

*Courage is resistance to fear,
mastery of fear,
not absence of fear.*

Mark Twain

Introduction

“No, no . . .,” Luci mumbled as her head swayed with the lurching motion of the stagecoach.

Jolting her awake from a deep sleep, a strong hand frantically grabbed her arm. For a moment, the young woman was disoriented, and then she realized it was Slick, the Oklahoma cowboy. His spurs scraped the narrow planked floor.

“Get down, ma’am. *Quick!* We’re being attacked by Indians.”

In shock, Luci obediently scrambled onto the stagecoach floor next to Martha Thompson, who was sobbing hysterically. Protectively, Luci put her arm around the ample woman’s trembling shoulders.

“Everything will be all right,” she said reassuringly, but she didn’t believe a word of it. Fear raced like a runaway train through her chest.

Captain Packard, a former Union soldier turned bounty hunter, was poised for action with his Winchester rifle protruding out the rickety window frame. There was glee on his weathered face as he relished killing the “blood thirsty varmints.” The wind whipped back his silver mane of hair like the vortex of a tornado, and a demoniacal glint filled his wild eyes.

The captain tossed a spare pistol to Jasper Thompson, who anxiously leaned out the opposite window. Never expecting an ambush on his journey to the rich farmland out west, the shy, gaunt homesteader was stunned into silence.

Suddenly, Slick, who was propped against a rear window, twisted Luci’s arm and forced her to let go of the homesteader’s wife. Then he straddled her protectively under his lanky body, anchoring himself half on the tiny blond woman and half on the crackled leather bench seat. His chaps flapped noisily in the turbulent wind. With six-shooters drawn, the cowboy began to volley with the whooping raiding party.

It was a thundering of jarring, strident sounds. Earsplitting gunshots echoed hollowly, and the tiny wooden enclosure strained and groaned as it tore faster and faster over the brutal terrain. Shrill war whoops pierced the air, and rumbling hoof beats pounded closer. Magnifying her terror, Luci’s heartbeat drummed in unison.

All at once, she heard a muted groan and then a scream. Her horrified eyes spotted the limp body of their guard, Harlan Wright, flailing through the air off the top of the stagecoach to his death on the rocky trail. He had been riddled with at least four feather-tipped arrows.

Next, Jasper Thompson cried out in anguish. Luci’s eyes flew to his slumping

body, an arrow bisecting his chest. Martha, ignoring the danger, rushed to her new husband's side, and suddenly an arrow found a bull's-eye in her back. Shock, then peace, filled their stricken eyes, and they died, sinking motionlessly into each other's arms on the blood-spattered floor.

The driver, Jeb Smith, met a grizzly death next as his cadaver dangled upside down from the roof, then dropped with a sickening thud to the hard ground. Because it was entering a treacherous curve in the trail, the rattling stagecoach careened wildly out of control without a driver.

In numbing fear, Luci tried to pray, but the words got stuck in her paralyzed throat. She squeezed more tightly into a corner for protection, but the dead bodies of the Thompsons pinned her legs against the splintered floor. Slick's oppressive weight also made it impossible to move any further.

As he tried to gun down a few more "savages," the captain's outrageous laugh rang out deliriously. A deadly arrow came out of nowhere to nail him between the eyes, and he toppled forcefully onto the corpses of the Thompsons. In shock that he'd survived the Civil War but not an Indian attack, his frantic eyes sought Luci and appealed for help, but it was too late. Blood covered everything, splattering Luci's plain gingham dress and the cowboy's dusty cowhide boots with a melancholic crimson ooze.

Though nauseated at the carnage, Luci forced herself to face reality and peer around Slick's gangly form. She gasped at the ferocity on the bronzed, war painted faces of the Indians as their lathered horses pounded by the stagecoach.

"*Oh no,*" Luci screamed silently against the deafening wind. Slick took a well-aimed arrow in his chest and careened from the rear window. He crushed her with his weight. Wanting him to know she had appreciated his protection, she scrambled from beneath with difficulty and gently touched the cowboy's lined face. His pained eyes flung wide open.

"Ma'am, you're such a pretty little thing. I always said so . . .," he whispered feebly. All eternity was in his voice as death claimed another victim.

Only Luci remained. She never thought a slaughter like this was possible on her journey to teach in the Oregon Territory.

Sensing victory, the Indians wildly circled the stagecoach, and one leaped to the rooftop to halt the stampeding team of horses. He landed with a frightening thud, which jolted Luci into action. Because of her small size, she was sure they hadn't spotted her.

With a burst of energy, her survival instinct kicked in. Grabbing the captain's rifle out of his lifeless hands, she hastily crawled across the dead bodies to the rear seat, lifting the bench top to reveal a tiny storage compartment. Deftly, the young woman maneuvered into the suffocating space, and she propped open a half-inch crack for air.

Skidding across the rocky trail, the stagecoach rumbled to a deafening stop. The ominous silence of death was broken only by the pounding of Luci's heartbeat in her throat.

As a late afternoon breeze whipped trail dust around its foreboding structure, the stagecoach sat solemnly in the heat. The air was oppressive, and the storage space cramped. Luci heard a door creak open and footsteps pad among the bodies.

Through the tiny crack, she could vaguely discern the figure of an immense Indian well over six feet tall. His size dwarfed her 5-foot-two-inch frame. His bare chest was painted red and had two strange circular scars. As he crouched to examine the victims, his chest became rigid with muscles. Powerfully corded forearms were ringed with turquoise and silver bracelets, which clanked eerily as he shuffled about the cabin.

The warrior wore an immense headpiece of unevenly shaped feathers, and a combination quiver and bow case filled with feather-tipped arrows was slung across his back. From her hiding place, his legs looked as tall as bridge trestles in loose fitting elk skin chaps, and his glistening bronzed skin rippled between the smudged geometric designs of red war paint.

All at once, he extracted a curved knife made out of a sun-bleached antler. It was bent at the tip like a machete and had a wooden handle. Emotionlessly and exactly, the Indian began scalping the hapless corpses. Blood dripped down their ashen faces. Luci unconsciously groaned at the macabre sight.

In a sweeping motion like a vulture attacking its prey, he flew across the coach and flung open the bench, somewhat startled to find a delicate child-woman huddled unharmed in the tiny space. He grunted. As Luci bravely aimed the rifle at his chest, his onyx black eyes stared unflinchingly at her.

This was the first time she'd seen the Indian's face. It was magnificently chiseled like a marble statue by Michelangelo, fiercely handsome with high cheekbones and a Roman uncompromisingly straight nose.

"No closer," Luci warned boldly, momentarily forgetting the Indian couldn't speak English. He remained expressionless at hearing the soft, strange voice. Challenging his own death, he waited to be shot without retreating.

It's his life or mine, Luci tried to convince herself. It didn't work. Unintentionally, the barrel of the Winchester rifle began shaking in circles. Her arms trembled, and her breaths shortened. *It was hopeless!* She couldn't kill another human being. The raiding party would just finish her off anyway.

As she shuddered in defeat, tears splashed down her cheeks. Luci chastised herself for her weakness and finally dropped the heavy barrel to the floor. Helplessly, she buried her face in her hands and wept.

