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## **A Summer Collection**

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*A Summer Collection*

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# *The Far Side of Lonesome*

by  
Rita Hestand

## **Chapter One**

*Summer 1870*

*Just a little past Doan Crossing, Texas*

“Jeb, I didn’t want to bring this up, but you know we got a problem,” Hoot said in a low voice so as not to be overheard.

“I know...I just ain’t sure what we should do about it...” Jeb replied, trying his best not to look over his shoulder at the woman and baby behind them. Sweat trickled down the side of her face, but she didn’t acknowledge it, and she hadn’t once complained.

“We best be figurin’ something’ out, don’t you think?” Hoot frowned at his friend.

“I’m workin’ on it. We’ll talk to her about it when we camp tonight. It’s a couple days ride ‘till we get to a decent size town anyway. We can’t just dump her in the middle of nowhere...” Jeb rasped.

“Agreed, that’s for shore and certain. So...you gonna talk to her?”

Jeb glanced over at his friend; Hoot sat the saddle almost as though glued there. Jeb eyed him up and down strangely until Hoot almost glared at him.

“In all my born days I’ve never seen you eye me like a side of beef before, what are you lookin’ at?”

Jeb shook his head and spit to the hot ground, “Nothin’ Hoot, not lookin’ at nothin’, I’m thinkin’, but I’ll take it up with you later, when I’ve thought it through.”

Hoot frowned, “Never liked it when you did too much thinkin’. Down right spooky...that’s what it is.” Hoot shook his head and scurried on in front of him as though ignoring him a while.

It gave Jeb a break. He eased back on the reins and let his horse canter while the lady with the baby caught up to him. He wondered how he should talk to her. She hadn’t said anything since the Indians brought her to him. It was obvious she didn’t want to go with them and Jeb understood that.

He glanced over at her now. She wasn’t looking at him, but straight ahead and by her expression Jeb wasn’t sure what might be on her mind. His eyes slid to her Indian deerskin dress, and how it rode up on her thigh. He turned his head away. He didn’t like the feeling stirring inside him and he fought it down. He had no right to look at her like that. But for the life of him he couldn’t stop the feeling. The woman was in her thirties he’d guess, she was no child that was for sure. She had light brown hair that blew like wisps in the wind. Her eyes were like a summer sky, compelling. She was thin and long boned. But one look into her face and Jeb knew this woman had known hard times, lots of hurts and a vague loneliness that stirred him, as though he recognized that same loneliness.

He glimpsed stubborn pride, and a gripping sadness within her. It was the sadness that pulled him mostly.

He scratched his chin, and eyed her, “Ma’am, you do understand us, don’t you?”

She shot him a sideways glance and her glorious head of light brown hair swayed to the soft breezes over her shoulders, “Of course I understand you, I’m white...why wouldn’t I?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I realize that. But are you scared of us?”

“Should I be?” she asked, giving him a sardonic look. He could tell she wasn’t afraid of anything. Fear didn’t seem a part of her.

“No, ma’am, I don’t think you should be, but I’d understand if you was. I mean you were sorta forced on us and I figure you are as shocked as we are.”

She nodded. “That’s a good word to describe it...”

“Now, ma’am, we got us a problem and I need your help in deciding how to handle it.”

She didn’t wince. “Go on...”

“Them Shawnee...well...some of them seemed kinda reluctant to hand you over. And believe me it weren't our intention to grab you and the baby there. But on the other hand, me and Hoot as honorable men couldn't quite leave ya there, knowin' you was white...and that you'd been a captive.” Jeb tried to use all his manners; he generally hoped he was doing a good job. “We'd planned to trade for horses, that was all...ours bein' worn out.”

She blinked, and then glanced at him, “Sorry I wasn't a horse...”

When Jeb didn't say anything, she continued, “The baby is the son of the chief's son,” she announced boldly.

Jeb sighed a little too heavily, and her head reared proudly.

