would be leaving soon; Mary had become much too attached to him, for her own good.

Taking one of the tin plates, Cora filled it to capacity with food, then carried it to Will to exchange the baby for the lunch.

"Mighty good, Emma," said Will, after tasting the cold beef. Cora had been too busy to give Will much attention that morning, so when she pulled out a chair and placed it beside his rocker, Will's sky blue eyes beamed contentment.

All throughout the meal, Alfred and Josiah discussed the crops, the weather, then exchanged stories about their lives before becoming farmers. At one time, Alfred had tried to trap the Rockies, and had given up after only a few months of hostile Indians and just as unfriendly weather. The men laughed and joked, both at ease in each other's company. When Josiah put his mind to it, (which these days was most of the time), he could usually find something he had in common with others, something to draw them into friendly conversation. His easy, non-threatening manner caught people off guard, and Emma had been gratified to see how much Josiah tried to live in peace with his neighbors. True, not all of their neighbors were as cordial as the Bellamys, but most were, and Emma had thanked God on more than one occasion for the peace they had found in the Willamette. God was blessing them, not only with good neighbors, but with a solid investment that kept proving to be more and more advantageous to their family.

The only thing that would make Emma's day ideal, would be to see Mary finding an interest in someone or something else besides George Hughes.

After lunch and a lengthy talk among friends, Quincy and the Bellamys got back on their horses and left just as another rider approached the Brown's farm. With a hearty "Hullo!" Tom Peters came into view just as Quincy and the Bellamys disappeared from sight.

The happiness drained from Mary's smile as George quickly went into the house to gather his things.

Swinging down from his rather rangy looking pony, Tom Peters shook hands with Josiah and declared he wouldn't have recognized Josiah without his shaggy hair and greasy buckskins, if not for the beauty of a woman standing beside him.

"This has to be Emma," said Tom, shaking Emma's hand as heartily as he had Josiah's. "For once, David Lambert wasn't spinning a tall tale. Yer as pretty as he said, and then some." He turned to Josiah, not waiting or needing Emma to answer. "I got the message you passed along to me through Zeke. Too bad about him. I guess he wasn't cut out to be a farmer, after all. But you sure are," said Tom, looking about the property with admiration. "Never thought you had it in you, but I guess that's what a good woman will do to a man."

"I hope Zeke is glad to be back in his mountains," said Josiah. "He had a nice farm, and I thought fer sure he'd keep it going. But at the last, he complained he didn't have enough freedom and when his wife heard that, and she up and left him. Took the children, too. Such a shame. Some men just don't know what they have."

"I'm glad to see you're not one of those men," said Tom, a touch of understanding in his voice. Emma understood Tom's meaning. In his day, Josiah had been a wild man, in nearly every way one could be called wild. That someone like Josiah could have a family, a nice home like this one, was no small matter. Josiah had yielded his life to God, and God had blessed him for it. It was obvious to anyone who had known Josiah's previous life.

"Zeke tells me I'm to be hired to take some young feller back East," said Tom, rocking back on his heels in a good-natured manner. "Zeke said something about being paid in gold. Is that true, or was Zeke just being Zeke and making a joke at my expense?"

"No, fer once Zeke told you right." Josiah looked back at the house, smiled as George stepped outside with a leather pack on his back. "He's a mite eager to get going, but I reckon you'll want to stay fer supper and git an early start in the morning."

Tom grinned as George approach them. "You hear that, young feller? We'll be staying the night, and leave in the morning."

Tom was about as old as Josiah, and that meant Tom was old enough to think George about as green as they come. George scowled at the indignity of being called "young" twice, and both times before he had been able to get a word out of his mouth. Emma understood this, and couldn't help smiling as George squared his shoulders like a man.

"I hear tell you've spent some time in the Rockies," said Tom, looking George over with a skeptical eye. "From what I'm told, you're supposed to have lasted more than a season."

"That's right." George cleared his throat. "I had some help, of course."

Tom slanted a look at Josiah, humor dancing in Tom's eyes. "I reckon that's enough to make this boy an honorary *grad-you-ate*. Don't you reckon, Josiah?"