The Indian alertly grabbed the motionless gun. Luci was terrified to look up. *Would he shoot her for threatening him?* There was an eerie silence.

After a lengthy chilling pause, her eyes peeked through a few stray wisps of blond hair sticking out from her oversized bonnet. The warrior, ignoring her presence, was nonchalantly scalping the remaining corpses. He efficiently gathered the mangled hair into a ringlet of gore and then attached the scalps with twine to a stone-headed, long-handled club. She felt nauseated at the copious blood. When he had completed his task, he turned his attention to her.

“Please, no . . .,” Luci pleaded. Impossibly, she tried to crouch even lower in the tiny compartment.

In a deep, authoritative voice, her captor gave a one-word command and held his hands out. He expected obedience, but Luci froze. Impatiently, he repeated the word. Helplessly, she remained motionless.

With irritation at her disobedience, the Indian scooped his muscular arms into the box and yanked her tiny figure upright. Seemingly awed by her pale blue eyes, he stared straight at her without blinking. Defiantly, she stared back, stunned by his strength but determined not to give up without a fight.

Like an empty sack, the Indian suddenly heaved her effortlessly over his massive shoulder. Hammering his iron back with her fists and kicking him in his abdomen and groin, Luci squirmed and wrestled with all the force she had in her hundred pound body. Her constant fights with her four brothers and tomboy nature served her well, and she finally slithered from the warrior’s grip, tumbling harshly to the floor.

The Indian registered his first facial expression. *Surprise!* If Luci could have read his mind, she would have seen he had compared the delicate woman’s feistiness to a buffalo cow in labor. Not one to be outsmarted by a woman, the wily Indian yanked her upward, whipped an arm around her tiny waist, and then tore off her plain blue bonnet. A silver clip from her hair bounced across the dead bodies.

As the woman’s long blond hair tumbled down like a field of golden wheat ready for harvest, he uttered more surprise. His weathered hand touched it with awe. *It was as soft as the finest silk the white man traders bartered for beaver pelts*, he thought. His eyes had never feasted on this strange color of hair, and Luci gasped, knowing she was now an even more desirable prize.

Determined to prevail over the beautiful woman, the Indian yanked his knife from his belt. In one sweeping motion, he shoved her forward, released her waist, grabbed her neck and hair in a vise from behind, anchored her against his chest, and motioned he would scalp her.

Though his actions were intimidating, he hadn’t really hurt her, but Luci was shocked at his quickness and brute strength. Lowering her eyes, she pretended to be subdued. Stoically, however, she refused to show fear, only a grudging submission.

When he felt no further resistance, his iron grip loosened. Her captor spun her

around to face him and firmly repeated his command in the Indian dialect. Then he tugged at her hair and gestured with his knife that he would scalp her if she disobeyed.

Gathering her wits, Luci nodded, hoping to appease him. *It was like magic.* He let her go, and his knife retraced its path to its hand sewn sheath. Once again, the warrior flung her limply over his shoulder, and this time she let him. The two quickly fled the horrible bloodbath.

Once outside in the steaming afternoon sun, the immense Indian deposited her with a thud on the rocky trail. He had obviously concluded she was a fool to try to escape. Luci stood like a stone statue and refused to look up, not even to see how many Indians surrounded her. She sensed it was important to show her captor she could be trusted to obey.

There were various unintelligible verbal reactions to her presence, even some grunting and laughter, but it was not much different than white men reacting to her appearance, she decided.

Suddenly, however, an unwelcome leathery hand came out of nowhere and began fondling her hair. Her eyes flew up in fear and then anger. It was a different Indian, stocky and squat, his rounded moon-shaped face pitted with deep scars as if he'd had smallpox when he was younger. He snarled, and his black eyes glinted lustfully. Then another Indian boldly came forward and began to paw the waistline of her mangled dress.

Luci's eyes frantically searched for her captor, who was retrieving a regal-looking pinto stallion on the fringes of the raiding party. *At least her captor hadn't hurt her,* she reasoned. Summoning her courage, she dashed away from the other Indians. With a shocking burst of speed, her high buttoned shoes flew across the rough terrain to the towering Indian who had carried her out of the stagecoach. Taken by surprise at her quickness, the other two took up hot pursuit.

Luci was deceptively fragile and impossible to catch. In moments, she grabbed the muscular forearm of her captor, whirling behind him for protection. Without any hesitation or fear, she burrowed her face tightly against his bare back. Thinking he might pull away, it stunned her he didn't.

The trail dust spun as her angry pursuers skidded to a halt and made a wild grab for her. Digging her fingernails into the Indian's back, she clung even harder. Her captor, in a booming voice, suddenly issued terse orders to the entire group. The vengeful eyes of her pursuers obediently dropped, and they shuffled off somewhat resentfully to their restless horses. The entire raiding party, ten in all, began to mount at the Indian's command.

Luci noticeably exhaled and gazed up in relief. Her captor was obviously the leader of the rebel band, and he had kept his men from hurting her. If she wanted to survive, she had no choice but to cooperate with him.

The Indian twisted around, his long black hair shining with oil in the sun. He flashed an indiscernible look as if to say, “*Why are you still hanging on me? You are safe now.*” Luci had momentarily forgotten she had locked him in a vise.

Her feistiness vanished and while releasing him, she lowered her eyes self-consciously. She could tell the simple action intrigued the Indian and knew he wondered how she could be both shy and fiery at the same time.

Abruptly, her captor turned to his horse and flew with ease onto a beaded saddle atop a woven blanket. Luci gazed up . . . and up. The pinto stallion was breathtaking in size compared to her, and he was majestically painted with red war paint and decorated with feathers on his bridle.

The Indian gave her the same one-word command as on the stagecoach, and she anxiously approached the enormous horse. Extending his hand, her captor motioned with his eyes to grab hold and be hoisted up behind him. Because she’d never learned to ride a horse, Luci was terrified. Her family in Boston only used carriages. Sensing her fear, the Indian became more patient, and his eyes urged her forward again.

Chiding herself for showing weakness, Luci confidently placed her left foot in the waist high stirrup, squeezed the Indian’s calloused hand for support, and allowed herself to fly weightlessly behind his immense body. Her slender form sank gracelessly behind his formidable body and reticently, she inched her arms around his narrow waistline.

All at once, he yanked her forearms forward and locked them around his ribbed abdomen as if to say, “*It’s going to be one fast ride, white woman, so hang on for dear life.*”

With a quick tap of his heels, they were flying off to join the others. His lightning fast stallion swung into an immediate gallop and took the lead. Not knowing what to do, Luci burrowed her face in the Indian’s bare back to protect herself from the wind.

Once she realized she wouldn’t fall off, Luci gradually relaxed, and she began to sense how to lean and mold with her captor as if they were one rider. He skillfully and swiftly led the band of Indians through a dense forest and then into rocky hill country.

The ride was both paralyzing and exhilarating. The rush of wind stung Luci’s face into a feverish numbness, yet the machine-like rhythm of the stallion’s powerful stride thrilled her senses. Her mind was still in anguish at the surrealistic images of bloody corpses and dangling scalps. But because her captor had protected her from his comrades, she had mastered her fear, and the gruesome images were juxtaposed with a practical acceptance of her situation.

