



A Love Forbidden

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Prologue

Colorado Rockies, June, 1870

There were times—just a few—when Shiloh Wainwright truly, fervently hated her sister. And this, the twelve-year-old thought as she watched her older sibling take the half-breed Indian youth's hand and lead him into the barn, was one of those times.

Why in tarnation—her fists clenched the wooden post as she peered around the corral fence—did I think any good could come of Jordan making friends with Jesse? Once she works her wiles on him, he won't even know I exist, much less want to be my friend!

It had seemed such a good idea. Though Henry Wilson, their ranch foreman, had only hired the seventeen-year-old Jesse Blackwater two months ago, it hadn't taken long for Shiloh to convince the handsome youth to allow her to tag along while he did his chores. And, after a time of guarded interactions on Jesse's part, they had gradually formed a bond that had blossomed into an actual friendship. It was just as apparent, however, that their friendship was the only one he had made.

Shiloh puzzled over that for several days, before coming right out and asking Jesse about his lack of other friends. "Not everyone likes Indians, even those with half white blood," he soberly informed her. After digesting that surprising revelation—well, maybe not all *that* surprising, Shiloh admitted, recalling some remarks made in passing by certain schoolmates—she set to work remedying that problem.

Shiloh now watched the barn door slide shut behind Jesse and her sister, all the while recalling the plan she had hatched to help Jesse make friends. *The other hands just don't know him like I do*, she had thought. *They all sure want to get to know my sister better, though. Not only is Jordan older, but she's beautiful and without any ugly freckles like me.*

At fourteen, Jordan Wainwright caught the breath of every man who laid eyes upon her. Well, every man save her father and two stepbrothers, anyway, Shiloh amended. If she could get her sister to favor Jesse . . . well, every other man on the ranch would surely fall over himself to befriend the half-breed in the hopes of finding similar favor with Jordan.

After a few rough patches, the first stage of Shiloh's plan had seemed to be working. At first, Jordan had shown interest in Jesse as a favor, after Shiloh had hounded her mercilessly, regaling her with tales of Jesse's expertise in breaking the most unbreakable broncs and roping cattle no one else could even come near, and about all the tracking secrets he'd taught her. Well, after all that *and* the surrender of the precious music box their father had purchased for Shiloh on the day of her birth.

But she wasn't going to linger over something as material as even a beloved music box. What mattered, above all, were people. Loving them, helping them. Shiloh had always loved helping others.

And people around here needed a passel of help to see beyond Jesse's Ute Indian heritage to the good and wonderful person he was inside. A friend who ignored her coltish, clumsy body and homely face, her wild red hair and embarrassing overabundance of freckles. A friend who didn't discount her as the baby of the family but looked past it all to see straight into her heart. To see her on so many levels, to really *know* her and, in the bargain, like what he found.

One couldn't ask for more than that. All the same, Shiloh thought, her apprehension rising as the minutes ticked by and the barn door remained closed, she regretted—fiercely regretted—ever pushing Jordan to take notice of him.

Not that, at this point, there was much she could do about it. Jordan no longer talked to Jesse just as a favor to her. These days, her sister actually sought him out, stealing him away from Shiloh at every opportunity. And something no longer seemed quite right about her motives.

For several minutes more, Shiloh waited for the pair to reappear. Then, with a disgruntled sigh, she turned and headed back to the white frame ranch house. She had laundry to take down and she'd better do it soon, she thought, casting a glance at the gray clouds building over the valley. Emma, their housekeeper, wouldn't be happy if the freshly laundered bedding she'd hung out this morning got wet all over again.

Fifteen minutes later, a basket load of folded sheets resting on her hip, Shiloh headed through the back door and into the house. She deposited the basket on the kitchen table and glanced around, wondering where everyone had gone. The murmur of voices rose from the front of the house, so she set off in that direction. At the open entry door stood Emma and Mary, Shiloh and Jordan's mother.

"Do you think we should get Mr. Nicholas?" Emma was asking their mother. "With Mr. Edmund gone to town, I mean."

Mary gave a sharp nod. "Yes. There's no one else with enough authority to stop that brute. He certainly won't listen to either of us."

As Shiloh opened her mouth to ask what they were talking about, a sharp crack shattered the silence. She edged closer and glanced around the two women standing in the doorway.

“What’s going on? Who’s using that old bullwhip of Pa—”

Her breath caught in her throat. At the corral not more than fifty yards away, the same corral she’d hidden behind just a short time ago, someone was tied, hands over his head, to a tall fence post. He faced away from her, his shirt ripped open, and several oozing lash marks crisscrossed his bare back.

Even as she and the two other women watched in horror, Henry Wilson threw back the hand holding the whip. Then, in a swift, hard motion, he snapped it forward. As the thin piece of leather met flesh, the recipient of the whip went rigid, then reared back in agony. Not a sound, however, passed his lips.

The tilt of the head in that single, swift moment gave away the victim’s identity. It was Jesse.

“No!” she whispered on a swift, sudden exhalation of breath. “No!”

In the split second between realization and action, her mother grabbed for her. Shiloh was too fast. She dodged the outstretched hand and scooted instead around Emma.

“Shiloh! Don’t!” Mary Wainwright cried, but Shiloh was already across the front porch and scrambling down the steps.