"I reckon."

George frowned. "A graduate of what?"

"Why, fer such an educated feller, I'm dumbfounded you don't know. Ain't you dumbfounded, Josiah? This boy hasn't heard of the Rocky Mountain College! If you don't graduate, no one ever hears from you again. And here you are, so I reckon you passed. Now, how do you like *that* for an education?"

George cast a wary glance at Josiah. "I think I prefer Harvard."

In a burst of laughter, Tom slapped George so hard on the back that George stepped forward just to keep from being knocked over. Emma was only glad Tom wasn't joking around with *her*.

After calming down his merriment, Tom eased back on his heels again, looked over George with a more friendly attitude. "This one's got some mettle in him. I reckon he'll do."

"He's as good a man as I'd ever hope to meet," said Josiah, nodding to George to go back into the house. "Tom, let's you and me sit down and talk some business. I can pay you in gold, but we need to settle on a price before tomorrow morning."

"Sounds good to me," said Tom, taking a seat on the porch as Josiah did likewise.

Josiah looked up at Mary, nodded for her to go into the house as well. With a heavy sigh, Mary did as she was told; Emma decided she didn't need to be around either, and went to go see to the baby. The men remained on the porch for several hours, the sound of their conversation carrying into the house where everyone listened from the main room. The matter of money was easily settled, Tom naming a somewhat low price and Josiah raising the sum to a more fair amount. Though neither man mentioned it, Tom owed Josiah a big favor for having saved Tom's life several years back in the Rocky Mountains. According to Josiah, Indians had stolen their horses yet again, and Tom had broken his leg crossing a slippery stream. With Tom slung over his shoulder, Josiah had carried his friend several miles to the nearest trappers' camp, refusing Tom's

insistent pleas to be left alone to die. It reminded Emma a lot of Will's story, and she recognized the strong impulse to survive that it took for Josiah to live in such raw wilderness. To not only keep your life intact, but to actually thrive. No wonder there was admiration in Tom's voice when he addressed Josiah.

Something warm touched Emma's neck, stirring her from slumber. She felt it again, breathed in the scent of Josiah, and her senses awoke to find him kissing her throat.

"Tussle with me, Em." He pushed himself up until his mouth hovered above hers.

Silvery moonlight filtered through their bedroom curtains, highlighting the sharp contrasts of Josiah's face. Emma traced a finger across a cheekbone, stopping when she came to his lips.

"Thank you for being content, Josiah."

He looked at her with a puzzled smile. "What are you talking about?"

"Thank you for being content with just me, and not going off to find your pleasure with some other woman. Thank you for not being Zeke."

"Well, now," Josiah grinned unabashedly, "if this means you'll tussle, I'll wake you up five times a night so you can thank me proper." He lowered his head, his lips grazing hers with such light gentleness, Emma felt her pulse quicken. Josiah drew back a little, his smile coming slow, like the stirring of embers before being fanned into an open flame. "I reckon yer thinking back to that Shoshone woman. I've been true to you, Emma. I won't ever give you cause to regret you fergiving me like you did."

"Oh, Josiah." She breathed his name, and he claimed her mouth once more, this time more insistently, as though his need for her had grown stronger. She placed a hand against his chest, pushed just a little to let him know she wanted to stop.

"What is it, Emma?" His dark eyes sparkled in the moonlight, and she heard his ragged breath trying to steady itself against desire.

"George told me today that you said it was all right for him to send a courier, five years from now, with gifts for Mary and the rest of the family."

"I did. What of it?"

"Do you think it's wise for Mary to continue thinking about George? Wouldn't it be better for him to sever all ties with us, instead of Mary hoping to hear from him again in five years? I understand this courier will only come once, but still, that's five years of her being hopeful."

Josiah groaned dully.

"*Josiah?*" Emma felt herself tense. "What do you know that I don't?" A slight shove to his chest made him groan again.

"George came to me this evening, and said he talked to Mary. He's going to send a courier every five years, not just once. He also said they plan to trade letters."