“And you wouldn't leave him...” Jeb finished for her.

“That's right, he's my son...I could not leave him...” she felt a pang of regret or something for her face changed now.

“How long were you a captive?” Jeb asked, spitting his tobacco once more.

“Five years...” she winced from the pain of it, Jeb reckoned.

“Is your husband...?”

“Dead...we were on a wagon train, headed for Texas, for a land grant there. We were attacked by Comanche...” she began in a breathless whisper.

“Comanche, huh? They trade you for horses or guns to the Shawnee?”

“Yes, about six months later, after making a slave of me,” she raised her chin. “I...did my best to resist their torture, but I hated them...and they knew it. I was more trouble than they bargained for. I spent every day trying to figure out a way to escape them...” She admitted freely. “First because they killed my husband, and second because they treated me so badly.”

Jeb studied on her words for a long minute then glanced at her, “Then the Shawnee took you to their camp, huh?”

“Yes...they did...”

Jeb nodded, “Shawnee treat their captives better, I'm told. They sorta believe that if a white man kills one of their own, then they are entitled to steal a white and make them theirs. It's their way, I guess.”

“You know much about the Shawnee?” she asked.

“A little. Me and my partner here, we was buffalo hunters. We've traded with the Shawnee some. They never gave us much trouble, some of them even fought in the war with the union army. Most of them settled into Cherokee country north of the Red. But a few scattered and lived by the Red, like your bunch.”

A silence lapsed and Jeb looked at her again, this time keeping his eyes pinned on her proud face.

“So go on, tell me about living with them...”

She stared at him a long time, but he waited in silence. “Once I learned their customs, they treated me as an equal. After they saw I was willing to work...they began to accept me as one of them. I was given to the chief's son, as he had no wife or children. When I bore his child, they accepted me as part of the tribe. They considered me one of them.” She announced. “I learned to cope by accepting my fate and in time, I learned to care about the people...”

Jeb nodded, “Did you like it there?”

The woman hung her head for the first time, “No...not at first, then...later, it became easier just to accept it all...but I guess you wouldn't believe that... It's hard to understand when you haven't been through something like this. But they were kind to me. Most of them. They taught me how to survive, to live...even to love...”

Jeb was quiet again and nodded. “Yes ma'am...you must have been awful brave to have lived with them, bearing his child and his attention.”

“He was not a mean man; he treated me as his wife, and with respect.” She raised her eyes to Jeb, and he finally saw the tears there. But she didn't let them fall. “I grew...to care about him. Maybe I shouldn't have, but when you live with a man, it's hard not to.”

Jeb's heart nearly stopped when he looked into those sky blue eyes, she spoke with her heart and he sensed she meant every word. He'd never met a white woman who could adjust her thinking like that. This woman was stronger than she knew.

However, if she spoke it aloud, she'd be in great danger.

His eyes slid over her slowly now, digesting her. She wasn't the prettiest woman he'd ever seen, but there was something about her that tore into his heart and made him aware of her as a woman. Not that he'd dare act upon his feelings, for he was a God fearing man, but it was there nonetheless. The feeling was sure strange to Jeb. He'd have to pray on those feeling to God, for some kind of understanding of it. But what she said... startled him. He stared at her now, his mouth open, his eyes crinkling into some sort of twisted emotion.

"Yes, ma'am. The Shawnee are a right fair bunch of Indians. I've tangled with a few and they fight as fair as any white man." Jeb nodded. "But ma'am, well... you can't go saying such in front of your people. There is no tellin' what they might do to you. They hate the Indian as much as they do the Negroes. It's unheard of a white woman loving an Indian."

"No... you're wrong about that. There were others... that grew to feel the same. Maybe it was because we were captives for so long. Or maybe it was because we appreciated their kindnesses. I don't know. But there were women who refused to go back to their people—for more reasons than one. We talked of many things as time went by, the resignation you feel when no one comes immediately to rescue you—the hopelessness of the life before. A few white men came to our camps a couple of years later, and all of them—you could see it in their faces—the disgust. The fact that we preferred to live instead of die made them hate us. Some of them were family too. But that didn't matter..."

