

Mountain Stronghold:

Sanctuary

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CHAPTER ONE
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Colorado Territory

As she lashed her laboring horse with the reins, Maryan drew in ragged gulps of air, her whole body constricted by fear. The bitter wind coming off the jagged mountains had loosened her hair and battered her face with stinging particles of snow. She risked a glance back and the painted renegade's face filled her whole view.

He crowded his running pony close. His knee rammed into her soft thigh, nearly unseating her. Before she could regain her balance, steel fingers tangled into her billowing hair and she was dragged off the plunging horse. The smashing impact with the cold ground enveloped her in a dizzying burst of pain and threatening blackness. Staving off the numbing paralysis, she struggled to her feet as her assailant wrenched his pony to a skidding halt and leaped down. She shrieked, kicking and hitting at him. He grabbed her hair and yanked her back to the ground at his feet. He flung himself on her ramming his knee into her stomach.

His weight held her down and all she could see were the slashes of war paint on his face. *Her life couldn't end like this - ravaged and murdered!* Desperately, she tried to drag breath into her aching lungs but the fringes of blackness were closing in. The stench of his unwashed body and greasy hair gagged her. Cold air rushed over her body as he ripped at her dress.

Barely conscious, she sank her teeth into the muscles of the painted arm. He reared back and everything exploded into blinding flashes of pain as his fist clubbed the side of her head.

She felt his body stiffen and then his weight was gone. She rolled to her knees, escape her only thought. *She had to get away!* As she struggled to her feet, she was seized and held fast. Screaming, she fought wildly. A glimpse of her captor's face doubled her terror. *It was another Indian!*

Ignoring her panic, he turned towards the horses, holding her tightly. A second man was jerking a knife out of the painted renegade. He flung the corpse down and swiftly swung aboard his waiting horse, the wind whipping his long black hair and beard. He was even larger and more fearsome than the renegade, now lying crumpled and still. She was handed up and firmly settled on the front of the saddle.

She pulled wildly at the strong arm holding her, screaming "No, no!" fighting to get free.

"Stop that," a deep voice growled. She looked up and was fixed by a commanding look from bright blue eyes. *Blue eyes?* Her breath caught on a sob.

His arm wrapped tightly around her, the bearded man kned his horse into a spinning turn. The horse leaped forward. Shocked into silence, Maryan stiffened against him as the horse flattened into an all-out run.

Talons of fear clutched at her. Defilement and death had been staring her in the face just seconds before. At least she was still alive, not ravaged or murdered yet, but she still shook with terror.

Every muscle in her body clenched as she became aware of the rider pounding along beside them. He wore no war paint, but he was an Indian. *God help her, she was still in the hands of the savages!*

Strength surrounded her and a deep voice rumbled in her ear. "Be still, we aren't going to hurt you. We need to make it to the mountains. That war party is headed this way and they're coming fast. They haven't seen us yet."

Realizing she was totally helpless against this big man, she tried to go with the rhythm of the running horse so the pounding in her head would lessen. Even if she could break free somehow and throw herself off, they would have her back in a moment. She was trapped! She sat tensely, held firmly against his broad hard chest.

Snow was beginning to fall faster in big fat flakes and between her aching head and the obscuring snow, she shut her eyes and just tried not to think. Shivering in her cotton dress, she hugged her arms to herself, trying to hold in a little warmth. She stiffened when she felt his arm leave her waist and begin to unbutton his sheepskin greatcoat. When he opened it and tucked her inside, she felt his heat and turned her upper body towards him. In spite of her fear, she put her arms around his waist, warming her hands against him as he rebuttoned the coat around them both. She was so cold and he was so warm. Everything still had a nightmare quality and her head hurt so much. Each beat of her heart echoed the throb of pain in her head. He smelled of sweat and male, but there was an underlying trace of lavender. Her head hurt too much to even wonder about it.