Endless questions plagued her mind. *Could she adjust to a different way of life? Would she survive?* She clung to the only person who knew the answer.

*There is no greater sorrow than to recall happiness
in times of misery.*

Dante Alighieri

PART ONE

Chapter One

As it dipped elusively behind a jagged mountain of rock, a giant orange sun promised another sweltering spring day. Like a dangerous predator, a precipitous mountain loomed ahead and suddenly cast the raiding party into its cool shadow. Giving the appearance of an army of barren scarecrows, a row of straggly pine trees tenaciously guarded the mountain path.

For hours, the ragtag group had been well into the mountains, and the ride became steep and treacherous. Luci was bone-tired, and her head throbbed with tension. Her thin cotton dress did nothing to protect her tiny frame from the unmerciful bounces of the powerful stallion's broad hindquarters. She doubted she would be able to walk or even sit, yet Luci bravely clung to her captor and endured. The furious pace continued.

In Boston, it would have been teatime. *Boston*, she thought wearily, suddenly missing her family in spite of all the discord before she left. Distractedly, she began thinking about her reasons for traveling west in the first place.

Luci's father was Dr. Seth Garling, a prominent physician, and he and her mother, Margaret, and their youngest child, Luci, lived in a fashionable stone townhouse in the Beacon Hill district of Boston.

Luci's chaotic household had many servants including a maid, a cook, a gardener, and a governess, whose principal job over the years had been to control four rather unruly boys and one somewhat wild little girl. There had been eight children, but three died in infancy, leaving Luci the only sister of four rowdy older brothers.

Mrs. Garling had always lovingly doted on her only daughter, dressing her femininely in crinolines, frilly dresses, and black patent leather shoes when she was younger. To the woman's disappointment, her daughter wanted no part of femininity, preferring to play sports outside and roam through the woods with her rough-and-tumble brothers. To both parents' dismay, their beautiful, delicate-appearing daughter had grown into an incorrigible ruffian.

Luci was frequently punished for her unladylike escapades by being sent to her girlish bedroom with its canopied featherbed and pink flowered curtains. It seemed her parents thought a revoltingly pink room would turn her into a lady through osmosis.

But Luci didn't really mind the punishment for her room was filled with books, which provided a magical escape to faraway places and a yearning for unknown adventures. It was ironic that instead of resembling the magical dreams of her childhood, her brutal capture by the Indians had thrown her into an inescapable nightmare of horror.

Because of Luci's rebellion against anything feminine, her parents postponed her debutante ball, and they grudgingly allowed their rambunctious daughter to attend a nearby teachers college. Until they could eventually marry her off to one of the many eligible bachelors in Boston, they hoped a college education would keep her out of mischief.

Part of the agreement for paying her tuition was Luci's promise to participate in a debutante ball immediately after graduation. The dreaded affair was held just two weeks before Luci ran away. With great stubbornness, her father insisted she choose a wealthy young man to marry from the ball, his own candidate being Maxwell Sloan, the investment banker son of a family friend.

Reluctantly, Luci got all gussied up for the big affair and kept her promise to attend, but she was distraught from the start. As if it were preordained in the stars, a strange event happened at the ball. She remembered the exact moment her eyes unexpectedly locked on a bearded stranger in his early thirties. The man was dressed in a blue and gold cavalry uniform, and his slightly older, rugged appearance stuck out like a sore thumb against the maze of look-alike, handsome young men in evening attire.

Unintentionally staring, Luci noticed the man animatedly talking to her mother's dearest friend, Matilda Towers. Every now and then, the plump Mrs. Towers would emit a delighted laugh at something the stranger said, and her rolls of ample flesh would jiggle up and down in her canary yellow satin dress. Needing some humor and definitely a distraction from the stuffy ball, Luci crossed the crowded ballroom.

"Luci, darling, you look lovely." Embracing her warmly, the plump woman planted an affectionate kiss on her cheek. The action caused Luci to drop one of her white evening gloves to the floor.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Yours, I believe," a low masculine voice said with gruffness.

Luci spun to gaze face to face with intelligent, unwavering brown eyes. Smiling demurely, she said thank you.

"Luci, I don't believe you've met my nephew from Philadelphia, Lieutenant Samuel Towers. And this is Miss Luci Garling, one of the belles of the ball."

The two shook hands, although it seemed the lieutenant held hers a little too long.

"Samuel just happened to be visiting, and your mother, bless her heart, said to bring him along to your ball since I was coming anyway."

The lieutenant's eyes continued to stare irreverently. "I guess I'm too late to sign up for a dance," he said evenly with a slightly crooked but appealing smile.

"I'm sure someone has a few dances left," Luci said with a dismissive shrug, not liking that the man looked at her like she was a juicy steak. She was curious if he would back down.

He didn't.

"I don't want to dance with just anyone," the lieutenant answered tenaciously. "It's you or no one. Well, how about it?" He held out his hand as if expecting her to take it.

If there was one thing Luci loved, it was a challenge. After a few quick moments of indecision, she decided irreverence was better than boredom.

"Well then," Luci said impetuously, "I'll just have to squeeze you in on my card." Her eyes sparkled and matched his boldness, and she playfully pretended to scribble his name on her dance card. Little did the cavalryman know she had very little experience with men or witty conversation.

"Lieutenant?" Luci held out her hand. Without any hesitation on his part, they were suddenly twirling on the dance floor to the graceful strains of violins.

Glad that the waltz had caught on in America, Lieutenant Towers squeezed Luci's slender body as tightly as he dared, and she let him, enjoying her newfound recklessness. He was an exquisite dancer, and Luci melted into his strong, capable arms. Her feelings both frightened and excited her, and she felt as though she'd taken a leap into uncharted waters.

All at once, he spoke. "I'm afraid Aunt Matilda is gaping with her mouth open. She still thinks of me as her shy, scrawny nephew. The fact is, I've been off to war for the Union, and soon I'll be going west, first to the Plains and then to the Northwest Territories to negotiate with Native Americans." He smiled confidently. "With the odds on my life the way they are, I tend to go after what I want in life."

"Oh, and what is it you want?" Luci spoke up innocently, thinking the man was about to reveal his lifelong dreams for his future.

The lieutenant smiled like a predator, his teeth white and slightly crooked. Luci fought a blush. No man had ever acted like this with her.

"You seem pretty bored at this bash. Why on earth are you here anyway? You surely don't have difficulty finding men," the man continued brashly.

Not knowing how to respond to his continued boldness, Luci gave him an enigmatic half-smile. He was downright impertinent. Her mother never taught her this type of conversation.

"Okay," he sighed. "If you allow me to ask one more question, I'll be a perfect gentleman like the others." His voice struck a sincere tone. "What is it like to be so beautiful that everyone holds their breath when you glide by?"

There was dead silence between them. If there was one thing Luci hated, it

was continual comments about her appearance. She'd rather have been born ugly so people would talk about something else for a change.

"I hope you're through," Luci said abruptly.