“Emma, go after her,” Shiloh heard her mother say, but then the sickening sound of the bullwhip meeting flesh once again filled the air. Everything around her narrowed, converging on the sight of Jesse yet again jerking in silent agony.

Her booted feet pounded against the dry earth, sending up puffs of dust with each stride she took. Her arms pumped furiously.

Jesse. I’ve got to reach him. Protect him.

“S-stop!” she screeched even as she neared the half-circle of men who’d gathered around Jesse and the foreman. “Stop it! Stop hurting him!”

Henry Wilson paused in surprise, lowering the whip he’d raised yet again. When he caught sight of Shiloh, his gaze hardened.

“Someone. Anyone. Grab and hold her,” he snarled, then turned back to the task at hand, unfurling the bullwhip behind him.

A pair of hands nearest her reached out. Shiloh pivoted sharply, just managing to evade the man. She twisted, nearly losing her footing, then righted and threw herself between the foreman and Jesse, covering Jesse’s now ravaged and bleeding back with her own body.

“No! Blast you, girl!”

Shiloh shot a swift look behind her. Henry Wilson staggered backward in an attempt to halt the forward flight of the whip he'd just unfurled forward. Yet, though he threw all his weight into the effort, it was too late.

The whip's leather tip caught Shiloh a passing glance on her upper right cheek, slicing open a tiny cut. It burned like fire. She choked back a scream. If Jesse could take such punishment in silence, so could she.

"S-stop it!" As a thin stream of blood trickled down her face, Shiloh wheeled about to face the now panic-stricken foreman. "Stop it, right now!"

For a fleeting moment, Henry stared in disbelief. Then a firm resolve darkened his eyes. An angry flush gave color to his formerly pasty white face.

"Clay. Go. Get a hold of her. I aim to finish what I started. As long as I'm foreman of this ranch, no half-breed piece of trash is going to take liberties with the boss's daughter!"

The hand named Clay hurried to do what he was told. This time, Shiloh was too shocked to resist. He took her by both arms and pulled her away from Jesse, dragging her to stand behind the other men.

Liberties? With the boss's daughter?

The blood pounding through her brain, Shiloh fought to make sense of the man's words. Then, as comprehension flooded her, she turned, searching the gathering until she finally found her sister standing several feet behind the men.

Jordan's flawlessly groomed hair was mussed. High color pinkened her cheeks. She was, however, quite obviously unharmed. Their gazes met, and the look of guilt in her sister's eyes was almost instantly replaced by one of defiance.

Oh, how I know that look! Shiloh thought. *She uses that ploy all the time to wriggle out of any trouble she's gotten herself into.*

Fury filled her. "What did you do?" she shrieked at her sister. "This is all your fault, isn't it? Isn't it?"

Jordan gave a sharp shake of her head. "No. I went in the barn with Jesse, but I didn't cause any of this. He . . . he wouldn't leave me be. He wouldn't stop when I told him to stop . . ."

She couldn't quite manage to meet Shiloh's gaze at the end. Still, the action was so subtle Shiloh doubted anyone who didn't know her as well as she did would've caught it.

“Liar,” she muttered softly. Though no one heard the bitter accusation, the expression on her sister’s face changed ever so slightly, signaling her recognition of the charge. Shiloh turned away in disgust and began to struggle in the ranch hand’s clasp.

“Let me go. You’ve got no right—”

“Do as she says,” a deep voice intruded just then. “Let my little sister go.”

Clay froze, then turned in the direction from which the command had come. He looked to the brown-haired man sitting in a wicker wheelchair, Mary Wainwright behind him, then at Henry Wilson standing not far away, the bullwhip curled limply at his feet.

“S-sure thing, Mr. Wainwright.”

The foreman gave a quick jerk of his head. As if he’d been burned, the ranch hand released Shiloh. At the reprieve her stepbrother had bought her, she wasted not a moment. Running to Jesse’s side, she pulled out her small pocket knife, flipped it open, and began sawing at the rope binding his hands to the corral post.

“I’ll have you free in a minute. Just hold on, Jesse,” she whispered, leaning close to him.

He lifted his head, turned to look at her. The expression in his rich brown eyes chilled Shiloh to the marrow of her bones. Fury burned there. Fury overlaid with a soul-searing pain the like of which she’d never before seen.

It was as if a blade had sliced clear through to her soul.

“Jesse. Oh, Jesse . . .”

Then the bonds fell away. With a shuddering breath, Jesse forced himself to straighten. Then, ever so slowly, he turned to face them all.

“I’m sorry about all this, son,” Nicholas Wainwright, oldest son of the ranch’s owner, said. “Come on up to the house and let us see to those wounds.”

“No.”

Shiloh reached toward him. “Please, Jesse. If they’re not cared for, those wounds could fester and become infected.”

“No!” He jerked back, shaking his head with a savage intensity. “Don’t touch me. Don’t any of you touch me!”

On unsteady feet, he headed to where his unsaddled horse was tied near the barn, unfastened the reins, and swung up on the animal’s bare back. For a long moment Jesse just sat there, hunched over in pain, the loose, blood-soaked bits that remained of his shirt fluttering in

the breeze. Then, with what Shiloh knew must be a superhuman effort, he straightened. Gathering up the reins, Jesse turned his horse in the direction of the road leading from the ranch.