He held her shivering body close against his chest, but the feel of her softness against him kindled an unwanted surge of desire that made him groan inwardly. The horses lunged beneath them as they forded the river at the foot of the mountains and turned up into the trees, slowing only when they were well hidden. His arm muscles flexed as he pulled the horse to a stop and reined him around.

Turning to peer from the warmth of the sheepskin coat, Maryan looked back the way they had come, trying hard to focus her eyes. A long way off through the now steadily falling snow, she could just make out the smoke spiraling from the burning wagons. Barely visible in the distance, she could see the ordered column of the cavalry troop for which her train had been praying.

Sorrow choked her throat like a stone. Well, they wouldn't get there in time for her friends. She covered her face with her hands and sobbed, remembering the cacophony of terror she had heard from the direction of the wagon train. Their screams battered around in her head and she slammed her hands over her ears, as if that would mute them.

Her sobs faded down to a sniffling ache. She held herself stiffly in the circle of the big bearded man's arms. Had she been truly saved or given into a different kind of captivity?

He looked down at her and she could see his mouth quirk through the heavy mustache. His bearded face was streaked with sweat and dirt, but she could almost swear those piercing blue eyes twinkled. The rumble of his voice enclosed her.

"We're safe now. Wish we could take you back to your people, now that the soldiers are coming, but that war party's headed this way and there are too many of them. We need to keep moving."

Maryan wanted to argue, wanted to insist that she must go back, but everything was fuzzy and when the horse moved, the pain in her head blotted out all other thoughts.

He wheeled his horse and they continued up the mountain, moving at an angle through the trees till they came to a heavily traveled game trail. The horses followed it upstream to a waterfall.

When the horse moved beneath her, Maryan reluctantly burrowed against the solid wall of the man's chest, glad to be warm but unwilling to dwell on their destination. Her head hurt with a pulsing pain that muddied all her thoughts. This was a dream. She'd wake up in her bed tucked away in their wagon and all the blood and screams would be only a nightmare. Not real.

She heard the big horse splashing as he picked his way through rocks in a stream bed. Why were they crossing water again, way up here? She chanced a look as they skirted around behind a thundering waterfall and into a cave big enough for several mounted horsemen.

Maryan shrank against the warm solid man as the Indian rode past them deeper into the cave, stopping at a rock wall. Maryan caught her breath in surprise to see that he was leading her own mare. She had never thought to see Derry again, sure that the gunfire and the warrior's attack had frightened her off across the plains. A packhorse crowded in right behind Derry. The tall bronze man in buckskins and sheepskin coat slid down from his pinto and reached into a depression in the wall. His arm moved and a large rock in front of him began to pivot, opening into another cave with light at the far end.

She and the bearded man rode on through. As they went by, she felt him lean and pick up the pinto's rein, taking him along with them. Derry and the packhorse followed. Looking back, she saw the Indian pull a branch out of a corner in this second cave and begin brushing away their hoof prints on the outer cave floor. He came through the opening between the caves and tucked the branch into a niche. He moved another rock lever, the pivot turned, closing the passage. A rope loop dropped over the inside lever.

Maryan knew panic. The Army would never find her, now that their tracks had been wiped out. Despair brought her tears to the surface again. She wanted to throw herself off the horse and escape back through the caves, but she was held tightly.

This second cave exited to a sloping trail. The walls of a hollow mountain ringed a valley that stretched away below them. She could see a cabin down the trail on the right, then another larger log building, and then another cabin -- all of them tucked up under an overhang against the mountain wall.

As they neared the middle structure, the tarp covering the doorway was pulled back by a smiling young Indian woman. They rode in. It was a barn cut back into the mountain. Several nickers greeted the newcomers. The warm smell of horses and hay were so familiar to Maryan. Tears burned at the thought that she'd never see her home again. She wanted this to be a bad dream. She wanted to be safe back on the wagon train. No, she really wanted to be back safe at home, a carefree young girl on the plantation again. *Damn Lawrence!*

The big man unbuttoned his coat and swung down from the saddle, leaving her sitting there alone. She shivered in the cool air as he and his warm coat left her. Then his hands were on her waist and he was lifting her down. As he set her on her feet, she swayed, the room doing a slow spin around her. Darkness began to edge in on her again.