"Yup, I am, ma'am," he replied.

"Well, *good!*" Her eyes flashed.

"If I've said anything but the truth, I apologize and stand corrected. Go ahead. Correct me, little one. Are you bored here? Are you truthful enough to admit you're beautiful?"

Her anger dissipating, Luci exhaled with exasperation. "Until you came along, the fact is I was bored to tears. It would be chivalrous of you to think of a way to rescue me."

Lieutenant Towers threw his head back and laughed heartily. It was a man's deep laugh, not a boy's. "I knew I was going to like you, Luci. You've got a lot of, shall we say, spunk and intestinal fortitude?"

"You mean *guts?*" she answered in her most unladylike manner.

"Yeah, *guts,*" he replied, squeezing her midsection a little tighter. "But in answer to your plea for a gallant rescue, I'm afraid I can't. I'd have a mob of suitors on my tail, and that doesn't even include your parents who are staring at us in the corner. They're utterly dismayed at your choice of a dancing partner."

The lieutenant nonchalantly whirled her around to see that he had spoken the truth. Her parents were rigidly standing like statues and white-faced.

"What if I tell you I don't particularly care if my parents approve of my dancing partners?" Luci said willfully.

"I'd say I like that very much!" His eyes twinkled. "I like a woman with a mind of her own." His broad hand enfolded hers, and he pressed it tightly to his chest. She could feel his heart beating nearly as fast as her own.

"In fact, let's surprise my parents. What if I invite you to Sunday dinner tomorrow at, say, one o'clock?" Luci said.

"To spite your parents or to see me again?"

She gazed at him unflinchingly. "I could lie to you and say it was solely to see you, but it's probably both. See that tall, skinny man by the punch bowl," Luci whispered secretively. "That's Maxwell Sloan. My parents want me to marry him. He wants me to marry him. His parents want me to marry him."

"What about Luci Garling? Does she want to marry him?" A concerned look swept over the officer's rugged face.

"No, absolutely not," Luci whispered tersely. "*She* doesn't want to marry anyone!" she added with certainty.

The lieutenant looked surprised. After all, debutante balls were to find husbands. "Well, then don't marry him. You're what, twenty-one? You're of age. Simply tell them all no!"

"It's not that simple," Luci whispered again. "It's all but arranged. Father is of

the old school and very convinced a young woman must be properly married. In fact, if I don't marry Maxwell Sloan, my father has threatened to disinherit me."

There was a sudden silence between the two. "So if you had the chance to do anything you wanted besides marry Sloan, what would you do?" the lieutenant probed. He was genuinely concerned over her plight.

Luci smiled. No one ever asked her that question. Her father had even forced her into teaching as the only career suitable for a woman. A faint ray of hope flickered in her eyes. "I've always dreamed of traveling, maybe even going west. I'm qualified to teach. Surely they need teachers out west."

Lieutenant Towers gave a serious smile. "That's no place for a delicate woman like you. There are all kinds of hardships and dangers on the frontier."

Luci's eyes flashed with anger. "Are you saying you don't think I have what it takes to survive in the West?" She could feel her temper rising. One of her biggest flaws, she knew, was being on a short fuse sometimes.

Her dance partner comically assessed her flushed face and then pulled her closer. She was immediately aware of his muscular arms against her back and his hard chest pressing against her. "You're mistaken, Luci. I think you're as tough as nails under all that fragile fluff!"

"*Fluff?*" Luci gasped, even more insulted.

"Beautiful, soft, delightful, squeezable fluff in all the right places," he added sweetly, batting his eyelashes innocently.

"Lieutenant Towers, you're being very forward! What if my parents are still watching?"

"Trust me, everyone is watching. And it's Sam to my friends. Call me Sam," he said evenly. He respectfully loosened his grip on her.

Luci slowly regained her composure. A wild and farfetched plan had been taking shape in her mind, and she was not one to hesitate speaking out.

"Since a woman of *fluff* like me would need the protection of a good man, you know, someone to show me the ways of the world . . ." There was a long pause. "Would you take me with you when you leave for the West?"

"*What?*" Sam asked incredulously. "I just met you four minutes ago."

"At least eight minutes ago," Luci corrected impishly. Her worried face grew solemn. "I'm serious. If I stay in Boston, I'll be forced into an unhappy marriage, a prison. I can't do it, Sam. It's not like I'm asking you to marry me! But I am asking you to rescue me. *Please,*" she pleaded.

"You don't even know me," the lieutenant protested feebly. "Maybe I'm a dirty old man twice as bad as Maxwell Sloan, and I'll take advantage of you at the first opportunity."

"You know you won't! Besides," a devious smile crossed Luci's face, "if you misbehave, I'll tell your aunt! Doesn't it sound exciting to save a damsel in distress from all this," her eyes scanned the room, "*boredom?*"

Totally charmed, Lieutenant Towers laughed out loud. Matching his uneasy mood with a flurry of dramatic runs, the stringed orchestra began winding to a close. “I’ll tell you what, Luci. I’ll think about it, that’s all. Besides, I could only take you as far as Chicago. From there, I’m off to Fort Hays in Kansas for training. If you come with me, and I say *if*, we’d have to arrange a specific destination for you. From Chicago on, you’d be on your own!” Sam swallowed, realizing he was getting in way over his head.

“Does that mean you’ll do it?” Luci pressed eagerly. Her face glowed like a fireworks display.

“*No*, it means I’ll *think* about it,” he quickly corrected her. “There’ve been too many skirmishes lately with the Native Americans, and many of the peace treaties have been negated. Since the Sand Creek Massacre in the Colorado Territory, it’s been totally unpredictable. And darn it, Luci, it’s dangerous for a single woman to travel alone, especially one as beautiful as you. You’d be a target for all kinds of men—outlaws, miners, *cavalrymen*.”

“Now that sounds promising,” she teased. “Any *cavalryman* in particular?”

Sam pulled her closer. “If we weren’t in this crowded ballroom . . .”

“You’d do what?” she dared him.

“I’d say it’s about time you were kissed by a real man.”

“Hm, where might I find a real man?” Luci asked mischievously as she gazed around the ballroom. Then her blue eyes zeroed in on Sam. “I doubt a real man would hesitate about taking me west with him.”

Sam shook his head in disbelief. “If you’re this persistent, you might do okay for yourself,” he conceded. He hated to admit it, but the idea was beginning to intrigue him.

Luci knew she’d almost won, and she pulled away gracefully. “Don’t forget, Sam. Dinner’s tomorrow at one o’clock sharp!”

“Wild horses couldn’t keep me away.”

Chapter Two

The Indian war party continued its breakneck pace through a lush valley filled with wildflowers. Then another perilously steep mountain came into view in the distance. Lapsing into memories about her final days in Boston, Luci numbly held on to her kidnapper's strong back. Her escape into unreality was the only thing that kept her from giving in to her fears.

Sunday dinner at the Garling's townhouse was an uncomfortable affair. Seth and Margaret Garling were livid their independent daughter had invited the scruffy-looking cavalryman from the ball, regardless that he was the nephew of Mrs. Garling's closest friend.