Emma tried to sit up, but couldn't because Josiah's chest blocked her from moving. "Trade letters? Why didn't you tell me this sooner?"

"Aw, Emma, it ain't such a big deal. Let's tussle." He touched her lips again, and when she didn't kiss him back, he returned his attentions to her throat.

"You do realize what's happening, don't you?" She shoved his shoulder, and Josiah only kissed her the harder. "George is thirteen years older than Mary, but when she becomes old enough, he's going to start courting her. Do you really want that? She's only ten!"

"If he waits until she's older, she won't be ten anymore," Josiah answered dryly. "Now how about tussling me, Emma?"

"Then you *do* think George will have an interest in Mary in the future?"

"What I think," said Josiah, pushing himself up until he looked into Emma's eyes, "is that he considers her as a little sister. He told me as much today. If Mary can get George to see her in any other way than a brother and a sister, then she'll deserve to be his wife." Josiah inspected Emma's mouth, evidently couldn't help himself and kissed her with such passion, Emma knew he was trying to change the subject.

She tapped his shoulder, and Josiah came up with a patient sigh.

"Then you don't think George will ever have more of an interest in Mary?"

Not answering, Josiah nuzzled Emma's ear, drew his hand to the small of her back and pressed her close. "If you only knew what you do to me, Em, you'd take pity and kiss me."

"But what if they write over the years, and George never courts Mary? Wouldn't it be better to forbid them from writing in the first place, rather than risk such long-distance heartbreak?"

The caresses on Emma's throat became more desperate, and finally, when she didn't reciprocate, Josiah whimpered like a boy whose hurt needed to be kissed. "I must be doing something wrong, because I can't seem to distract you, the way you do me. Please, Em, we'll talk in the morning. Just nestle with me. I'll be happy-- God help me, I'll try to be happy with just that."

He rolled onto his back, pulled her to him, and she snuggled against his chest like a small kitten basking in sunshine. A deep groan of satisfaction rumbled beneath Emma, sending little shock waves into her heart. She touched his chest, heard him groan as though she were going to push away again.

Tipping her chin up, she met his lips, and kissed him until both strong arms came around her in a tight embrace. Snuggled in the wooden cradle beside her parents' bed, baby Rachel slept without so much as a tiny cry as Josiah and Emma shared the night. Josiah had been wrong about his inability to distract Emma, but it was a wife's prerogative to keep her husband guessing, so Emma let Josiah think her passion had been of her own choosing, and not because of his attempts to get her mind on him, and not Mary and George.

Emma still had a great deal of apprehension about Mary's friendship with George, but since the young man considered their daughter as a little sister, and nothing more, Emma decided to remain quiet about their exchanging letters. She and Josiah would keep a watchful eye on the situation, and if need be, they would put an end to the correspondence once and for all. Emma wasn't as concerned about George, as she was in Mary's heart breaking over someone who didn't love her in return. If she could, Emma was intent on sparing Mary that kind of pain.

The kisses became more insistent again, and Emma realized her attention had strayed from Josiah. She moved closer, and Josiah slipped into unrestrained contentment. All he wanted was "my sweet, sweet Emma," in his arms. As Josiah showered her with love, Emma knew she would never want to be anywhere else; she could think of few greater earthly joys than to be here with Josiah, cuddled in his arms, away from the world and the struggles of everyday life. Here, they had refuge, and here God's blessings of love only grew stronger.

This house held a lot of love, but with God's continued blessing, their family would only grow stronger through the years.

Even the baby was quiet as George moved about the house, making sure he had everything he needed. His hands searched through the contents of the leather bag before he tied it closed, then

swung the bundle to his feet in a movement of finality. He stood by the table in the main room, looked at each of the family who had gathered to say goodbye.

Reaching for the Bible on the table, Josiah opened it, turned to Isaiah fifty-four, then began reading out loud. The words touched George deep in his soul.

"Behold, they shall surely gather together, but not by Me: whosoever shall gather together against thee shall fall for thy sake... No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness is of Me, saith the LORD." Josiah placed the Bible back on the table. "George, know that we'll be praying for you. If things get too difficult for you back East, you're always welcome here."