His heavy coat fell open as he turned to begin unsaddling his horse.

"You're hurt!" Maryan didn't understand the words the Indian girl spoke, but she recognized the alarm.

At the Indian girl's shocked whisper, he looked down at his shirt, felt it with his hand, and it came away bloody.

"No, it's not mine."

They looked quickly over at Maryan. She was standing there unsteadily, eyes closed, swaying. As she started to crumple, he stepped quickly forward and caught her upper arms.

He guided her over to a box and sat her down. He looked closely at her head where the warrior had clubbed her with his fist.

The scalp was split over her ear and had bled pretty strongly down over her shoulder. The front of her dress was wet, the dark dress masking the blood's color.

The Indian moved closer and studied her wound. "Stitches, six or eight anyway."

Maryan was only vaguely aware of their gentle touches as they looked at her head. It was very hard pushing back the encroaching darkness.

She dimly heard, "Come on. Let's go to the cabin and wash off some of this blood and see how bad it is."

"You go on. I'll tend the horses," she heard another deep voice say.

She was scooped up in strong arms, and they moved up a long passageway. Maryan knew she should be trying to get away, but her head hurt and everything was unreal. She felt the rumble of his voice where he held her against his broad chest. All she could do was lay her cheek against him and close her eyes. Most of the time they were speaking some language she didn't know.

"What do you want to do first?"

They had reached the upper cabin.

"Let's take her to the hot pool and wash all that blood off. I may need help with her dress, it's soaked."

Through a doorway cut into the mountain itself, the rock floor sloped gently down to a bubbling, steaming pool.

Maryan felt him set her down on the edge of the pool and the Indian girl started unbuttoning Maryan's dress while the big man steadied her. Flinching back, Maryan caught onto the girl's arm whispering, "No, I can do that." She was afraid of the big bearded man, but her head hurt and she was cold in the gory dress.

He dropped his hands from her shoulders but stayed squatted in front of her. She could only fumble with the dress and finally her hands fell to her lap and she had to give up. The Indian girl's gentle fingers began unfastening buttons again as tears of frustration slowly trailed down Maryan's cheeks. When the buttons were undone, she pulled the dress down and off Maryan's arms. Even her camisole and petticoat were blood-soaked.

"Please, bring me a sheet."

When he returned, Maryan heard the Indian girl dismiss him. "I will call you when I need you. Put on fresh coffee. We will need some."

She peeled the bloody clothes off and soon had Maryan's naked body wrapped in the sheet. Maryan protested feebly, but the clammy, bloody clothes had been cold against her skin and the dry sheet felt much better. She could feel the steam from the hot pool against her back. It felt good.

The Indian girl called out, "Come. I need you."

Maryan wanted to refuse his help, but realized she was too weak and could only sit there on the edge of the pool. Without the girl's hand on her shoulder to steady her, she was sure she would have just slid to the floor. The thought of the warm water dulled her fear. Maybe her head would hurt less in the steaming pool. Maybe she could shake the fuzzy, dream-like cloud that enveloped her. A strange ripple spread through her body when the man slid his arms behind her back and under her legs. He held her a moment and then lowered her into the pool. Her scalp wound was still bleeding and the sheet was soaked around her shoulder. The blood spread out in the water, slowly following the current down the overflow.

"I will call you when we need you. Go away." The girl waved her hand dismissively as she put her arm across Maryan's shoulder to steady her. As the man moved up the sloping floor, she began to unwind the sheet.

Maryan closed her eyes as the warm water soothed her battered body. She felt the girl gently rinse the blood out of her hair and murmur over the bruises that were beginning to show up. The bruise on Maryan's stomach from the renegade's knee was turning dark. She rinsed out the sheet and wrapped it around Maryan again. Maryan tried to stand and sagged back into the warm water on rubbery legs.