Clutching the tooled silver eagle hanging from the chain around her neck—a gift he had given her just a few days ago—she watched him ride away. For the longest time Shiloh stood there, her heart cracking open in her chest, immobilized in horrified disbelief. Finally, though, the blood began to course once more through her frozen limbs. With a wild cry, she ran after him only to be scooped up by one of the ranch hands and hauled back to the house.

Inconsolable, Shiloh bawled for days. Then she tucked away the memory of Jesse Blackwater into a secret place in her heart and forced herself to think no more of him. Not so with her sister, whom she couldn't forgive for the part she'd played that terrible day.

She tried, oh, how Shiloh tried, but she just couldn't.

Castle Mountain Ranch, Colorado Rockies, early March 1879

“Mark my words, Shiloh Wainwright. It’s bad enough you’ve thrown the whole family into an uproar with this rash decision to quit your job in Denver and head out to that Indian Agency. But your head-in-the-clouds need to save the savage Utes is going to be the death of you yet. And that,” Jordan added, one dark blonde brow arched in a knowing look, “will be the very *best* you can hope for.”

It never stops, does it? Shiloh clamped down hard on her rising irritation. Lowering her gaze, she folded yet another skirt and placed it in her leather travel trunk standing beneath the window of her former bedroom. *No matter how old we get, she’s always going to try and have the last word. And maintain her bossy ways and superior airs.*

The fact that they were both young women now—Jordan married and the mother of a six-month-old baby girl, and Shiloh to be twenty-one years old the beginning of next month—hadn’t softened the long simmering animosity between the sisters. Two years of teacher’s education, plus another six months instructing at that fancy girls’ boarding school in Denver, still didn’t hold a candle to Jordan’s greater age.

No matter that her sister had been quite content to finish school and immediately wed her longtime beau, while Shiloh had gone on for a higher education. No matter that, while *she* possessed the means to support herself, independent of any man, Jordan was now but a simple wife and mother. Indeed, there were times when Shiloh wondered if her sister was as content with the life she had chosen as she claimed that she was.

There were no more adoring suitors to stroke her eternally inflated self-esteem. Well, none, anyway, who’d dare risk revealing their admiration in the presence of her sister’s hulking, ever-possessive husband, Robert Travers. Indeed, thanks to her husband, in many ways Jordan’s ability to come and go as she pleased was severely limited these days. And her sister had never been one to tolerate any constraints on what she could and couldn’t do.

Maybe that was why Jordan seemed so dead set against her heading off on yet another adventure, Shiloh mused, corralling her thoughts and herding them back to the present. Why, when her two stepbrothers had sent word of Shiloh’s arrival and surprising plans, her sister had hightailed it from her own home twenty miles to the southwest of here. Because marriage and motherhood were choking the life out of her. Because she wanted—and wanted desperately—to be as footloose and fancy-free as her younger sister.

The possibility filled Shiloh with a grim satisfaction. For once, just once, her older sister might actually envy her. Might desire something only her younger sister could have.

“Head in the clouds, notwithstanding,” Shiloh replied, restraining a smug grin with only the greatest of efforts, “taking the job at the White River Ute Indian Agency is what I aim to do. So

maybe we should agree not to discuss the matter further. You've got your opinions. I'm not going to budge. And there's plenty of other topics far more pleasant. Like, did little Cecilia enjoy her new rattle? I thought it was so pretty, with those pink and red roses painted on the white porcelain."

For a moment, Jordan looked as if she wasn't ready to relinquish their current discussion. Then, with a sigh and shake of her head, she apparently let the topic go.

"Yes, I think my Ceci will love it, once she's older. I know you can't understand the ways of babies, not having one of your own, but if I were to give it to her now she'd soon have it in a million pieces." A self-righteous smile lifted her sister's lips. "So, I'll put it away for a time. It's far too pretty to risk breaking."

Shiloh chose not to rise to the bait. One way or another, Jordan was determined to win every argument. Instead, she walked to the dresser and picked up an armload of books. Her precious books that she'd use to teach the Ute Indian children.

The image of dark eyes peering intently back at her from sun-bronzed faces filled her mind. One of the few Indian bands that had yet to be torn from their beloved lands and relegated to the dreaded "Indian Territory" in Utah, the White River Utes were a free-spirited and intelligent people. Her old nursemaid, a Ute Indian and Buckskin Joe's wife, had regaled her for years with tales of their life and culture. Thanks to Kanosh, Shiloh also spoke fairly decent Ute. Her impressive educational credentials and glowing recommendation from her last job notwithstanding, she suspected that her knowledge of the Ute language had most helped sway Nathan Meeker, the White River Agency's Indian agent, to hire her.

Currently, his daughter, Josephine, though not teacher trained, was struggling to set up classes for the Ute Indian children. Her success so far, however, had been minimal. Apparently the Utes were suspicious of the effects of the white man's education on their children. They feared it would incline their offspring to leave the traditional Ute ways and the reservation.

It was expected, however, that Shiloh's professional training would be sufficient to induce better attendance at the Agency school. Still, for a fleeting instant, Shiloh wondered if she perhaps hadn't "oversold" herself and her abilities. Though she firmly believed education was the only hope for the Utes' survival in a world rapidly changing around them, she wasn't certain she could single-handedly alter their opinion of what they wanted versus what they truly needed.

