

Unbridled



Delores Fossen

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P.O. Box 618
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888-546-6478

Send us email at admin@LionHearted.com

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Printed in the U.S.A.

To my family

Tom

Charra

Clinton

Justin

Beth

and to my great-grandmother

Lide,

a Choctaw Indian who inspired this book



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Chapter 1



April 1888

Pass Christian, Texas

Suddenly, Adi knew she was no longer alone in her dead brother's house.

“Is someone there?” Her voice pierced the death-like silence, and she wiped away another tear that had slipped onto her cheek.

Adi McLaurin heard nothing, not even breathing, but something alerted her. *Someone's walking on your grave*, her Great-aunt Carolina would have said. The air in the room stilled as if everything, including her body, had braced itself for the terrible thing that was to come.

He was behind her in the corner of the room— whoever he was. Adi prayed it was a he and not an it. While she nervously fondled her handkerchief, she slowly turned to shift her position in the direction of the visitor. With each passing moment the tension in her body heightened. Part

of her hoped she was about to come face to face with her brother's ghost. Stuart's ghost. At least she would be able to tell him good-bye.

With her gaze lowered, Adi saw the shoes first. Boots: a deep honey-colored leather with strap stitching. They were wet and dirty. The person had his feet spread wide apart as if supporting a sizable amount of weight. Adi could see small pools of rainwater on the hard wood floor around each boot. Her visitor must have stood there for some time.

That wasn't a comforting thought.

Adi had just spent a half-hour in Stuart's kitchen believing she was completely alone. Why else would she allow herself to cry? Alone, she could relax her rigid control and express her true feelings.

Her eyes stayed trained on boots that went all the way to knees. From there, Adi's gaze traveled upward to see the same honey-colored leather in the trousers. They weren't trousers at all, but snug leggings covered by a breechcloth. Adi knew they weren't Stuart's legs either. These were muscular and strong. Applying even a generous compliment, Stuart was basically lanky.

There was nothing lanky about this man, and there was simply too much of him to be ghostly. If he wasn't an apparition, who was he?

An ivory knife handle protruded from a scabbard strapped around the man's waist. Large, powerful

hands rested nonchalantly on his narrow hips. A shirt was exposed beneath a vest. The shirt was the same leather. Buckskin, she decided.

His neck was deeply tanned, as was the well-defined chin he held high. Expecting to feel nothing less than sheer terror, Adi lifted her eyes to the remainder of his face. He had sharply angled cheekbones, a full mouth, and piercing gray eyes. Not true gray. Silver. Storm black hair just barely touched the shoulders of his collarless shirt and looked as unbridled as the rest of him. A red bandanna was tied Apache-style around his head.

“My brother isn’t here.” Adi didn’t realize she’d said the words at first. She glanced around to make sure there wasn’t yet another stranger in the room. There wasn’t. She was alone with... him.

The man said nothing, but he slightly lifted one dark eyebrow.

“Stuart’s dead,” Adi went on to say, slicing her words with shortened breath. “He died a little over a week ago. Drowned in the Fir River when his boat sank. His funeral was this morning at the Presbyterian Church. Did you know him?”

Adi moaned at that stupid question. This man, this Indian, was obviously a savage predator. She was his prey, and she was still trying to make small talk. It would have pleased Mrs. Edelweiss, Adi’s finishing school mistress, to know her pupil could manage such a feat: chit-chat while facing death.

“My brother’s housekeeper will return any minute,” Adi lied. The woman had left hours ago, right after Adi returned from the funeral, and she wouldn’t be back for over a week. “Did you need to speak to me about Stuart? I know he owned the Rose and Thorn Café. His lawyer told me that. Are you here on business?”

No response. Not even a blink. It was at that moment Adi accepted she would probably die today. Here, miles from home, in her dead brother’s kitchen, she would die at the hands of a savage. But, by God, she wasn’t going to do it without a fight. She tried to face her attacker with as much dignity as she could muster.

“I want you out of my brother’s house now.”

Stone-cold silence followed. She twisted her amethyst engagement ring, trying to hide the chunky bruise-colored stone beneath her palm. Not that she cared so much if the savage stole it, but she didn’t want to welcome such thievery. “I presume you’re not deaf, and you understand some smidgen of English. Correct me if I’m wrong.”

Despite her stalwart expression and firm tone, Adi’s legs were shaking. She scanned the room for a weapon or anything she could use to protect herself. A somewhat dull-looking, broken tipped paring knife lay on the edge of the kitchen table. If she could get to it, she could use it to threaten him.

“I asked you to leave. Now go,” she ordered,

volleying her glances between the paring knife and the man.

Dropping her handkerchief, she lunged for the knife. She snatched the blade off the table and spun toward him. But before Adi could fully turn, he charged at her. With an airborne leap, he rammed into her chest and sent both of them sprawling onto the floor.