"Come back, we need your help again."

As he strode down to the pool, Maryan could see he had pulled off his bloody outerwear shirt and heavy long underwear shirt. Even though she was weak from the warm water and her wound, Maryan's head was beginning to clear as the pain subsided somewhat and she found herself staring at the size of his broad shoulders. Besides his beard and hair longer than his collar, his chest was heavily furred with black hair. He tossed his shirts into a corner.

His heart quickened as he bent down and tenderly lifted her out of the pool, very aware of her soft curves through the few layers of wet sheet. He sat her on the edge of the pool, leaving one big hand spread over her shoulder. "Can you sit there by yourself?"

Maryan tried to nod but her head threatened to throb again, her senses fluttering surprisingly at his touch in spite of the untamed look of him.

He grinned. "I'm going to find a dry shirt. What are you going to put on her for clothes?" he called back over his shoulder.

Another deep voice sounded from the doorway. It was the Indian. "There are clothes here," and he handed the girl a set of saddlebags. She rummaged and pulled out a clean camisole, petticoat, and stockings -- even a pair of light slippers. Maryan's boots needed to dry by the fire.

"Go get one of your wool shirts to keep her warm."

Maryan closed her eyes as the girl began to dry her off and help her dress. It was as if she were a child again, being looked after. Her terror of the afternoon was fading. The girl rolled up the sleeves of the plaid shirt, many times too big, but warm and comfortable. Maryan hugged it to her. It smelled like the big man with the black beard. For all his wild look, he smelled of sun and wind, horses and a male musk -- and that trace of lavender.

The two girls walked slowly towards the doorway into the cabin, Maryan holding tightly to the Indian girl's arm. The men smiled and rose to their feet from their seats at the table.

"Well, you look some better now. How do you feel?"

Maryan gave them a wan smile. She felt so shy with these people. Their tender care seemed genuine, but that big one looked like a wild man, like some of the mountain men who had visited the train a time or two. And that big Indian...

They settled Maryan in a big chair in front of the brightly burning fireplace. The fuzziness in her head was clearing. The warmth felt good and she began dabbing at her hair with a clean towel.

The big man jumped up from the table and moved quickly to her. His forehead wrinkled as she flinched back from him. He wrapped her little hand with his big one. "Careful, you've got a big split up there -- that's what bled so badly. I'm afraid you need some stitches."

She caught her lower lip in her teeth and drew a quick breath, trying to calm her thudding heart. Stitches! No, she couldn't even bear to think about stitches. "No, no stitches."

"Yes. It won't close until we do and will keep on bleeding. Come on over here to the table. You can hold my hand while Mingo does the honors."

Mingo. With her wide eyes, she gazed at the Indian not at all sure. He made her very uncomfortable. He was so big and he was an Indian. The only Indians she had seen were either the pitiful tame Indians at the various forts or the savage war party. She swallowed with an effort, determined to be brave. After all, they had been kind to her so far. Slowly, she stood up and moved to the table, sitting on the end of the bench. The bearded man straddled the bench on the other side of her and put one arm behind her and one in front, holding her hands.

"Here, hang onto me. Squeeze all you like. Holler if you need to!"

She closed her eyes and sat very still. His big hand spread over her trembling back comforted her, even if she was still afraid of him. As the needle bit in for the first stitch, she tightened down on his other hand. Mingo sewed neatly without wasting time, and as the number of stitches built up, the tears rolled down her cheeks from her closed eyes. But she didn't cry out or try to pull away. She just held onto that big hand very tightly, biting her lower lip.

After a while, Mingo said, "Want to rest before I finish?"

Maryan's voice was very small. "No, just get done."

The men exchanged glances. The girl dabbed at the Maryan's tears.