One couldn't know if one didn't try, though. And she'd never been one to shy away from a challenge. Especially not one that meant so much to her as this one did. With all her heart, Shiloh wanted to help the Ute Indians, to make a difference in their lives. A difference that would educate not only their minds but also their hearts with the knowledge of the love of the Lord Jesus Christ.

"You do what you deem best with that rattle," she said as she carefully placed the books in one corner of her trunk. "And, in the future, I'll try to purchase more appropriate gifts for little Cecilia."

Jordan rose from her spot on the edge of the bed. “That would be appreciated.” Her glance strayed to the necklace dangling from Shiloh’s open-necked blouse as she leaned over to tuck a box of fountain pens and bottles of black ink in the upper corner of her trunk.

Shiloh looked up just in time to catch the direction of her sister’s gaze and the resulting grimace of distaste. “What’s the matter now, Jordan?” she asked wearily.

“That Indian trinket you insist on wearing along with the cross of Christ. Do you have any idea how sacrilegious that must appear to anyone who sees it?”

As her hand rose to protectively clasp the small silver eagle suspended from the same chain as her silver cross, Shiloh stiffened in anger. “Not only do I cherish these in honor of my two dearest friends,” she said tautly, “but because the Indians revere the eagle as a carrier of prayers and for its special connection to the Creator. So I hardly find it sacrilegious or unworthy to hang alongside the cross.”

“Well, I’m willing to bet some of the folks who work at that Indian Agency will think differently. But suit yourself. You’ve never been one to listen to those older and wiser—”

In that instant, something in Shiloh frayed and broke. Her patience, most likely. She’d never been overly patient.

“Enough, Jordan!” She slammed down the lid of her travel trunk and stood there, her hands fisted at her sides. “It never ends with you, does it? The constant belittling? The poorly contained, eternal displeasure?”

Her sister’s mouth dropped open in surprise. “I-I was just—”

“No. Don’t say it.” Shiloh held up a silencing hand. “I don’t give a tinker’s darn *what* you think you meant! I’m leaving for the White River Agency tomorrow morning, and nothing you can say will sway me from that intent. So, let’s try and make the passing hours between us pleasant, if not for the sake of our relationship, then for the sake of our family.”

“Fine.” Jordan’s mouth snapped shut. Her lips thinned to a white line. “I’ll see you at supper then.” With an indignant toss of her blonde head, she stomped from the room.

Shiloh rolled her eyes. Leave it to her sister to take offense whenever she didn’t get her way. Shiloh was mightily, mightily tired of the games and manipulations. The only blessing in any of this was she no longer had to live with Jordan or long endure her silly, self-centered tantrums.

Her mouth quirked in wry realization. If only Jordan realized how great was Shiloh’s desire to run off to be with the savage Utes! Especially in comparison to enduring even one more day in *her* irksome presence.

Surprisingly mollified, Shiloh completed her packing, then headed downstairs for a bit of fresh air before supper. The independent life definitely had its benefits. And one not so insignificant one was she was no longer compelled to put up with the likes of her sister.

The Ute brave known as Nuaru paused on a rise overlooking the valley where the White River Indian Agency lay. Below and south of him, past a large fenced and plowed field, spread a small community of buildings neatly laid out in a north-south pattern.

First and foremost was the granary, community well, and agent's house. A long dirt street separated all that from the adobe-walled milk house. Directly south of the agent's house were the employee quarters, and across the street from them were the storerooms that held all the annuity supplies that were periodically and, at least from the Utes' view, very parsimoniously doled out. Next came another storeroom building and a boardinghouse.

Just before the White River carved its undulating way south lay the tepees of Chief Douglas's band, a large pony corral, and the house and tepees of Chief Johnson. Though Nuaru generally preferred to keep as wide a distance between Agent Meeker and himself as he could, he had agreed to spend the next few days with his best friend, Persune, who was part of Douglas's camp. And, now that he'd delivered all the slain mule deer but one to his own chief, that time was finally upon him.

Admittedly, Chief Douglas wasn't any more fond of Meeker than was Nuaru's chief, Captain Jack. But Douglas and most of his band *were* overly fond of the annuity handouts of flour, oats, plug tobacco, and blankets that Meeker dispensed on an almost weekly basis, and so settled for Agency living. Despite Nuaru's repeated warnings that these government supplies came with a price, and that price was the ultimate surrender of the Ute way of life, few were willing to listen. But then, he thought bitterly, they had yet to experience how swiftly—and viciously—the white man could turn on his Indian brother.

Today, however, Nuaru was compelled to enter the Agency. And, tomorrow, the first day of spring, was the official start of the annual Bear Dance. On that day, no Ute male was exempt from the ceremonies, nor allowed to refuse any woman who asked him to dance. At least not if he wished to avoid having a bear later find him in the mountains and kill him, Nuaru thought with a wry twist of his lips.

He nudged his pony down the rock-strewn incline, pulling the pack horse loaded with the remaining mule deer carcass with which he intended on gifting Chief Douglas. Just a few days in the oppressive atmosphere of the White River Agency, he promised himself. Then he'd be free, once more, to come and go as he pleased. Or rather, come and go until the white man no longer pleased.

“You'll like Josie Meeker. Everyone does.”

