

Leseutdrag fra “Red Black Dawn”

The sun disappeared behind the cliffs, long shades filling the canyon and coldness chasing the heat of the day away.

Tókwär rose, went to their pile of bags, and grabbed his parfleche. He pulled out two rifles, a cartridge belt he tied around his waist, and three Colts.

What was he doing, preparing for the night? Bella had never seen him carry weapons, except from a hunting knife. “Are there dangerous animals in the canyon?”

“Yes, but they’ll stay away if you keep the fire burning.” He slid two of the Colts into his belt.

“What kind of animals?”

“Coyotes and mountain lions.”

She swallowed a gasp. “Dear God.”

“You know how to shoot?”

“Um... Mr. Peterson showed me how to use these.” Voice trembling, she pointed at the rifles.

“Good. But I’ll leave you a revolver. It’s easier to use.”

Alarm cut through her. “What do you mean, you’ll *leave me* a revolver?”

“I’m going back to the camp to see if I can free Whirlwind.”

“*What?*” Her high-pitched blurt echoed between the canyon walls, and she stood so fast she nearly lost her balance.

Loading bullets into the last Colt, he spoke matter-of-factly. “If the Utes don’t kill him, the Whites will. Their army can’t wait to get their hands on rebellious *Injuns* and hang them.”

She stared wide-eyed. She could care less about that lousy Cheyenne. She’d become used to Tókwär’s presence. He protected and provided for her. Now he was leaving her all alone? “Are you telling me I have to stay in the wilderness all by myself, among dangerous animals? Really? Because of him, that murderer?”

His face was stony, dark. “He helped save your life and your baby’s life. To me, that’s a valid reason to do everything I can to help save *his* life.” He gave her the loaded Colt.

God, she was so scared. Her hand shook as she accepted the heavy gun.

“Before you do anything, point to the ground so you don’t accidentally shoot me.”

Not funny. “O-okay.”

“Pull the hammer back.” He indicated a crooked piece of metal on the back.

“Like this?” She pressed it backward.

“Yes. Now that the gun is armed, hold it with both hands.” He stepped behind her and circled her with his big frame, arms around her elbows and warm palms covering her fingers.

“Okay.”

“Stretch your arms.”

Together, they lifted the revolver and aimed at an imaginary point on the cliff across the river. His chest and shoulders enveloped her, emanating heat. He leaned his hard temple

against hers so they stood ear-to-ear. His manly scent filled her space and hot breaths brushed her cheek.

God, their unusual intimacy was a terrible distraction. It had been an eternity since she'd been so close to a male. It was an improper position to be in with another man other than Travis, but she couldn't deny Tókwar gave her the masculine assurance and comfort she needed right now.

Don't move, don't go away.

"Don't forget to breathe," he said, so near his low voice vibrated inside her.

Had he noticed she held her breath? She glanced sideways.

He killed a small smile. "Focus, Bella."

"Y-yes." She fixed on the front sight of the revolver.

"When you're ready, press the trigger."

"Okay." She slowly squeezed her index finger.

"Not now," he hurried to add. "I mean when you need to. We don't want anyone to know we're here. The shot is very loud, especially in a canyon, and it can be heard for miles."

"And we don't want to waste bullets, right?"

"Right." Too soon, he released her hands and moved back, creating distance between them. She instantly missed his heat, his proximity. "Put the gun down and don't touch it unless you need it. It's ready to fire, okay?"

She nodded and carefully placed the heavy Colt on a rock beside her bags.

"And if you have to shoot, remember to re-arm it, or else it's not ready to shoot again." He picked up a blanket and a canteen, walked over to the pony, slid the blanket across its back, and squatted by the river to fill the canteen. Each of his preparations brought them closer to his departure.

"When will you be back?"

"I don't know. I'll come if I can. If I don't, you have my horse, so you can continue traveling west."

A rush of cold fear went through her. "What do you mean, *if you don't*?"

Canteen full, he closed it and hung it to his belt. "The Utes aren't going to give him up easily." He grabbed the pony's mane and, moves quick and graceful, jumped up on its tall back.

Her heart squeezed. "No." She gasped. He was referring to the unthinkable. Not only would she be completely alone in the wild, but ... *he* wouldn't be around. Tears welled in her eyes. She couldn't stand the idea of never seeing him again. It wasn't possible. It hurt too much. "No."

He gave her a long stare, head tilted and black gaze glistening. "No, what? You're afraid your 'pig' won't be able to bring you to Salt Lake? Or you're afraid for his life?"

Oh, he was mean. Burning tears sprang out of her eyes. Angry and hurt, she spun to hide her broken face.

"Then I'll be back, Bella." He left in a quick trot.