Unknown to Luci, they had already asked Maxwell Sloan to dinner, and Luci was likewise affronted she hadn't been informed. A tomblike silence greeted both dinner guests who arrived simultaneously at the pillared doorstep.

To make matters worse, the two men glared with hostility at each other across the mahogany dining room table. At first, their eyes locked like bayonets. Later when Maxwell Sloan thought the cavalryman wasn't looking, he assessed him shrewdly. Placing even more strain on the already tenuous atmosphere, Luci, in a show of defiance, deliberately chose an empty chair beside the lieutenant.

This drama unfolded while being served a meal fit for royalty, which included beef bouillon, Cornish game hens, braised potatoes, green beans in a cream sauce, and custard. The only sounds heard were the shuffling footsteps of a crisply uniformed servant and the clinking of sterling silver against the delicately flowered bone china.

Lieutenant Towers eventually found the whole scene wonderfully amusing. Luci was not in such good humor, however, until his black leather riding boot began playfully rubbing her ankle. Her eyes shot up in surprise to catch his twinkle.

Luci found his boldness irresistible, and she searched for his hand under the Quaker lace tablecloth and gave it an affectionate squeeze. He held it tightly, refusing to let it go.

The conversation turned to the final days of the Civil War and whether abolition of slavery was a good thing economically. The lieutenant spoke of his experiences at Antietam, and Luci listened with rapt attention, finding Sam Towers a man of surprising depth and insight. She genuinely liked him and his deep sense of conviction.

In a no nonsense manner, Dr. Garling changed the subject to the present. He said to Lieutenant Towers, "I hear from Luci you're about to go out west to fight Indians."

The lieutenant startled. "Not exactly, sir. I'm going to negotiate peace treaties,

not fight. I leave in two weeks.” Luci could almost hear her father breathe a sigh of relief that the cavalryman would soon be leaving Boston.

“I would think it’s more important to rid the West of the savages than make peace,” Dr. Garling said as an afterthought. “Horror stories come back every week about whole families being burned or scalped. The government ought to civilize it properly.” The distinguished-looking doctor, who was insulated in Boston from what was really happening, leaned back in his chair.

Lieutenant Towers spoke with a strained respect, and Luci could tell he was offended at her father’s rigid opinions. “I think Native Americans are a misunderstood people with a culture that’s merely different than ours. What’s civilized to us may be uncivilized to them, such as forcing our way onto land that has been theirs for thousands of years or killing off the buffalo which they depend on for their very existence.”

“What are you, Towers, an Indian lover?” Maxwell Sloan interrupted sarcastically.

“On the contrary, Mr. Sloan, I respect all people regardless of their skin color. If you’ve forgotten, I fought for the freedom of the black man. The rights of all people need to be protected, not abused.”

“With regard to the Indians, I’d say public opinion is against you,” Dr. Garling mused. “Most would say the more Indians killed the better as it’s safer for the white folk.”

“That’s precisely the attitude that made me volunteer to help negotiate workable peace treaties. I hope to see justice done.” Sam visibly bristled.

“Do you think one person can make a difference?” Maxwell Sloan burst in philosophically. “That’s highly unlikely, don’t you think? It’s kind of like the proverbial needle in the haystack.”

Realizing the discussion was getting heated, Dr. Garling suggested the group retire to the parlor. As they ambled through an immense foyer, Luci pondered Maxwell Sloan’s prophetic question. *Could one person make a difference?* She really didn’t know.

Lieutenant Sam Tower’s footsteps abruptly stopped, and he expressed his gratitude for the elegant dinner. Aunt Matilda was expecting him, he added. With disappointment, Luci volunteered to see the lieutenant out, and the others left for an adjoining room and closed the door. She leaned her head wearily against the carved oak door frame.

“I’m sorry dinner turned out to be such a disaster,” Luci apologized with sincerity. “I had no idea my parents had invited Maxwell Sloan.”

“Time spent with you could never be a disaster, Luci,” Sam sweetly reassured her. He took her hand gently into his.

“By the way, thanks for leaving me alone in this bulwark of prejudice against the ‘savage’ Indians,” she murmured.

“Oh, I think you can hold your own if you want to,” he answered, suddenly leaning his head next to hers. Sam was so close she could feel his warm breath on her nostrils. Luci was glad the door to the parlor was closed.

“Will you see me later, Sam?” she whispered impulsively. “We could meet at the Public Gardens near Boston Common at four o’clock.”

The lieutenant smiled. “I’m shocked, Luci. This is twice in two days you’ve asked me to meet you. That doesn’t sound like a proper young lady to me.”

“Maybe it’s not in my nature to be proper.”

His broad hand tugged the nape of Luci’s neck until her lips melted against his in an unexpected kiss. After a few enjoyable moments, she pulled back in surprise.

“There’s nothing I love more than your lack of propriety, Luci. It becomes you! I’ll see you at the park at four o’clock!” Leaving her speechless, Sam took off down the front steps.

Later that afternoon, Luci fabricated an excuse about needing fresh air and enjoying the beautiful spring day. Before anyone could object, she was out the front door and flying to her rendezvous, which was only three blocks away.

Her eager eyes immediately spotted the muscular cavalryman leaning placidly under the cool shade of a box elder tree. His arms were crossed patiently. The lieutenant was, of course, punctual and absorbed in watching two towheaded children feeding bread crumbs to a graceful white swan.

With a burst of spontaneity, Luci rushed into the unsuspecting officer’s embrace, throwing her arms exuberantly around his shoulders. His arms happily circled her waist.

“What *are* you doing?” Sam laughed with pleasure. He swung her gaily around like a ballet dancer.

“Seems to me I was told at the ball that I needed a kiss from a real man!” Luci hinted boldly, shocking even herself. She had no idea why she was acting so forward.

“In public?” he asked with a mixture of astonishment and pleasure.

“You’re a real man, aren’t you?” Luci teased. “Wait, I know. You’re shy!”

The lieutenant squeezed her tightly. “That’s one thing I haven’t been accused of in a very long time,” he murmured. His soft lips happily met hers in an impassioned kiss and then another.

They were a man’s kisses, and Luci became suddenly shy and introspective. When they pulled back, they were both breathing heavily, and there was an awkward hush between them.

“I’ve never been kissed quite like that before,” Luci stammered. “With Maxwell, uh, we’ve never quite gotten to the point of kissing.”

Lieutenant Towers chuckled. “Luci, you are so adorably innocent. What am I going to do with you?”

“Hm, maybe make me less innocent?” she ventured. Then realizing the import of her words, Luci blushed.

With a sudden responsible sigh, Sam shook his head. “You shouldn’t give a man an open invitation like that, Luci. A less honorable one would take you up on your offer. C’mon, let’s go for a walk. We need to talk.” As they began strolling by a pond filled with mallard ducks, he clasped her hand on his arm.

Because of his mild rebuke, an uncomfortable silence cropped up between them. In embarrassment, Luci mulled over her forwardness. All at once, she blurted defensively, “I don’t usually behave like this!”

Lieutenant Towers shot her a quick grin. “That’s too bad. I kind of like you uninhibited like this.”