Two weeks later, and for the umpteenth time, Shiloh swatted a maddeningly persistent fly from the vicinity of her nose, adjusted the broad brim of her straw hat to minimize the sun on her face, and glanced over at the man who sat beside her on the big freight wagon bench, driving the team of four mules before him. Joe Collum, hired to bring in some farm equipment from Rawlins, Wyoming, to the White River Agency, seemed a decent enough sort, if a bit loquacious. She'd been fortunate to hear about his pending Agency trip when her train had arrived in Rawlins, and she'd soon run into him loading supplies. If not for him, Shiloh would've been compelled to hire someone to take her the rest of the way.

Though she'd have far preferred just admiring the scenery on the way south back into Colorado to the Agency, Shiloh did her best to keep up some semblance of a conversation with the man. He was likely a bit hungry for womanly conversation, she supposed, if the scant amount of females in these mountain towns was any indication. And, though she was no Jordan Wainwright, Shiloh knew she had finally grown into a passably attractive young lady. Well, that was what several suitors for her hand in those months teaching in Denver had said, anyway. But then, the severe shortage of women in these parts probably helped to make even the plainest female seem pretty attractive.

No matter. She wasn't looking for or even wanting a husband. She had more important—more worthwhile—plans than tying herself down to a man and a passel of squalling babies. Not that she had anything against babies or a husband . . . someday. But not now. And not anytime soon.

“So, you've met Josie Meeker, have you?” she asked, now that Joe had finally introduced a topic that piqued her interest.

The big freight driver nodded. “Yep. To be honest, she's not quite the looker you are, ma'am, but she's tall, slender, with dark blonde hair and a straight, no-nonsense air about her that sets well with most men. And, if there's a need, there's nothing that gal won't take on.” He chuckled. “Word is she was quite the tomboy in her youth.”

In her youth . . . Shiloh smiled to herself. Josephine Meeker—the only one of three surviving Meeker children to come with Nathan Meeker and his wife, Arvilla, to live at the White River Agency—was barely a year older. Shiloh hoped the closeness of their age and the fact they were both college-educated, independent women would lead to a fast friendship.

“Yep,” Joe continued on, apparently oblivious to the fact that the conversation was again rapidly becoming one-sided. “I even heard tell that Miss Josie used to challenge the boys to horse races in the streets, when she lived in Greeley with her family.”

“Well, then we'll have a lot to talk about,” Shiloh replied, giving a firm nod. “I grew up on a cattle ranch and know my way around horses. It'll be fun to have someone to go riding with.”

“Well, beggin' yore pardon, ma'am, but that might not be all that safe, what with the problems of late with the Utes, and—”

Just then, they topped yet another hill. The mule team paused. Below them spread a small, verdant valley, pierced on its southern end by a river. It was the tidy layout of buildings, corrals, and a scattering of tepees, however, that took Shiloh's breath away. She turned to the freight driver.

"It's the Agency, isn't it?"

He nodded, then slapped the reins over the backs of the mules, urging them forward. "Yep, sure is. Another ten minutes or so, and you'll finally be home."

Home . . . The word had an unexpectedly foreign ring to it. Shiloh swallowed hard, suddenly overcome with a wave of homesickness overlaid with an acute edge of trepidation. This was it. She was here, and now reality must substitute for all her dearly held dreams. But what if . . . what if things didn't turn out as she hoped? What if she wasn't sufficient to the task at hand?

With a resolute shake of her head, Shiloh banished the doubts and fears. Nothing was served allowing such thoughts to undermine her confidence. She would do the best she could, changing the things within her power and finding peace and acceptance with what couldn't be changed. That was all anyone could do. The rest was in the Lord's hands.

As they headed down the hill, someone apparently gave word of their approach. A small crowd formed outside what must be the Agency office, if the American flag flying there was any indication. A distinguished-looking older man—gray-haired and who appeared to be in his early sixties—with an older woman of similar years at his side, stood directly beneath the flagpole. A younger woman with two small children walked up to halt nearby. And then, a slender, dark-blond-haired woman, drying her hands with a dish towel, strode from the building just down from the Agency office.

"That's Miss Josie," Joe offered. "The tall one in the white blouse and blue skirt."

"And the older man and woman?" Shiloh leaned toward him, as they were almost within earshot. "I assume they're Nathan and Arvilla?"

"Yep."

She shot the big freighter a quick glance. The clipped way he had replied was out of character, and she wondered why. It almost seemed as if . . . as if he wasn't overly fond of the senior Meekers. If so, was it both or just one?

Shiloh was tempted to ask him, but it was too late. Joe Collum, even then, was leaning back, pulling the mules to a halt.

All eyes turned in the direction of Nathan Meeker. With a squaring of his shoulders, he stepped forward and offered his hand to Shiloh. She took it and climbed down from the wagon.

“Welcome, Miss Wainwright,” Nathan said, his voice cultured and mellifluous. “We’ve been awaiting your arrival with the greatest anticipation. Haven’t we, my dear?” he asked, half-turning to the older woman standing behind him.

She walked up and nodded. “Yes, indeed we have.”

“May I introduce myself?” he next said. “I am Nathan Cook Meeker, the agent for the White River Indian Agency. And this is my beloved wife, Arvilla Delight Meeker.”

Shiloh accepted the woman’s proffered hand. “It’s so wonderful to finally make both your acquaintances. I’ve been looking forward to working with you.”