Finally the stitches were in and her hair was even beginning to dry and curl. They had gently sponged off the last remnants of blood from around the stitches. A small square bandage covered the new stitches, held on by a strip of cloth around her head. The big man helped her back to the chair by the fire and brought her a cup of coffee. He pushed a stool over and put her feet on it. *Such small feet.*

"Cream and sugar?"

"Yes, please."

Maryan sipped her coffee, the familiar taste and warmth sliding down pleasantly. She looked at these people who had rescued her. The big man's long black hair would fall to his shoulders if he untied the thong gathering it on the back of his neck. His mustache and sideburns flowed into a beard that reached to his chest. His bright blue eyes were a surprising contrast to the black, slightly wavy hair. Maryan felt reassured by the laugh lines that radiated out from his eyes.

Her gaze skimmed over the Indian couple. They had called the man Mingo. He was as big as the bearded man, both of them at least three inches over six feet. Mingo was as broad in the shoulders and narrow in the hips as the bearded man. His black hair was longer but he wore it in two braids. His face was smooth with no beard or mustache. His rich skin tones were like the girl's - touched with gold under the ruddy tones. Both of them had warm brown eyes that slid over Maryan with the same curiosity and acceptance that she was beginning to feel for them.

Maryan found herself thinking of the campfire talk she had heard all along the wagon trail since Missouri. "Injuns are dirty, stinkin' savages."

The warrior who had attacked her had smelled strongly of many unpleasant things that Maryan didn't want to identify, but Mingo and the girl smelled of sage and lavender and leather, like the big bearded man. To be sure, the men smelled of sweat on top of that, but it was not the days-old, stale smell she had noticed on many of the men on the wagon train.

The girl was small, probably about Maryan's height of five foot three. She was slim and graceful and her thick black hair hung in a single braid down her back nearly to her waist. She had an elfin beauty.

The girl started poking up the stove and moved a big pot over to a hot burner and stirred. The smell of stew filled the room. Soon the table was set with a fresh pan of biscuits, stew, and glasses of milk.

"That smells heavenly!" Maryan closed her eyes in anticipation, savoring the aromas. She rose carefully to her feet, waving away the helping hand. She could make it to the table. She had to get her strength back.

"When did you last eat?"

"Supper, yesterday, I think. It was early morning when I went down to the river to water my horse. Before breakfast."

"Well, it's supper time now, so you've missed a whole day. Take it easy at first, though."

It wasn't long before she laid down her spoon and sat back. She was comfortably full, relaxed, and filled with a growing strange sense of wishing she belonged. Maybe these people were as kind as they seemed. The girl brought the coffee pot around, her hand wrapped in a towel. Maryan looked up and all eyes were on her. She smiled shyly. The big man shoved the cream and sugar towards her.

"Okay, I'm John, that's Mingo and his wife Morning Star. We want to know about you, your name. How did you end up out on the prairie all by yourself fighting that warrior? Why in the world didn't you stay with the wagon train?"

Maryan looked at their rapt faces. The aura of friendly curiosity made her smile. Unconsciously, she followed their lead and gave only her first name.

"My name is Maryan. Early this morning hardly anybody else was up yet but I just felt I had to do something. I was uneasy all night and decided to go water Derry early before breakfast. I don't know what was bothering me, but I just knew I had to take my mare down to the river. And then the attack started."

She felt her chest constrict as she relived those moments. "I hid out down there until it was clear to run for it. It was warm enough early this morning but it started to get colder the longer I hid."

"I thought I was headed for the fort, but I must have gotten turned around." She kept clasping her hands, like she was washing them. "Then that Indian saw me. When he caught me and dragged me off my horse, I thought he was going to kill me. I was so frightened. He hit me." She shuddered as it became vivid in her mind again. The drumming pain in her head got stronger. She squinted her eyes as she rubbed her temples.

"I really don't remember a lot after that -- just bits and pieces. I remember riding and a cave?" And she blushed brightly, remembering the hot pool.