“You think I’m immature, but I’m just glad to see you,” Luci explained in a reasonable fashion. “Besides, my father is turning my home into a prison.” Her voice dropped sadly. Suddenly, she glared at the lieutenant. “What do you think, Sam? That I go around grabbing and kissing men and making dates?”

“Hey, whoa, I believe you,” Sam broke in, stopping to pull her close once more. “But I would like to give you some sage advice, little one, that is if you’re interested.”

Not sure she liked being called *little one*, she nodded for him to continue.

With a twinkle in his eye, he shrugged off her growing peevishness. “If you’re going west, young lady, you better pack a little reserve in your suitcase. Otherwise, you’ll spend most of your time fighting your way out of men’s bedrooms.”

The realization of what he said finally hit her, and her eyes popped open wide.

“*West??* West!! Does that mean you’ll take me with you, Sam?” She pulled him into a gigantic bear hug. “I’m so happy!”

With a defeated sigh, the lieutenant nodded, realizing he was no match for the persuasive charm of the dazzling woman before him. “I have a few conditions we have to discuss.”

“Anything you want!” Luci interrupted excitedly.

“There you go again,” he objected quickly. “Don’t say ‘anything you want’ to a man, Luci, even me. A man will misinterpret it and take advantage of you.” She nodded obediently but felt like rolling her eyes.

“First, we’re going to sit down and plan your itinerary for the safest trip possible. Because spring is the best time to travel, we’ll need to leave soon. We’ll also have to finalize a specific destination and someone to meet you. Otherwise, the deal’s off. If anything happened to you, Luci, I couldn’t live with myself.”

Indulging his concerns, Luci smiled confidently. *What could happen to her?* She was just going west to teach.

Lieutenant Towers sighed deeply at his ominous thoughts. “Promise me you’ll

be withdrawn and quiet on the last leg of your journey. We'll have to try to make you look as ugly as possible."

She laughed at his silliness. "I'll be more subdued, but . . ."

"I know," Sam conceded. "I've been trying to figure out how to grow warts on your nose. For sure, we'll buy an old cotton print dress with a huge bonnet and hide all that glorious hair of yours." Luci smiled.

Impulsively, the lieutenant grabbed her in his arms, and she felt his broad hands splayed across her back. "Let's just forget this game we're playing. Why don't you marry me, Luci? You'd still accomplish your goal of leaving."

Luci's eyes widened like saucers. Marriage with Sam or anyone had never entered her mind, and a look of dismay crossed her face.

He caught her unhappy expression. "Okay, little one, just forget I said that. I can see you rank marriage right up there with pulling teeth. But I promise you, Luci, someday I'm coming for you wherever you are, and I'll have marriage on my mind!"

"I-I don't mean to be difficult, especially after you've been so kind," Luci said meekly, realizing she was disappointing him.

Sam stroked her cheek softly. "You're not being difficult. I am. Freedom is the most important thing you need right now, especially after your father. You're like a rosebud that's ready to burst open in the sunlight, but there's one thing I'm afraid of."

"What's that, Sam?" she murmured softly.

"I'm afraid I won't be the one to see you bloom."

Luci felt a wave of love sweep over her. *Was this what it was like to fall in love, or was it just infatuation?* There was an uncomfortable silence, and Luci wisely decided to change the subject.

"Where do you think I should go out west, Sam?" Luci suddenly said.

As they began to stroll around the park again, the lieutenant pondered her question. "A lot of settlers call the Willamette Valley in the Oregon Territory home. It's supposed to be a lush, fertile land. It's pretty far, though, and right through Indian country, but I imagine they need a teacher. Because the buffalo is being threatened by the white man, I think the danger of attack is greater in the Plains. So if it were me, I'd head for the coast. There'd be beautiful mountains and the Pacific Ocean, and I hear the Nez Perce are among the more peaceful tribes."

"Then Oregon it is," Luci broke in excitedly.

"It just so happens Aunt Matilda's cousin, Dora Johnson, is a rancher's wife in the Oregon Territory. Until you find a teaching position, she'd put you up for a while. We'll send her a message that you're coming for an extended stay."

Luci's eyes shone with excitement. It was a real plan, and she loved having a plan of action!

"When Aunt Matilda finds out I masterminded your escape from Boston, do

you know the trouble I'm going to be in? And your parents will never forgive me for running off with their only daughter. Your father might even send out the federal marshals to my cavalry unit, but your secret is safe with me! Besides, he'll never understand I was merely chaperoning your journey."

Luci's footsteps abruptly stopped. "*Chaperoning?* I'm not thinking of you as a chaperone!"

"Well, you better start for I mean to keep your reputation above reproach."

"You're no fun, Sam. You make it sound like you're never even going to kiss me again."

He laughed as he playfully pulled her into his arms. "Oh, you think not. That shows what you know, little one." Without any hesitation, his lips flew to hers, and she eagerly kissed him back.

It was dusk before Luci made her way back home.

*Do the thing you fear most
and the death of fear is certain.*

Mark Twain

Chapter Three

The stallion's hooves pounded relentlessly and for a brief moment jolted Luci back to reality. In growing despair, she wearily clung to her Indian captor as they ventured further from civilization. *No one would ever find her again*, she realized. The length of their ride and the fact that they were now in the mountains led her to believe she was somewhere in the Rocky Mountains in either the Wyoming or Colorado Territories, exactly where she didn't know. It had been a long time since the stagecoach attack.

Clack. . .clack. . .clack. . .clack. . .the hooves became the methodical lullaby of steel rubbing against steel as she and Sam rode the train to Chicago.

With a faint smile, she remembered the crinkled faded blue of Sam Tower's cavalry shirt as she napped against its coarseness, his whiskered face, the soot from the steam locomotive, the elegant linen draped dining car, the smokestacks of industrialized Chicago, and the clapboard rooming house where they stayed in separate rooms at Sam's insistence. Then they parted ways. Sam left to meet up with his cavalry unit in Kansas, and Luci continued first by train and then by stagecoach, eventually planning to catch up with a wagon train heading for the Oregon Trail.

One of the stories Sam recounted on the train was about the Sand Creek Massacre in November of 1864. It was a bloodbath as Colonel John Chivington of the Colorado militia slaughtered more than a hundred defenseless Cheyenne. When they were attacked, the Indians had been seeking shelter on the Sand Creek reservation in the Colorado Territory.

Repercussions from the atrocity were still ongoing. Other Plains tribes, former enemies of the Cheyenne, were gradually forming alliances to fight the spread of the white settlers. Although treaties had been signed over the years, Sam explained that oftentimes the agreements weren't understood, so they were ignored.

Additionally, the United States government kept changing the treaties every few years and taking more land for the settlers. As promises continued to be broken, there was a general attitude of mistrust between all parties. Sam often wondered whether he would have success in negotiating fair treaties or whether it was doomed to failure. It was definitely a daunting task.

Without warning, Luci harshly lurched forward against the Indian's bare back and was jolted awake. *Would Sam ever realize she had vanished?* The answer was

no, she decided hastily, as her captor's horse began to slow down to a trot. It was time to think clearly and quit daydreaming, to accept her perilous situation for what it was, and to decide a course of action. For good measure, Luci whispered a silent prayer for help.