"Thanks, I appreciate it." George tried to clear his throat at the touching offer, then continued talking in the hopes that his voice wouldn't break in front of everyone. "When I leave home today... strange," said George, muttering to himself at the realization, "I don't know when I began thinking of this farm as my home, and not Massachusetts and Virginia. It doesn't matter. I belong back East. I have a law degree to earn, a father to face, and a job ahead of me. I won't rest until I've done everything I can to rid the institution of slavery from the South. It's long been a disgrace, and it's time someone from the Hughes family admitted it."

"I know you have yer generous aunt and all, but if you need money," said Josiah, lifting little Adams into his arms, "you send word with that courier of yers, and we'll do all we can. It may be that yer Pa disowns you, and that favorite rich aunt of yers won't help. Whatever happens, whatever friends turn tail and run, you can be sure we won't. You just remember that when yer facing down all them slavers."

"That goes double for me," said Will, hobbling forward on his wooden leg with a wince of pain in his face. He had tied on the leg, just to be sure he could be present to say goodbye. "We may not be your blood kinfolk, but we're family just the same."

Something glimmered in Mary's eye, and George turned to his small little friend. George hadn't really thought it would be this difficult to leave, but then, he never allowed himself to think about it very much.

"Are you sure you can manage without me, George?"

Mary's simple question caught him off guard, and he waited a moment before answering. "I'm sure. I'm also sure I'm going to need your prayers. You won't forget, will you?"

A tear slid down Mary's cheek, and she brushed it away with the palm of her hand. "I won't forget."

Rummaging about in his pants pocket, George brought out a roll of leather parchment. "I wrote down our deal in plain words, just like I said I would. I have one like it, as my own reminder. It's not valid in a court of law, but it binds my word of honor, just the same. Go on, take it and read it out loud before I go."

With a small snuffle of sorrow, Mary took the leather parchment, unrolled it, and with a wavering voice read aloud George's promise to send the courier every five years. It was witnessed by Josiah's own signature, something George noticed made Emma give her husband a noticeable sigh. At the bottom, George had signed the document, "For Miss Mary Brown. Your devoted friend and servant, George Hughes."

Reading this, Mary broke into tears.

George crouched to her level, tugged her braid to try and coax a smile. "You know I have to do this, don't you?"

"Yes, George."

"I'll never be able to live with myself if I don't give this cause every effort I can." Since Mary didn't smile, he did it for her, then gave her a parting hug before standing. "You of all the children will miss me most, but I don't want you grieving after I'm gone," he said, summoning his sternest teacher's voice. "I've got my work ahead of me, and so do you. I expect to hear that you're not wasting the intellect God has given you, and that you're working to expand your knowledge at every possible opportunity. I encourage you to share that knowledge with others, whether it's simply teaching your brothers and sister, or one day becoming a schoolteacher, yourself. God gave you a gift, Mary, and I expect you to use it."

His words seem to give Mary courage. Her shoulders straightened, her chin held high, and the tears became a little less frequent. He sure was going to miss Mary and the other children. He would miss being a big brother, and George had to force aside some regret at having to go back and face his kinfolk where he was still the baby of the family.

"When you go back, tell them to do the right thing, George." Bravely sniffing, Mary ran the sleeve of her dress across her eyes. "Tell them to respect the rights of man, and become a really good lawyer. I sure am going to miss you, though."

"We all will," said Emma, coming to Mary's side and drying the girl's remaining tears with her own apron.

Jefferson and Washington came forward to shake George's hand, both boys solemn at this parting of their friend. Not wanting to be left out, little Adams clamored to be put down, and when Josiah had, the boy came to George and insisted that his hand be shaken, too.

In a break with her usual stoicism, Cora gave George a warm hug, a kiss on his cheek, then placed a bundle of food in his hands. She made sure George would have enough home-cooked meals to last a few days. Even eaten cold, they would still remind him of home.