Morning Star got up and moved around the table to sit beside Maryan. She knew what Maryan was remembering. She put an arm around her, "Don't worry, it was just you and me."

They smiled at each other. Maryan was greatly relieved. Her thoughts were whirling. *Had she been held in strong arms while nearly naked?* Her cheeks grew hot. She pushed those thoughts down and continued her narrative haltingly.

"Where are we? I remember horses running and climbing, and a cave and then we were in a barn. It's all kinda fuzzy and mixed up."

Her audience murmured sympathetically.

John's deep voice explained, "Well, we found you and this renegade fighting down on the high plains and when he hit you, you went down like dead. I grabbed him and fed him some steel and Mingo caught you before you could take off. You were about to run right into that whole war party, the way you were headed. They'd have snatched you up in a second! He handed you up to me and we got the hell out of there. The whole war party was headed our way running from the cavalry coming up on the other side of the wagon train."

Mingo spoke, "Snow coming down fast after that so they didn't see us. If his horse stays there, they might find the one we killed. If his horse ran off..." and he shrugged.

John smiled, "Welcome to The Stronghold. This is a hidden valley inside a mountain, known only to a few of the old ones in the Ute tribe that lives near here. They are our friends. Morning Star is the chief's daughter.

"The Stronghold belonged to this tribe but they gave it to Mingo and me because we saved them from a massacre a few years ago. The ways in are secret and now locked. Nobody can get in. We have plenty of supplies and can stay till spring, if we want to.

"Of course, now that you know the way in, we'll either have to keep you or kill you."

The glint in his eyes let her know that she wasn't in much danger of being killed. The thought of keeping her sent a small ripple of awareness through him. As she smiled up at him, he felt an odd catch in his chest.

"We three are partners. We run cattle, trap a little, and raise a few horses. The Mission is about an hour away down the mountain and the fort is about an hour beyond that, both out on the high plains."

"Enough about The Stronghold. We want to know all about you. We've never had a visitor up here; you're the first. We've got all winter, so start at the beginning!" John settled back on the bench, leaning against the table, his arms stretched out along the tabletop on either side of him.

Maryan started to stand holding her cup, but Morning Star stopped her with a gentle hand on her shoulder till she sat back down. She took the cup for a refill. Maryan decided that she'd tell these kind friends the truth. With a big breath, she began.

"I'm from South Carolina. I was happy growing up on the plantation, but when I was 17, my parents and my sister started trying to marry me off." She shuddered.

"I was in South Carolina during the war," John mused under his breath, remembering back several years.

Maryan looked across the table at Morning Star, sitting close to her husband. His muscular arm clasped protectively around her shoulders. Tears pooled in her eyes.

"Did you ever meet a man who sent cold chills up your spine? A man who made you sick with revulsion?" Maryan watched as Morning Star's eyes grew big. She nodded.

"Well, that's the way I felt about the man they chose for me. I begged them to choose someone else, anyone else, but they were adamant. Nobody understood how I felt but Mammy, my old nursemaid.

"When they set the date and refused to listen to me, I knew I had to get away. I packed my saddlebags with a few clothes and keepsakes and took twenty gold coins from my father's safe, got my mare, and ran.

"The darkies hid me and passed me on from plantation to plantation."

John interrupted, "How did they know you were coming? That you needed help?"

"Have you ever heard the drums? Most of the white planters think they are dancing and happy down in the quarter, but they are drum talking to the other plantations. They knew all about me and helped me. Mammy made sure the darkies on our plantation spread the word. Nobody liked the man I was supposed to marry.

"They hid my mare Derry in out-of-the-way sheds and me in the quarter. Nobody ever knew, and I made it to Virginia finally, sometimes working as a nanny for different families to get a little money."

"Why did you have to work sometimes? You had those gold coins." John asked.

"I had to keep my gold coins hidden because there would have been too many questions. I made up some letters of reference from too far away to check. I had to use a false name and pretend I was from way away or they would have told my father where I was. Those planters stick together and they all think women don't have any sense at all."