A ribbon-like river crashed over a verdant hillside sprinkled with uneven rocks, and the sound of the river was a symphony of powerful cool, clear water. Luci's throat was parched from the exhausting journey, but she willed herself into silence. Her captor raised his calloused hand to halt the war party, and the warriors obediently reined in their frothing horses.

Hours had passed without a break, and any hope for rescue had vanished. It was time to accept that her fellow travelers were all dead, and she was alone. Her captor trotted his horse to a leafy bush away from the others. He agilely flipped his right leg over the horse's mane and landed two-footed on the ground. There was no sign of weariness in him.

His deep black eyes motioned her to dismount. Luci wanted to cooperate, but her limbs were numb. She also had no idea how to navigate the immense size of the horse's wide buttocks. Awkwardly, she struggled to lift her right leg over the saddle, but without the firm hand of the Indian to steady her, Luci began tumbling toward the hard ground.

Hopelessly twisting her ankle, the slippery leather bottom of her shoe slid quickly through the left stirrup. Then like dead weight, the rest of her body tumbled to the ground and startled the fidgeting pinto. Because he wasn't securely tied, the stallion bolted from the bush, and Luci started to be painfully dragged across a clearing. Tiny chards of sharp rocks pierced into her flesh, and she screamed for help.

Between the neighing of the frightened horse and Luci's squeals, it was an unwelcome commotion. Alertly, her captor sprinted after his horse, heading him off at a clump of birch trees before plunging into the river.

Effortlessly, the Indian retrieved the dazed woman off the ground and gently untangled her left ankle, which was still mangled in the stirrup. Then he planted her upright and bent to examine her ankle. Luci's eyes smarted with pain and blood trickled down her arms, but she refused to cry.

The Indian's eyes gave her an ignominious stare as if to say, "*Don't you even know how to get off a horse, white woman?*"

Belligerently, as if insulted by his imagined reprimand, Luci stood up straight, glared at him, and limped away into the woods. He watched her determined steps as if wondering what kind of woman defiantly cast off pain and dared to answer his eyes.

Luci realized the warriors were all staring at her. With a gutsy determination, she strode to the riverbank, splashed her face and took a refreshing drink, and went behind a nearby lilac bush to take care of her private needs. After she accomplished

everything she could think of, she returned to the clearing and collapsed on the ground beside a massive boulder. Every part of her ached from her slumping shoulders and jostled back to her stiff hind end and weary arms, which had held fast to the Indian's waist.

Despondently, she surveyed the remains of her cotton dress. It was torn at the waist and creased like an accordion. Its mottled blue color was splotted with dried blood and grime. She momentarily thought of her leather suitcase with her other dresses and life savings still atop the abandoned stagecoach.

With exhaustion, Luci closed her eyes. Although it was difficult to accept her situation, she reminded herself that God was here in this desolate place, and He would somehow help her. A troubled sleep finally overcame her fears.

It seemed but a moment's respite when a strong, unyielding hand nudged her shoulder. Remembering she wasn't with Sam on the rumbling train, Luci flinched, and her terrified eyes flew open. Her captor was squatting down before her, examining her tearstained face with a weathered thumb. He extended a wooden bowl of steaming food, and the aroma caused Luci's stomach to rumble with hunger. Food had been forgotten that day.

Even though she was starving, Luci obstinately shook her head no and then reclined against the boulder. She was wrong to think her captor would give up. The Indian firmly lifted her chin with his fingertips and held the steaming food under her nostrils. *So I'm not the only obstinate one*, she thought. Unintentionally, a wisp of a smile found a path to her lips.

Perhaps he let his guard down because they were nearly twenty feet away from the others, but the Indian let his mouth slide into the faintest of smiles in response to hers. He set the food on the ground, rose, and then retraced his steps back to the crackling campfire where the others were settling in for the night.

Luci's eyes remained glued to his imposing figure. Once seated by a distant rock, he abruptly glanced up as if sensing her stare. It was too late to look away for his eyes caught hers in a vise. He motioned with an imperceptible nod at her food. After giving him another faint smile, she began to eat. Moments later, she glanced up to find him still staring.

Ravenously, Luci ignored him and gulped down the stew-like mixture. She had no idea what animal supplied the grizzly texture but guessed it to be a rabbit. On the whole, the meal was surprisingly tasty and filling. There were all kinds of leafy unknowns floating in the muddy gravy, probably local weeds. Regardless of the content, Luci ate every bite and then rubbed her gooey hands in the grass. She sighed despondently as she was still hungry, but she was afraid to seek a second helping.

After sliding her wooden bowl away, Luci let her tired head droop. It was impossible not to shiver, and her tiny shoulders were huddled against the cool dampness of a mountain night. There was no way she would venture near the

campfire to get warm. In the distance, an owl hooted. Then a coyote howled unnervingly.

A troubled sleep finally seized her heavy eyes. God was with her, she murmured over and over, still hearing the clacking wheels of the stagecoach.

*Behold, the Lord's hand is not so short
that it cannot save;
neither is His ear so dull
that it cannot hear.*

Isaiah 59:1

Chapter Four

Creating a craggy pattern of skeletal shadows, the penetrating rays of the morning sun pierced through the pine trees. Making it seem even more ghostlike, a soupy fog shrouded the encampment in a tomblike silence. Because her neck was stiff from its nighttime sentry against the damp boulder, Luci began stirring. Warily, she felt something rough and warm against her shoulders, and her eyes instantly flew open.

A hand woven, diamond patterned blanket had been tucked with care around her. Catching her by surprise, she smiled faintly, knowing her captor was responsible. Maybe it would be possible to look for his good qualities and not to dwell on the bloodbath of the previous day's slaughter. After all, there was no going back to life as it was before her abduction, and she had to come to terms with her precarious position. After setting a goal to grudgingly cooperate, Luci sat up to face the day.

Footsteps rustled in the underbrush, and she glanced up quickly through the fog. Her captor hovered over her like a phantom. He was no longer bare-chested but warmly wrapped in a poncho of two elk skins sewn together. The Indian squatted and from a beaded animal skin envelope, he extracted a powdery substance of dried meat pounded with cherries. Then he placed it in a bowl along with some narrow strips of hard meat.

With a dubious look, Luci stared at the unappetizing bowl. The Indian seemed surprised she didn't know it was food (she later learned it was called pemmican). It seemed he wondered where she'd been all her days.

Expressionlessly, her captor motioned her to eat. Testing her new approach, she nodded cooperatively and gave him a slightly braver smile than the day before. His black eyes flew to her face in distrust.

Although she felt foolish, Luci stared unflinchingly, keeping her small smile glued in place and challenging him to do the same. As if impossible to hold back, a faint smile traced sun-weathered lines on his bronzed face. Unwillingly, Luci thought he was almost handsome without his war paint, and she quickly shifted her attention to the bowl of dry food.

After voraciously chomping the crumbling mixture, she glanced up. Her captor was still staring. Luci thought she caught a flicker of amusement in his dark eyes, but every time she examined his face more closely, he masked his thoughts. It was almost as if he were playing mind games with her.