"Well," George said, casting a quick glance to Tom, who stood waiting by the open door, "I guess I have to go now." George let his gaze linger on each member of the family. When he felt sorrow begin to crowd around him, George nodded to Tom, then they both headed out the door.

George couldn't afford to look back, but he did. One last look at the farm and the people who flowed onto the porch to wave goodbye. He lifted his hand, smiled, then turned to climb onto the horse hand-selected by Josiah for the journey.

Long after the shouts of "Goodbye!" had faded into the distance, George knew he would never forget the Brown family or what they had taught him. As he drew his coat shut, he felt something lumpy in his pocket. He stuck in his hand, and pulled out a small wooden doll.

A well-beloved Blackfoot doll.

Reigning in the horse to follow behind Tom's pony, George quietly wept into his coat. No matter what the future held, there was one person who would always pray for him. Little Mary Brown.

Epilogue

George arrived in Missouri in one piece, as Josiah predicted, then went on to Massachusetts to finish his law degree at Harvard Law School. With the continued generosity and support of his Aunt Dorothy, George was admitted to the Worcester County bar a year after graduation. Despite severely strained relations with his father, George worked tirelessly for the abolition of slavery.

George kept his promise to Mary, and the courier arrived for the first time, five and a half years after George left the Oregon Country-- the half, accounting for the time it took the courier to

cross the continent. Among the books and dresses, Mary found a stack of letters addressed to her and her family.

After the letters had been devoured at least twice, Mary noticed a single leather volume with George's name on the cover in gold print. "The Rocky Mountain Journal of George Hughes," told not only of George and Will's harrowing experience as would-be trappers in the North, but most of the book was filled with none other than Josiah Brown. Careful selections of Josiah's exploits, his encounter with the grizzly, his adeptness at being able to navigate and survive in such terrible wilderness, captured the popular imagination of the readership back East. People who would have scorned Josiah for being a lowly half-breed, found themselves endeared to this hairy man, who was, from George's accounts, "a bear of a man, strong as any ox but with a heart as broad as the Rockies." Though the book chagrined Josiah to no end, it increased Josiah's peace with other Oregonians; they came to look at Josiah as not only an upstanding member of their community, but also a respected member of the famously romantic legend of the mountain men.

Over the years, George and Mary continued to exchange letters. And over the years, Emma and Josiah continued to watch.

Will and Cora remained on the farm, helping the children to grow with the land. After continued problems with his wooden leg, Will took to walking about with crutches, claiming they gave him less trouble. Cora passed down her father's heritage to her grandchildren, filling their childhood with the history of their people, and the knowledge of those who had made the Shining Mountains their home. Will and Cora remained happily married, a living testament of the joys that mutual respect and love can bring to a relationship.

The Browns continued their interest in the Oregon City Bank, Josiah and Emma's initial investment having grown at an even faster rate when the Oregon Trail began in earnest in 1843 and the Willamette Valley became a destination for many immigrants. Josiah was finally able to build that large frame house for Emma and the children, and their next two baby girls were born on the first floor in Josiah and Emma's room. Emma never did have another child to make her goal of eight, but Josiah always joked that since God rested on the seventh day, God decided Emma needed rest and stopped at seven children.

Each child Josiah and Emma held, comforted and soothed, was a celebration of the love that had first blossomed in the trapper's cabin, once tucked away beneath the shadow of Ole' Hollowtop. Those early memories in the Rocky Mountains were treasured by both. The moment Josiah saw Emma in the first morning's light, and realized what a beauty he truly had. The mending of the hunting shirt for Christmas, that first kiss given in love. The intimate smoke curling from the cabin, sheltering Josiah and Emma from the harshness of winter. Mary's precious face as Emma's

very first "Little One," the mending of the Blackfoot doll, the wonder of the first Christmas tree. Those days replayed themselves to Josiah and Emma, and every time they remembered, they thanked God for the blessings of their family... and each other.

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

The LORD has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.

- John Newton

The End.

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< <http://www.thefurtrapper.com> >.

Visit JudithBronte.com for more Inspirational Romance, and for the latest news about the sequel for *Mountain Wild*! This time, it will be George and Mary's story....

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