Maryan's eyes were flashing and her voice was raised.

"I just wanted to get to the Ohio River and find a way down to the Mississippi.

"After I had had to leave several jobs, the darkies told me of a young widower with three small children who needed a nanny, so I hired on with him. I thought a widower might be safer. We traveled down to Charleston, West Virginia."

John broke in on her story with a chuckle. "Why did you have to leave your jobs? Weren't you a good nanny?"

Maryan bristled. "Those plantation owners were disgusting. Women were just property and the nanny was just another servant, as far as they were concerned. They expected me to give them whatever they wanted."

She shuddered at the memories.

"The widowers's children were sweet. I would have stayed longer, but after a month or so in their home in Charleston, he too decided that I owed him more than childcare. He came to my room one night and when he knocked, I was glad I had locked the door. He went away that time and tried to talk to me the next day. He said that if I was 'nice' to him, he might consider remarrying. Well, I had no intention of staying in Charleston. It was much too close to South Carolina. He had money, but I didn't want to marry him."

John felt a twinge of anger when he saw Maryan's flicker of disgust as she remembered this man. *The man ought to be whipped.*

"That night he came back to my room and used the master key to get in. I had to fight him. I finally hit him with a brass candlestick, tied him up with the cords off the drapes, and dragged him into a closet. Then I packed my saddlebags, locked my door, got my horse, and ran again." Maryan's three new friends grinned at the image of this petite girl using a brass candlestick on a lecher.

"When I got to the big river, there was a steamboat bound for St Louis just about to leave. I tried to buy passage, but a lone woman isn't allowed to travel by herself, even if I did show a gold piece to pay my way."

Maryan drank some of her coffee and looked at their rapt faces. "I guess I'm just a coward - I keep running. I knew if I didn't keep moving that either Lawrence or that widower would catch me."

"Who's Lawrence?" Morning Star asked.

"Lawrence White, the man I was supposed to marry back in South Carolina." Her eyes wide with apprehension, she drew a ragged breath.

"Anyway, as they were turning me away from the gangplank, a man and woman ran to the rail on the upper deck and called down to me, 'Betsy! Captain, let her on board and take care of her horse. That's my little sister Betsy!'

"I've always followed my hunches, and they didn't stir up my hackles, so I went along with it. Besides, I knew if I stayed there in Charleston, I would be caught and either Lawrence or that widower would have me. I grabbed at this chance. They made the captain find me a little stateroom near theirs, and a stall for Derry.

"Frank was a riverboat gambler, and very good at it. It turned out to be a fun trip and they taught me a lot about taking care of myself. Frank wouldn't even let me give him one of the gold pieces for my fare. Said he'd had a good year and it was their pleasure.

"His wife was so sweet to me. They treated me like I really was his little sister. They understood my problems and told me to go West on a wagon train. I'd be way beyond Lawrence's reach and I could start a new life. I wasn't sure about a wagon train, but I figured I'd worry about that later. Being beyond Lawrence's reach sounded perfect."

Maryan drank some coffee, remembering the trip down the river with her friends.

"I told Frank I had a mind to go to New Orleans, but he said it would be a terrible place for a young girl all alone. I couldn't talk him around at all, so I told him I'd get off at St. Louis and find a wagon train. They had been so good to me that I didn't want them to worry."

"Frank was right. New Orleans is no place for a young lady alone," John put in. Inwardly, he blessed Frank for sending her to the wagon train. She wouldn't be here in The Stronghold if she had continued on to New Orleans. She would probably be dead or a prisoner in some brothel. The images chilled his heart.

Maryan decided not to argue the point and continued her story. "When we reached St Louis, it was so busy! I'd never been to such a big city before. I tied Derry by a barber shop, got my shawl out of my saddlebags, and walked around a little bit, trying to decide which store would be a good one where I could ask for a job."