Adi gasped, the breath knocked out of her. She started to squirm, but the savage was on top of her. He had her hand pinned in a vise-like grip, his face only inches from hers.

Instinctively, she drove her other elbow into his jaw. She might as well have hit a stone wall because it certainly felt like one. He didn't move or flinch, though blood trickled from the open cut she'd made on his lower lip. He only stared at her with eyes that reminded Adi of winter ice.

With a mumbled oath, the man twisted and pressed a razored blade to Adi's throat.

Her life did flash before her eyes. Adi read that somewhere—that people saw images of their entire lives just before they died an untimely death. Now Adi knew it was true. She saw her parents, brothers, sisters and her fiancé and realized how truly uninteresting her life was. Uneventful, one might say, except for this incident, of course.

“Before you rape me...” Adi instantly regretted her words. Maybe he hadn't planned to rape her at all, but now she'd planted the idea.

He said nothing. She felt his heavy, hot breath against her face. The scent of mint and honey. Strange that. Even stranger that she would notice it now.

“If you were planning to rape me,” Adi corrected, “I think you should know I have a terrible disease. You’ll catch it, too.” She hoped it didn’t sound too obvious of a lie.

Still nothing. His teeth clenched, and Adi felt his heart pound against her chest. Still, his expression never changed. She figured he truly didn’t understand a single word of English. It was the final blow. She couldn’t threaten or reason with a savage who didn’t even understand her.

“Oh, go ahead and do what you’re going to do. I’m tired of you trying to scare me to death,” she hissed. “But I hope you burn in hell for it, you sonofabitch.”

She waited for a reaction, but again got nothing. Ignoring the knife, Adi shoved her elbow against his throat for leverage and tried to wrench herself from beneath him. It didn’t work. His knife snagged her dress, tore the black silk fabric and exposed the top of her coutil corset.

“I refuse to beg for my life if that’s what you’re waiting for me to do. Just rape me or kill me or whatever.”

The man adjusted his weight onto one of his knee and, crouched over her. Until then Adi hadn’t realized how intimately his knee touched her.

With her dress and petticoats pushed up to her thighs, he had his buckskin-clad leg wedged between hers. It remained there, despite his change in position. She didn't want to think of how it was rubbing against her *there*.

They stared at each other, gazes locked.

He rose slowly from the floor without making a sound. When he stood, he towered over Adi. She choked back a gasp. He seemed so menacing, so huge. Much larger than most men. He could, no doubt, kill her with one punch from his fist.

“Rape you? Don't flatter yourself,” he said calmly. “I'm not interested.”

She gasped at his caustic tone, then flinched when he thrust his hand inside his shirt. Adi fully expected to see some type of odious weapon, but instead he brought out an envelope and slung it toward her. She snatched it from the air to keep it from hitting her in the face.

It was a letter, and only her Christian name was on the envelope. She certainly hadn't expected something as innocuous as a letter. She raised a single eyebrow to question him, but the man only raised an impertinent eyebrow of his own. Frustrated with his response and with his silence, Adi ripped open the envelope and retrieved the page inside. It was from her brother, Stuart.

“Dear Adi,

My Best Beloved, I trust you have not shed too many tears over my untimely demise. This letter

would never have been delivered to you otherwise. The bearer is a good friend. Please go with him and do as he says..."

Adi stopped abruptly and glanced at the man. Stuart was obviously insane when he wrote this if he thought she would possibly go anywhere with this knife-wielding savage. Then the Indian motioned with his hand, apparently prompting her to continue.

"Please don't argue. I urgently need you to attend to the most important part of my estate. Consider it my dying wish that only you are capable of handling. Love, Stuart."

Adi looked at the man again before she read the note at the bottom of the letter. *"His name is Grayson Renaux. He is a fine specimen of a man, don't you think?"*

No, she didn't think so. She looked at his eyes and the loose black hair that fell haphazardly around his neck. He was a savage despite what her brother thought of him.

Still, he was intriguing. He dressed like an Indian, but his name was Grayson Renaux? That certainly didn't sound like an Indian name. And now that Adi studied him, he didn't look like an Indian. At least, not a full-blooded one.

"Where did Stuart want you to take me?" Adi asked haughtily. She had no intention of going anywhere with this man, She could get there on her own.

He wiped the trickle of blood from his lip with the back of his hand. “Devil’s Swamp,” he answered, his voice deep and callous.

Adi rolled her eyes. Devil’s Swamp? Of course, the place Stuart wanted her to go with this menacing savage would have a name like Devil’s Swamp. It probably had hundreds of snakes and, of course, more barbarians just like this one.

“Are you coming?” he asked.