"And you... why didn't you refuse to go with us, you had to know there would be more trouble?"

"I did refuse at first... but the chief said it would help make peace for his people, if I went. And I loved the old man."

"He didn't understand... that old chief. Hoot and I... we're black men. There ain't a town alive that would tolerate a black man bringin' a white woman back to civilization from an Indian camp where she had birthed an Indian baby. Don't you see? Not in Texas, not anywhere."

"Yes, I see... but what am I to do? I'm going with you now, I know not where, or what I will face. But do I really have a choice?"

Jeb grew quiet. He had no answers either.

"Crowfoot was not a handsome man," she said, changing the subject. "But he was a proud man, a good man, and I was proud to bear his child. He treated me... like a human being." She said raising her chin in defiance, "I'm not ashamed to say it. He was my husband."

"Crowfoot, huh?" Jeb repeated the name. "Well now, what do they call you, ma'am?" Jeb asked out of the blue.

"My white name was Sarah. My Indian name was Moonwalker, as I walked at night many times around the camps," she announced.

"Well, Sarah," Jeb hollered loud enough for Hoot to hear. "This here is Hoot, and I'm Jeb."

Sarah nodded to Hoot.

"We'll camp in a couple of hours and then we gotta talk... some more."

She nodded.

Jeb caught up to Hoot and told him what the woman had told him.

"You think that buck's gonna come after her?" Hoot asked after gathering all the information.

"Maybe, maybe not. Shawnee ain't a bad lot, for Indians." Jeb explained. Jeb cleared his throat and glanced at Hoot, "Maybe we should give her back..."

"Give her back? Are you serious? After all this, you want to just hand her back to them Indians? She's a white woman, Jeb. She deserves the chance to make it in her world," Hoot said.

Jeb smiled at his friend, "I just needed to know how you felt about it, Hoot. Don't get riled. We'll figure something out."

"God knows that woman has faced more than most men could. But... we ride into town with her and there will be a ruckus, and you know it. We hand her back to the Indians, how we gonna live with ourselves? We're not that kind. We're better than that. We seen too much hate."

Listening to the clop of the horses against the dry canyon lands of north Texas, Jeb rubbed his chin. "I got some ideas, but first we got to talk to her..."

"You know there ain't a decent town gonna accept her with that kid along..." Hoot snorted. "Or even her with us. That poor woman just traded one problem for another."

“She didn’t have any choice...Hoot, but be quiet. She came with us, to help them, to help bridge a peace between the white and the Indian. They’d let her go with the grandson of the chief, it’s unheard of. And I doubt the white will even understand the nature of that gesture,” Jeb explained. “Don’t you see, she’s had troubles for five long years, trying to figure out how to stay alive? She don’t need to hear ours.”

“I expect you’re right about that,” Hoot agreed and took a drink of water from his canteen.

He stopped and offered the woman a drink, and she took it without even wiping his spit away. Hoot smiled at her.

Jeb couldn’t keep from smiling at her actions too. “Easy...not too much at once...”

She nodded and gave it back to him after she whetted the baby’s lips with a ribbon she soaked in water.

Not much moved along the canyon except the whiz of grasshoppers and an occasional jackrabbit or two. The rattlesnakes were out and about too. Jeb kept his eyes peeled for them. A few willows dotted the dry landscape as they passed the dried up watering holes. The land was barren and lifeless. The summer had been too dry.

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That evening Jeb took out the bedroll and made the woman as comfortable as he could. But instead of sitting, she began to rummage through the gear and found some food to prepare for them at the campfire. Beef jerky and canned beans seemed to be the best she could do as the waterhole offered little fishing.

No one complained.