Maybe he's just thinking how gluttonous I am, she decided as she left for the woods. When Luci returned, he motioned her to his massive horse, and she silently groaned, knowing it was time to feel pain again.

After securing his bedroll and her blanket, the Indian easily mounted. Although she was shivering without the blanket's warmth, Luci hid her discomfort. Without balking, she took his extended hand and glided more skillfully than the previous day into the saddle. Luci was sure her graceful assent was more from his strength than her abilities.

Luci's arms drifted shyly around the Indian's lean waist, which was cloaked in soft elk skin. Suddenly, he laced his fingers through hers and pulled one of her hands possessively under his warm poncho. His long fingers enfolded her tiny hand with ownership, and it was her turn to be disarmed. Then after tugging her other arm to latch on tightly, it was back to the grueling business of primitive travel.

As the war party's horses gingerly climbed to higher elevations, the weather abruptly changed again. It was hard to believe it was spring. Clouds hovered at these altitudes, making the path dismal and windy, even dangerous. In the distance, thunder rumbled ominously.

Luci unconsciously trembled with the colder air, and her captor glanced inquisitively over his shoulder. Not wanting to show weakness, she lowered her eyes but then accidentally shivered again. The Indian, motioning the others to continue, pulled his horse to a halt and dismounted. He retrieved a blanket from his bedroll. After remounting, he handed it to her, and she wrapped it appreciatively around her shoulders. *Why would he help her?*

As they continued the laborious climb, Luci wearily leaned her head against the Indian's supple poncho. Through its thickness, his shoulder muscles strained with effort and in unison, their bodies angled forward to help the horse balance on the perilous incline.

From a windswept summit, the band had to pick its way down the other side, which was littered with small stones. Sensing the woman's fear of tumbling headlong, her captor anchored her arms more securely around him, and he leaned back in the saddle for more support. His weight was crushing but oddly comforting.

Fearing death at any minute from falling, Luci tried to concentrate on the beauty of the lush green forest with its carpet of blowing grass and wildflowers, all silhouetted in elongated shadows. But her physique was not built for endurance riding, and she heard herself groan with despair at the arduous course.

It appeared the Indian read her mind again as he ordered the group to dismount. After gracefully leaping to the ground, he obviously remembered the fiasco of the day before, and he turned to assist Luci. His strong arms slid around her waist, and he coaxed her down and cushioned her descent with his body. Regardless of his help, her knees buckled with fatigue, almost causing her to fall again. After taking

care of her personal needs, Luci mulled over her interactions with the Indian and wondered what it all meant.

As she saw his towering figure approach again, she glanced up ready to smile. Instead, Luci was shocked beyond anything she imagined. Her captor emotionlessly pulled her toward him and bound her hands with gnarled rope, its coarseness digging into her wrists. He spun her around harshly and tied a tether around her chest.

Never had Luci felt such betrayal! Her captor's eyes caught her hurt expression, which she quickly replaced with anger, and he glanced around to make sure no one was watching. Suddenly, his hand pulled her face tightly to his chest, and he whispered some soothing, unintelligible words in an Indian dialect. Instinctively, she knew his actions pained him. *Maybe he was going to kill her*, she concluded, bowing her head in defeat.

Although she expectantly waited for her execution, it never happened. All at once, however, Luci felt a slight tug on her rope, which was like a dog's leash. The Indian, who had remounted, began pulling her on foot, and the rest of the procession rode slowly across a broad meadow nestled against a mountain. The war party, including her captor, had repainted their faces and bodies with red dye as well as their horses.

Her captor had mounted the gruesome scalps from the stagecoach massacre onto his horse's bridle, and he proudly rode as a victor toward what looked like a distant encampment. His head held high and his shoulders back, he slowly dragged her, the captive, behind. *It was a humiliating experience*, she thought with resentment.

The group passed through a protective clump of spruce trees. Suddenly, there it was. *The Indian village!* Luci would never forget her first awed impression of the buffalo hide tepees dotting the landscape, their narrow pine poles like spears against the expanse of blue sky. Smoke curled languorously from the tepees to the blue spruce beyond.

A moment of truth hit Luci head-on. Without a doubt, this was her life now, and she would never be found. Swallowing her desolation, she squelched any submissiveness and determinedly squared her shoulders. *I'll show them*, she decided. With courage, the young white woman marched into the village under her own power.

Her captor led her to a splintered oak post near a clearing at the center of the tepees, and he tied her somewhat loosely to it. As the post's sharp, splintered wood pressed against her thinly clad form, Luci's back began to throb. The Indian once more tried to apologize with his eyes, but Luci refused to acknowledge him. Instead, she looked away with an indignant expression. As the only captive, she had to endure being on public display alone.

A celebration was underway for the victorious raiding party, and the villagers

gathered round to listen to the lengthy, undoubtedly grandiose tales of conquest. Displaying scalps and pointing to Luci, her captor did most of the talking. Finally, the group disbanded, some going to their tepees, and others examining the white hostage with hair of an unknown color.

The curious villagers did whatever they wanted to her. A few women touched her hair, and several partially naked children poked fingers at her body or wiped food on her dress. One teenager spat at her in anger, and another peeked at her undergarments.

The squaws were unusually reserved, a few pointing but rarely talking around the men. Whispering excitedly to one another, the young braves were the boldest. Several began stroking Luci's hair, and one even stared into her pale eyes from only inches away. Although it was difficult, Luci forced herself to show no emotion or reaction.

Instead, she gazed at the thick forest of evergreens and a snakelike river winding by. *It was a tranquil place*, she decided. *Why did violence have to dominate such a paradise? Wasn't there enough land to share in peace?*

As the afternoon sun dipped behind the coarse pine-needled treetops, shadows played tag with the encampment. The air became nippy and uninviting, and the dense forest darkened in an ominous glare. She'd been abandoned for a while now, and Luci began to feel faint from exhaustion and hunger. Suddenly, she slumped in unconsciousness against the beam, feeling it knife into her back.

Unknown to Luci, her captor was leaning against his tepee in the distance. Without interference, he warily observed her ordeal and allowed her to fulfill the custom of his village to publicly display its captives.

But privately, the Indian guarded the white woman with diligence. No overt action passed his steely eye and if the need presented itself, he was prepared to rescue her. He wasn't sure why he watched, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from the beautiful but fragile blond woman.

He saw her faint. As the woman's dead weight tugged against the beam, he knew the grainy rope could serrate her thin wrists. Her pale skin would be bruising and tearing the longer she remained unconscious, and her middle section, which was doubled over another rope, might be caused even more injury.

For whatever reason, he'd had enough. The woman was no threat to him or his village. Because he had chosen to spare her life, she was his possession now, no one else's. With fierce determination, the Indian marched to the post and sawed the woman's restraints with his hunting knife. A silent crowd watched him, but no one voiced an objection to his actions.

Like limp buckskin, the white woman crumpled in his arms. Her captor gathered her closer and then confronted the others with defiance. His black eyes glowered from face to face, daring anyone to question his authority. No one did!

The Indian left with his hostage.