Maryan didn't mention the "friendly" men who had tried to talk to her, making her race away and hide till they quit looking for her. She shuddered at the memory.

"On a side street, I found a ladies' fabric and dress shop with an older woman and a girl about my age running it, so I went in. They were so friendly that I asked them for a job. Mrs. Sherman laughed and said she couldn't afford to pay me, but that if I was willing to work for room and board for me and feed for Derry, then I could stay. Their old horse had died. They still had a buggy so we used my Derry to pick up supplies and things.

"Things just went wonderfully for several months -- until the owner of the building told us to get out, that his wife wanted to run her own shop. He offered me a job working with his wife, but I had learned to recognize that look in a man's eyes, so I refused and stayed with Mrs. Sherman and Annie."

As she dropped her eyes to her coffee cup the pink spread up her neck and over her cheeks.

John clenched his fists, anger seething through him at the predatory assumption of so many men. His thoughts were tinged with a bit of guilt, though, because he too had felt the flickering of desire when he held her. He forced his thoughts back to Maryan's tale.

"We had a war council meeting and decided to join a wagon train. There was nothing there in St Louis for us. I gave Mrs. Sherman half of my gold coins, we sold the buggy, and bought a wagon and team and provisions. We packed up what we could take in the one wagon, and left in May with the train.

"The wagon trip was hard but we three were mostly happy. Mrs. Sherman was wonderful and told everyone we were both her daughters and engaged to soldiers in Colorado. I didn't feel bad at all telling such a lie because every man on the train, single or married, would have thought it was his bounden duty to take care of us. With Mrs. Sherman watching out for us, though, we managed to hold them all off, thank goodness.

"Why is it that men feel that women have to have a man to control their lives? If they had known that I had gold and no husband, they would have taken my coins and found me a husband, whether I liked it or not. But Mrs. Sherman looked after me."

Maryan dropped her face into her hands and tears leaked through her fingers. John surged to his feet and moved to her side. He turned her to face him, his hands on her upper arms.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know if Mrs. Sherman and Annie are dead or alive; and, if they are alive, they probably think *I'm* dead."

She stared up into his face, her eyes huge and the tears glistening.

John's heart skipped. He patted her shoulder, wanting to do something, anything, to dry her tears. Frowning, he wondered privately if her friends had survived the attack. "Next supply run to the fort, we'll check on them and find out."

Remembering her manners, Maryan spoke awkwardly. *How do you thank someone for saving your life?*

"Thank you all for rescuing me. I really thought that Indian was going to kill me."

"I don't think he meant to kill you -- just take some of the fight out of you. You were making it too hard for him to get what he wanted!" John growled, his brows drawn down in anger.

Maryan sat up suddenly, a hand to her throat. The color drained out of her face, except for two pink patches high on her cheeks.

"No, no. We interrupted his little game in time," John gave her a wolfish grin. "Somewhere in the Happy Hunting Grounds is a very disappointed warrior, I'm glad to say."

Morning Star held out a cup with liquid in it. "Drink this. It will make your head feel better."

Maryan looked at the cloudy liquid and then, with a shrug, drank it down. If these people meant to hurt her, they would have done so already. She made a face, "Ugh, that's bitter!"

She rested her head in her hands and closed her eyes. Soon the pain began to fade and she raised her head and looked around. Her new friends had quietly talked while her head eased.

"What was that drink you gave me?"

John was standing by the fire, staring into the flames. *If they hadn't come...* Hearing her question, he moved to her side.

"It's an Indian remedy, comes from willow bark. It sure helps with aches and pains and will also bring a fever down.

"Mingo is a lucky man to have a smart wife like Morning Star, and it sure is nice to come in from a hunting trip and find the fire going and supper ready."

Mingo smiled and reached for another biscuit. "White man's food good on cold night," he intoned in a deep voice.

"Don't pay any attention to that talk. I think he's putting it on for your benefit."

Mingo laughed and said, "John knows me too well," without the hesitant a hint of English.