As they all settled back, and she uncradled her child, Jeb glanced at her. He noted the way she laced and unlaced his cradle so easily, as though she’d done it many times. He wondered how many things she learned in the Indian camps. Such an unusual woman.

“Sarah, I don’t want to bring this up, but it has to be said before we get there and it has to be decided upon now. Those people in town...they will accept *you* and take you in, but they won’t allow that baby to come with you. I think you already know that. Now, Hoot and I, we know it ain’t natural to separate a mama from a calf, but those refined townspeople ain’t gonna see it that way. So we gotta figure out what to do. You got any notion where you need to be headed?” Jeb asked her.

Sarah let the baby sit up and play with a stick, and then looked at the two men. “I had two babies by my first husband, two girls. I want to get them...and then I’ll go it alone...I expect.”

“Alone? Fool woman, don’t you know...you can’t do that.”

“My husband is dead, I have no relatives...I’m alone now. That’s part of the reason it was easier to keep livin’. I knew my man was gone, and there was no one else to care for me. The only hope I ever had was those two girls. Just thinkin’ on them kept me goin’ at first. Then after a while...I became accepted.”

Jeb and Hoot both nodded.

“I know you are right about the town. My husband told me to use the gun if those Comanche’s got too close, but I just couldn’t do it. I knew what he meant. I just couldn’t do it...” she let a tear escape down her cheek.

“The good book don’t respect takin’ your own life. It’s God given, and takin’ it away is a sin. I couldn’t do it.”

“It’d be hard to do alright, ma’am.” Hoot nodded and handed her his bandana.

“Maybe I should have...because there is no place for me now...” Sarah announced sadly. “I guess you two are kinda sorry you picked me up, too...”

“No, ma’am. We’d of done it anyway. But don’t you have family somewhere...?”

Sarah stared at them, her eyes searching their expressions.

“Do you honestly think my family would be any different than the townspeople? Knowing I’d been a captive that long—and bore a child. When I got married, my father disowned me. I’d been an old maid, all of twenty-one and never married or had children. He wanted me to marry the banker’s son. A fat, spoiled son of a rich man. We didn’t even like each other. I refused and when John Litton asked me to wed and go west, I jumped at the chance to get away. I hadn’t known him over a week or so, but we didn’t have time for proper courting. He was moving west. That’s the last I seen of my folks. I do have a sister; if I got word to her...she might come for me. A sister and two daughters. She’s more than likely got my kids with her.”

Jeb shook his head. “Family can be down right intolerable sometimes. But don’t you reckon they would be happy to have you returned safely?” Jeb asked.

“I don’t know, I don’t have any idea how she would feel seein’ me now, with him...,” Sarah admitted glancing toward her son.

“Yes, ma’am. I understand.” Jeb watched her closely. The baby played happily at her side with the stick. He was a cute little chunk. Jeb smiled at the boy, and another strange feeling entered his heart. He had no family and deep down somewhere in a dark corner, he knew he wanted a family of his own. He had squashed it so deep he forgot those feelings, until now.

“That was many years ago, I haven’t seen them in all that time,” Sarah admitted.

Jeb listened to her story and glanced at her and the baby several times.

He’d been worried all along what they were gonna do with this white woman. But the minute he rode into town with her, heads would turn and they’d all be in danger. Negroes didn’t belong with whites anymore than Indians. The woman had no chance to survive. That was the truth.

But once he’d made the decision to take her from the Indian camp, he’d put everyone’s life in danger and he knew it. Yet what else could he do? He couldn’t leave a white woman with the Indians, it just wasn’t done.

And the white people wouldn’t appreciate him and Hoot bringing her back.

And as old as her children were, they might not even want her, then what?

Even his own people would frown upon his decision.

Hoot was upset and nervous and Jeb couldn’t blame him, for he hadn’t thought much about what they would do once they got to civilization again. Now that decision bore down on him like a rattlesnake about to strike.



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