“Well, no more than *I’ve* been looking forward to working with *you*,” the dark blonde young woman said, pushing her way past the others standing about. “Though I dearly love trying to recruit and teach the Ute children, with all the other tasks Father’s assigned me, I must confess I’m in dire need of assistance.”

She thrust out her hand to Shiloh, her blue eyes sparkling. “I’m Josephine Meeker. Everyone, though, calls me Josie, so you should too. And you did know, didn’t you, that you’ll be helping with the meals at the boardinghouse, and with the weekly laundry, and maybe even with some doctoring if you’ve got the skills?”

“Josie, why don’t you show Miss Wainwright to her room and help her get settled in?” her father brusquely interjected just then. “Time enough later to drown her with an excess of information.”

His daughter laughed. “As you wish, Papa.” She looked to Shiloh. “Did you bring a trunk or something with all your things?”

Shiloh nodded. “Yes, a trunk and a carpetbag.” She turned to the freight driver. “Could you hand me my traveling bag? And see that someone brings my trunk to wherever my new lodgings will be?”

“Sure thing, ma’am.” Joe tipped the brim of his big, floppy hat at her. “It was a pleasure traveling with you, ma’am.”

“I enjoyed your company as well, Mr. Collum.”

“Well, now that *that’s* settled,” Josie said, grabbing hold of Shiloh’s arm, “let’s get you to your new room. Supper’s in an hour, so you’ll have just enough time to unpack a bit and freshen up. But only if we hurry.”

Shiloh had to quickly lengthen her stride to keep up with the long-legged Josie. So much for proper introductions and getting to meet everyone right off, she thought. But maybe it was for the best. She really was travel weary, and it’d be nice to settle in a bit before supper.

Then, if all went well, she might be able to make an early day of it. Right about now, a nice bed in a quiet room sounded the closest thing to heaven she'd find on this earth. The stopover last night in that tiny town hadn't yielded the most comfortable of sleeping quarters. Not upstairs of the town's only saloon, which didn't close down until at least three or four in the morning. Indeed, even the prior nights of sleeping under the stars had provided better rest.

"You mustn't take offense when Papa gets a little short," Josie said just then, wrenching Shiloh's thoughts back to the present. "He's just under such duress at times, trying his mightiest to please the Utes and the Indian Bureau. And believe me, most times what the Utes want is in direct opposition to what the Indian Bureau wants."

"And what would those opposite desires be?" Shiloh asked as they passed two buildings across from each other and then headed for the one in the southeastern most corner of the little complex.

"The Utes want to live as they've always lived, free to hunt and roam as the seasons dictate. And the Indian Bureau wants them to give up their ancient ways, settle down on reservations, and become farmers."

"That does sort of put your father smack in the middle, doesn't it?"

Josie nodded. "Yes, it does. Unfortunately for the Utes, my papa pretty much agrees with the Indian Bureau. And when he sets his mind on a task . . ." She shook her head. "Suffice it to say, I feel sorry for the Utes."

She paused at the door to a two-story building that appeared to be newly built. "Well, enough of the politics. Come on in and let me show you your room."

That was a very interesting bit of information, Shiloh thought as she followed Josie into a small foyer with a set of stairs at the back that led to the second floor. A colorful hooked rug graced the hardwood paneled floor, and a tiny carved wooden table stood just to the left of the door, set with a crystal vase adorned with a handful of pine bough greenery. It was all very charming and rather unexpected in such a high mountain valley so far from civilization.

As she followed her hostess up the stairs, however, she couldn't keep from harking back to Josie's most recent words. They were very interesting indeed, but best not delved into too deeply just now. She had plenty of time to get the lay of the land, figure out where everyone stood on things. And tomorrow was definitely soon enough to begin.

The next morning after a hearty breakfast of oatmeal, biscuits, ham, and eggs, Shiloh helped Josie and her mother clear the table in the boardinghouse dining room, scrape plates in the kitchen, then wash and dry the dishes. It was Shiloh's first opportunity to actually meet sixteen-year-old Flora Ellen Price, wife of Shadrach Price, an Agency employee who worked as a farmer, and little May and baby Johnnie, their two children. Though Flora had been in the group to welcome her yesterday, Josie had hurried Shiloh away before she could greet everyone. And

then Flora hadn't felt well that evening and so had missed the supper meal at the boardinghouse, where she and her family lived with most of the other employees.

Shiloh immediately liked the shy young woman and was heartened by the fact she'd have two potential friends in Flora and Josie. Hopefully, their companionship would help ease her transition into Agency life, which, at present, still felt rather foreign and awkward. So foreign and awkward that she hadn't slept well last night, even after unpacking all her things and attempting to make her bedroom as homey as she could.

But that was to be expected, she hastened to reassure herself. Her first job at the girl's school in Denver had been a challenging transition from her two years spent at teacher's training at Peru State Normal School in Nebraska. And, Shiloh sheepishly reminded herself, she'd nearly given up from severe homesickness and gone home while there.

She was a grown woman now, though, and would rather die a thousand deaths than slink back to Castle Mountain Ranch because of yet another bout of homesickness and the self-doubts that always seem to hover just below the surface of her self-sufficient, confident façade. Not to mention she'd never hear the end of it from Jordan. No, if it was the last thing she ever did, she'd finish out her year's contract. By then, she would have made a place for herself here or begun looking for employment elsewhere. She wasn't about to tuck tail and head home.

