

A Romance



Wounded
HEART

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Chapter 35

A wave of relief, followed by an immediate sensation of panic, flooded Della. Her breath caught in her throat. Her heart thumped against her ribs, and a film of perspiration sheened her body. What would Wild Wind do when Shane demanded her release?

Shane and the village's men converged on the level ground before the encampment, with the men engulfing horse and rider. Still, Shane rode undeterred toward the village, coming closer to Della. She stood transfixed beside a motionless Neha, watching her love draw near. The group of men and the rider advanced and drew abreast of the women. Shane rode on past without acknowledging Della by so much as a glance. His snub smote her, though she didn't have time to dwell upon his action.

Neha clutched her elbow and dragged her away. "Come. We must get away from here." She hustled Della back to the lodge they shared.

Inside, Della laid down her pouch of berries and faced Neha. "Little Wolf has come for me."

"It is just as my brother feared. Your uncle has sent Little Wolf to take you back to the white man. Wild Wind will lose you, as my brother lost Waynoka to the pony soldiers."

"Yes. Little Wolf has come for me, but I told Wild Wind if we were already married, I would stay with him. I have no husband waiting for me in the white man's world."

"It is good you should say that. We will wait and see what word Yellow Wolf speaks."

The minutes dragged on. Della fidgeted about the lodge, while Neha sat without moving. How long would the discussion continue? Would Wild Wind convince his father to move forward with their wedding? She wondered what Shane had felt when Yellow Wolf had told him of her forthcoming marriage to Wild Wind.

Della paced, her thoughts and emotions a wild jumble, until Wild Wind hailed them from outside the lodge. Della looked to Neha for guidance.

“Go to him. Yellow Wolf has spoken. What he says, will be. He is chief.”

Della pushed back the flap over the door and ducked through the opening. When she straightened and looked at Wild Wind’s face, she knew his father had ruled against his plea. She caught her breath. A mask of anger and denial set his features in bitter lines. His eyes glittered with a terrible savagery.

“Yellow Wolf had decreed that you must go back to your people. We are not to marry.”

Della stretched out a hand to him, her own emotions tumbling about almost without control. Her heart fluttered against her ribs like a bird struggling to fly free. Should she say she was sorry? Was she sorry? Had Shane’s mother felt such a contradiction of feelings when the soldiers tore her from her Cheyenne husband and her life in this village and thrust her back into life with her white husband, a man she hadn’t seen in almost ten years? Tears of confusion, of relief mingled with sorrow, burned behind her eyes.

Wild Wind took her hand and pressed her palm against his buckskin-clad chest. “Winter has returned to my heart. Your sunshine has been taken from me.”

“I am sorry, Wild Wind. What will you do?”

He shrugged, a very white gesture Della guessed he’d adopted during his time at the army fort. “We must go. Little Wolf waits to take you back to your uncle the general.”

With their fingers linked, Wild Wind towed her through the encampment to his father’s lodge. For once, a quiet pall hung over the village. Even the dogs had ceased their barking. Men and women stood before their tipis, tracking their progress with solemn expressions. Outside Yellow Wolf’s lodge, Wild Wind pulled her to a stop and looked down at her with scorching

eyes. “My lodge will remain empty. There will be no sunshine, no laughter, no children, without you.”

Della lifted her free hand and touched his cheek. “May you someday find happiness with another.”

Wild Wind didn’t reply. His gaze smoldered over her face as if committing her features to memory. Then, tugging her behind him, they entered the chief’s lodge.

An odd sensation of *déjà vu* washed over Della. Everything seemed much the same it had as the first time she’d entered this lodge. Once again Yellow Wolf sat behind the cook fire, facing the door, his saddlery on one side and his weapons on the other. This time, Shane Hunter sat where Wild Wind had previously sat, and his brother now stood by her side.

Wild Wind spoke in low, rough tones. Della had learned enough of the language to catch a few words, enough to understand he made one last appeal for their marriage.

Shane didn’t glance at her. For all the reaction he betrayed, she might not have even entered the lodge. When Wild Wind lapsed into silence, Shane didn’t move or speak.

Several moments of tense expectation hung in the air. None of them seemed to breathe. At last, Yellow Wolf spoke. When he finished, Wild Wind freed her hand from his. Spinning about, he slapped aside the privacy flap and flung himself out of the lodge.

Shane said something to his Cheyenne father, who nodded once. With a fluid grace, Shane pushed to his feet and grasped Della’s arm. “Come. We must leave. Now.”

Outside, their horses waited in the autumn sunshine. Someone had caught up Della’s Morgan mare and prepared her for riding. The horse waited beside Shane’s gelding. A young boy held the reins of both mounts.

Della glanced about, at the lodges and the people whom she'd come to know. She saw no sign of Wild Wind or of Neha. With his fingers still wrapped about her arm, Shane hustled her toward her horse. Della dug in her heels.

“Wait. I want to say good-bye to Neha.”

“We don't have time. We must leave. Now.” Without giving her an opportunity to argue, he tossed her onto her chestnut. He ducked around his grulla's head and stepped into the saddle.

Yellow Wolf had followed them outside and now stood at the doorway to his lodge, watching. Some unspoken communication passed between the two men before Shane reined his gelding about and set out at an easy walk.

With a last look about her, Della followed. Her time here in this village had changed her. She'd never be the same woman she'd been before Wild Wind brought her here. She left a part of herself with these people.

They cleared the top of the ridge. Della twisted about in the saddle for a final glimpse of the encampment below. The tepees stretched along the riverbank, smoke curling from the vents in the tops of the lodges. From this distance men and women appeared as toy figures. The camp disappeared when Della's mare followed Shane's mount down the other side.