Josie entered the kitchen just then, returned from putting the clean dishes back in the cupboard in the dining room. "As soon as you're finished with those forks and knives," she said, glancing at the silverware Shiloh held, "we can head down to Chief Douglas's village by the river. They're getting ready for the first day of the Bear Dance."

Though Shiloh had heard of the Utes' traditional three- to four-day annual ceremony held in late March to celebrate the coming of spring, she had actually never seen one. All she really knew was that the Utes believed that the first spring thunder awakened the bear from his winter's hibernation, and that the dance would not only placate their friend, the bear, but awaken him for his hunting. The Bear Dance was a time to make new friends and rekindle old friendships. A time to thank the Creator for their surviving another harsh winter and to celebrate the renewal of life with the coming of spring.

Excitement filled her. This was why she had come to the White River Agency. To immerse herself in the Ute life and culture, to gain a deeper understanding of their needs, hopes, and dreams. It was the only way she might have a real chance at effecting any change in them and their lives. The only way she might be able to help them avoid the same sad fate as all the other Indian tribes, relegated to bleak, barren Indian reservations far from their ancestral lands, dependent on the United States government for even the food they ate.

Shiloh quickly finished drying the last of the silverware, placed the pieces in the drawer beside the sink, and put away the dish towel. "Give me a moment to run upstairs and get my coat and mittens," she said as she untied her bib apron and hung it on a peg near the wall cabinet. "I'll meet you in the entry."

“Don’t tarry,” Josie replied. “I want to get us a good spot where we can see everything.”

With a quick nod, Shiloh hurried from the kitchen and bounded up the stairs to her bedroom. Morning sun still streamed into her single, white-lace-trimmed curtained bedroom window, making the small space a bright, cheery place. A simple, iron-framed bed covered with one of her mother’s colorful handmade quilts graced the wall catty-corner to the window, and on the opposite wall, a plain little table with a chair served as her desk. Near the door was a chest of drawers with a mirror atop it. Her traveling trunk sat beneath the window, and though it provided a handy seat, the view of the storehouse across the street didn’t encourage a lot of time spent gazing outside.

She had yet to unpack all her books, or hang the few framed prints she had brought with her, or laid out the rag rug beside her bed, but her family photographs already sat on one corner of the table. Putting out the tintypes of her two older stepbrothers—Nicholas and Cord—as well as one of her now-deceased stepfather standing with her, Jordan, and their mother, and the very grainy one of her father, dressed in Union blue, taken just a few months before his death in a battle against the Confederates, was always one of the first things Shiloh did when she was away from home. The photographs were the closest thing to actually having her family with her, and their presence seemed to help lessen some of her homesickness.

She grabbed up the heavy, black woolen coat she’d left laying on top of her trunk and donned it. Briefly, Shiloh considered whether to bring along her knit hat, then decided against it. The day was cloudless, sunny, and no wind blew. She’d be warm enough in her coat, mittens, and wool skirt, in addition to a woolen vest over her pleated white blouse, woolen stockings, and boots.

Pausing before the chest of drawers, she did a quick check of her hair in the mirror. In a vain attempt to contain it, she had pulled back her dark-auburn, irrepressibly curly tresses at the nape of her neck and tied them with a black ribbon. Still, as hard as Shiloh had tried to tame the flighty mess, some of the shorter, more wayward tendrils escaped to frame her face.

She inwardly sighed. With the wild mane she possessed, not to mention its color, she was sure to be the center of attention with all the Utes. But it couldn’t be helped. The good Lord had His reasons for everything, and sooner or later even the Utes, who were certainly not used to curly red hair, would get used to it.

For an instant longer, Shiloh’s gaze caught on the silver chain that lay over her buttoned blouse, the silver cross and tooled eagle glinting at her throat. Jordan’s claim that it was sacrilegious to wear the two together echoed in her mind. Was her sister correct in her scathing assessment? Was she pushing the boundaries of good taste and decorum wearing the two together?

After a moment of indecision, Shiloh decided not to hide the necklace beneath her blouse. She was proud of both. Indeed, perhaps they might be of some help in bridging some of the cultural separation between the whites and Indians. If nothing else, the Utes should appreciate her honoring their beliefs by wearing one of their revered symbols.

The walk down to the White River from the Agency took about ten minutes, Josie chattering on about the Bear Dance preparations the whole way. “See that tall fence of sticks and branches?” she asked, pointing to a large circular brush corral between the river and Chief Douglas’s tepees. “The opening to it always faces east, and inside is where the Utes do their Bear Dance. The men and women line up facing each other, and then each line takes two large steps forward and then three small steps back, everyone moving in unison. The men build the enclosure and make all the other preparations, including the feast afterwards, to honor the women.”

Shiloh shot her a quick grin. “It’s nice to see that some men, anyway, like to cook. Our own people could stand to learn that custom.”

Josie laughed. “Well, don’t go getting your hopes up that Ute men are any different than white men. In the Ute culture, cooking the food is usually the woman’s job. All the men are expected to do is provide the food. And, aside from protecting his family when the need arises, that’s pretty much all Ute men do. Well, aside from racing their ponies.”