They reached the bottom and level terrain. Shane reined in his gelding and looked at Della for the first time when her mare halted beside him. His blue stare bored into her, intense and probing. “Perhaps this is difficult for you to talk about, but have you been. . . Are you all right?”

Della reassured him with a tentative smile. “Yes. The Lord protected me the same way He protected your mother. Wild Wind claimed me for his wife and shielded me from the other warriors. Neha was a most vigilant chaperone.”

He blew out a breath and nodded. "Thank God. Now, we make tracks. Right now I'm more concerned about puttin' distance between us and the village than in hidin' our trail."

"Do you think Wild Wind will follow us?"

"I've never seen him like he was today. I didn't dare let him guess our involvement. It would have made him worse had he known. I think him capable of anything to get you back."

"What did you tell Yellow Wolf to make him turn me over to you?"

Hunter looked at her with a steady regard before he replied. "I told him you were more trouble than you were worth, and he would be wise to give you up."

As she remembered all the trouble she'd caused because of her impulsiveness, his words hit their mark. Della closed her eyes and bowed her head. Then, she lifted her head again and met Shane's gaze. "I know I'm a lot of trouble," she said in a small voice. "Uncle Clint has told me that over and over."

Shane nodded but didn't comment.

"What else did you tell Yellow Wolf?"

"I told him that your uncle had called in the army and would raid his village if I didn't bring you back."

"He believed you."

"He remembers how he lost my mother and didn't want military action against his people."

A beat of silence followed, while Della recalled the reason for her being taken. "The rustlers set the fire. Did you put it out?"

"It took us two days, but we saved the ranch house."

"I was beginning to think I'd have to marry Wild Wind before you could rescue me."

“We men didn’t even miss the stolen horses—or you—until after the second day when we returned to the ranch. Coral was frantic because you were missing. She’d found the empty safe, so she knew the ranch had been robbed. We figured that whoever had robbed the safe had taken you, as well, since your horse was gone, too. By then it was too late for me to start trackin’ you until the next mornin’.” Shane twisted in his saddle and scanned the range behind them, then faced forward again to sweep the grasslands with a searching look before he turned his attention once again to Della. “It took me all this time to find you. The trail was old. Much of it was lost, but I found a couple of places where clear hoof marks had been left. I recognized your mare’s tracks along with Rusty’s cow pony’s tracks. When I trailed the rustlers to where Wild Wind’s Dog Soldiers attacked them, it was easy enough to see what had happened. I knew you’d been taken by the raiding party. Now, let’s ride.”

Della stretched out a beseeching hand. “Shane, I must tell you something first. You should know this if we’re going to have a future.”

A wary expression crossed his face, and he thumbed back his hat, shifting in the saddle. “Somethin’ tells me I’m not going to like what you’re about to say.”

Della took a breath, wanting to make her confession and lay the whole truth before him. “I gave my word to Wild Wind that if we married before you rescued me, I would stay with him. I wouldn’t go back with you.”

“You would have done that?”

She nodded. “He was kind to me, and charming in his way. I think he truly loves me, and he remembers too well what happened to his mother. I would have honored my wedding vows to him.”

“That explains a lot.” Shane glanced away, out over the billowing prairie. He stacked both hands, one atop the other, on the saddle’s pommel.

Eying him with apprehension, Della waited for a response. At last he looked at her again, and the tortured expression on his face frightened her.

“I reckon the question I should be askin’ is, do you want me to take you back to the village? Do you want to marry Wild Wind? I think your uncle would call off the army if he knew you stayed of your own choice.”

Their glances caught and held. The prairie wind stirred the grasses and played about Della’s braids. The two of them, alone on the vast sea of the plains, seemed to be the only creatures in all the universe.

Della shook her head. “I want to marry you. I could have made a good life with Wild Wind if you hadn’t come for me, but that’s behind me now. You’re the man who holds my heart.”

The lines of Shane’s face relaxed. His eyes warmed. “For a minute there I thought my brother had stolen you away from me.”

Della smiled. A sensation of relief swept over her.

Shane cued his mount into motion. “We’d better put miles between us and the village. I don’t want to fight my brother over you.”

They rode hard, with Shane checking their back trail. About midafternoon they came to a meandering stream with shallow banks.

Shane called a halt. “Let’s rest a bit here. I’m going to try to lose our trail in the water.” He swung down from the saddle and came around to help Della dismount.

Leaning down, she placed her hands on his shoulders. He lifted her from her horse and closed both arms around her, not letting her go when her feet touched the ground. She snuggled against his chest and wrapped her arms about his back. His heart thudded with a steady rhythm beneath her ear. "Hold me tight, Shane. Just hold me."

They stood in a close embrace for several moments, not speaking. Shane rested his cheek against the top of her head, enclosing her in a desperate clasp, one hand pressing her head into the hollow of his shoulder. At last she leaned against the band of his arms to look up into his face.

"I don't know who I am anymore. I've lost myself. Help me, Shane. How did you find yourself when you went back to the fort?"

His sympathetic gaze roved over her face. "You make peace with yourself, one day at a time. You learn to fit in, even if inside yourself you feel like you don't belong."

His words brought a measure of comfort.

Before they remounted, Hunter filled their canteens and let the horses drink their fill. Once again astride, Della followed Hunter's gelding into the water.

They rode until dusk cloaked the earth. When they reached an escarpment where the steep, rocky wall would protect their backs and a hillock shielded them in the front, Shane called a halt. They made camp and ate a cold meal, with the horses picketed nearby.

"No fire tonight. We'll leave before dawn."

Della snuggled into her bedroll. Shane sat beside her, his back to the rocky escarpment, his rifle cradled across his lap.

The silence of the night enshrouded them. Della pitched into oblivion.

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