She paused, her smile fading. “My father had such high expectations of changing their ways when he first came to the Agency. He wanted to turn the Utes into progressive, self-sustaining farmers. So far, all my father’s been able to get them to do is dig one irrigation ditch, and to get them to do even that, he had to threaten to withhold their supplies. Now, he just shakes his head and says they’re lazy.”

Unease rippled through Shiloh, and she quickly ignored it. Nathan Meeker’s letter in response to her application for the teaching position had certainly not made mention of such difficulties. He had, instead, written a glowing account of all he’d accomplished since his arrival last July, and all he still intended to do to help the heretofore nomadic White River Utes adapt to a farming lifestyle. His letter had excited and inspired Shiloh, who had always wanted to play a part in helping the Indians of Colorado.

Whether the Utes realized it or not, their days of roaming their beloved mountains were numbered. Since the end of the War Between the States, the influx of settlers seeking a fresh start was rapidly growing. And, with the discovery of gold deep in the southern Utes’ territory of the San Juan Mountains of Colorado in 1858, soon followed by the unearthing of additional gold and silver veins throughout the Rocky Mountains, the relentless onslaught of miners had only compounded the problem. The Ute way of life required they have a vast territory to roam in pursuit of game and other food, and the white interlopers couldn’t understand why such a small number of people needed such large amounts of land. Sooner or later, these two opposing ways of life were bound to clash. Unfortunately, past events had already proven that the Utes wouldn’t come out well.

“It takes time—and education—to change long-held beliefs,” Shiloh replied instead. “Surely we can find some common ground on which to build a mutually respectful relationship. The Utes are as much God’s children as we are, after all.”

“Yes,” Josie said with a nod, “they are. Father isn’t very good, though, at hiding his opinion of the Utes as exactly that. Children. And they resent him for that, among other things.”

Shiloh sighed. “The ones I’ve known have been far from childish. They’re kind, friendly, generous people. But they’re also proud and fiercely independent.”

“Oh, you won’t get any argument from me on those counts,” her companion said with a chuckle as they neared the brush corral and a crowd of Utes milling around outside. “I like them very much.”

There was an air of excitement mixed with much laughter and joviality in the colorfully dressed people slowly filing into the enclosure. The women wore moccasins and long, soft, white buckskin dresses covered with buckskin capes that were beaded with porcupine quills and elk teeth, the sleeves of the dresses fringed, as were the hems. Their long, thick, black hair was parted in the middle and either hung loose or in two braids. The men were garbed in heavily fringed buckskin shirts with the traditional V flap in front, and fringed leggings with moccasins on their feet. Some of them decorated their braids with animal fur coverings, and others wore their braids unadorned.

“Those are their ceremonial clothes,” Josie offered. “Usually the men wear trade cloth shirts with their leggings, and the women’s dresses can be a combination of trade cloth and buckskin. When it’s really cold, they add buffalo robes and fur hats or robes made from gray wolf or coyote or badger fur.”

“But not today,” Shiloh added with a smile.

“No, not today. Their buckskin clothes are pretty warm, and it’s not that cold.”

Josie paused to survey the Utes inside the corral. “Oh, good,” she said at last. “There’s Persune. He’s a member of Chief Douglas’s band.” Her mouth tilted upward in a smile. “He’s married, but he keeps asking me to be his wife. He says he loves me.”

Shiloh looked over at her. “And are you going to accept his offer?”

Her companion giggled. “No. Though I like and respect the Utes, I’m not interested in permanently living like one. When Papa’s time here is over, I’d like to travel and maybe find some sort of government work in our nation’s capital. I don’t want to be tied down to any man. Leastwise, not for a long while to come.”

“Me, neither,” Shiloh replied with a resolute nod. “Not for a long while to come.”

Josie grabbed her arm and began to pull her forward. “Let’s go stand with Persune and his friends. The Bear Dance is about to start.”

As they wound their way through the Utes who were beginning to take their seats around the outer edges of the corral—the men sitting on the north side, the women on the south—others

moved forward to form the two lines facing each other in the center. Several older Ute men sitting beneath a brush shelter on the western end of the corral began to sing and scrape a short piece of wood down a long, notched stick. The sound was harsh and rasping.

Shiloh knew the notched stick, in the Ute language, was called a *morats*, and was supposed to imitate a growling bear. The *morats* was a special ceremonial tool only used for the Bear Dance.

As they neared the spot where Persune stood talking with two other Ute men, one of the men, much taller than his compatriots, turned slightly in their direction. For a moment, he seemed not to take much notice of their approach. Then he abruptly stopped and blatantly stared at them. Or, rather, stared at Shiloh.

An expression of disbelief then shock, as his gaze traveled from her hair to her face to finally rest at her throat, swept over his face. Shiloh felt the blood rush to her cheeks. She had expected some unwelcome gaping at her red hair, but this Indian's response bordered on outright rudeness. Her eyes narrowed in irritation and, unconsciously, her hand rose to the base of her neck. As her fingers brushed the cross and eagle hanging there, a sudden realization shot through her.

She looked back up at the tall Ute, whose own eyes at that moment lifted to lock gazes with hers. Eyes that were the most intense, rich shade of brown she'd ever seen. Eyes she'd recognize anywhere, even after all these years.

Shiloh's throat went dry. Her heart began a wild hammering in her chest. And, with the greatest difficulty, she forced a name to her lips that she hadn't uttered in almost nine years.

"Jesse," Shiloh whispered. "Jesse . . ."

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