Adi couldn’t detect any emotion in his voice, but there was a disconcerted furl to his upper lip. He paused only a moment, and when Adi didn’t answer, he whirled toward the door and left. With an exasperated sigh, she sprang from the floor and rushed after him. By the time she got to the door, he had already mounted a large blood bay stallion and was prepared to ride.

“Wait,” she called out to him.

He clutched the reins and cut his steely gaze toward her. When Adi said nothing else, he kneed the stallion and bolted. Without thinking, she ran out the door. It had stopped raining, but the ground was still chilled and soupy. Thick mud oozed over her slippers.

“Stop!” Adi yelled.

He did. Immediately. He spun his horse to face her. But the cold, hard stare he gave her made Adi wish he had kept riding.

“Please stop,” she amended with considerably less volume in her voice. When he didn’t move

closer to her, Adi walked across the back yard, taking long strides despite the mud. To look up at him, he seemed gigantic. Invincible. And dangerous. She was nervous as she rubbed her hand on the side of her skirt. "Were you and Stuart close friends?"

His lips parted. Adi thought he might speak, but instead she saw a smile tug at his lips. He thought for a few moments and then nodded.

"This personal aspect of my brother's estate, do you have any idea what he wants me to do?"

He promptly snatched the letter from her hand and started to read. His tone mocked her. "The bearer of this letter is a good friend. Please go with him and do as he says. Don't argue..."

Adi snatched the letter back. "I can read," she said. "Now, if you understand the English language as well as you seem to, please answer my question. What does Stuart want me to do?"

He exaggerated his words, speaking very slowly. "He wants you to come with me to Devil's Swamp."

"Don't use that tone with me. I'm not an idiot."

He pointed to her dress. "You're just a woman with a terrible disease who begged me to rape her a few minutes ago."

Adi followed his pointing finger. The long gaping tear on the front of her dress now revealed not only her corset but a fair amount of her breasts as well. She quickly pocketed the letter and rushed to cover herself.

“I expect a straight answer before I consider riding into a swamp with the likes of you,” Adi mumbled while trying to hold the front of her dress together.

“The likes of me?” he growled.

“Why does Stuart want me to go with you?” Adi snarled back.

“The hell if I know.” He made an oath of that term of endearment. “I hadn’t seen Stuart in months. I received a letter just like you did. A letter I’m sure I’ll regret receiving. Let me correct myself, a letter I already regret receiving. In it, Stuart asked me to take you to Chichene in Devil’s Swamp.”

“Chichene?”

“Chichene Muchihira. She’s a *hopoye*, a holy woman.”

Adi eyed him with suspicion. “Is this Chichene, uh, is she attractive?” It was a natural question considering Stuart’s obsession with beautiful women and his large number of reckless relationships.

“She’s eighty-three years old and doesn’t have a tooth left in her head. Does that answer your question?”

It did. At least now Adi knew this wasn’t some quest to make amends with one of Stuart’s wronged lovers. “And you really have no idea what Chichene has to tell me?”

Grayson corrected her pronunciation of

Chichene before proceeding. "I have an idea, but I'm not sure, and I don't like to guess. Knowing Stuart it could be many things."

Adi silently agreed with that. Even though she hadn't seen Stuart in the ten years since she had turned fifteen, the brother she remembered had been unconventional and unpredictable. His friends were no doubt doubly odd.

Still, this was Stuart's dying wish, and it was probably important. Perhaps very important. It seemed selfish to deny her brother his last request just because this Grayson Renaux was insolent. Besides, despite Stuart's shortcomings, he wouldn't intentionally put her in danger. If Stuart trusted Mr. Renaux with her safety, then Adi probably could, too.

Probably.

"How long will it take us to get there?" Adi finally asked.

Leaning forward in the saddle, Grayson rested his forearm on the pommel. "About an hour."

Adi swallowed the goose egg in her throat. "Is this swamp a safe place?"

That amused him, and he flashed a distorted grin. "Safer than this town. Stuart made some enemies here."

"Women enemies?"

"Just enemies. The Lanieres are the worst of the lot. You'll have to watch your back around them. They might try to come after you."

Adi silently repeated the surname, committing it to memory. “Why would they want me? They’re Stuart’s enemies.”

“The usual reason. Revenge. Something about Stuart’s involvement with their youngest sister, Lizzie. I think the Laniere brothers would like to do to you what they think Stuart did to Lizzie.” He paused. “If you’re coming along, we have to leave now.” She hesitated. “Trust me. You’re safe with me.”

She certainly wasn’t going to trust him, but he did look capable of protecting her if it came to that. “Will you bring me back here after I’ve met with Chichene?”

Again, he corrected her pronunciation. Again, she scowled.

“Immediately,” he said.

She hated to appear inept in front of him, or anyone. As owner of the McLaurin businesses, she couldn’t afford to show weakness. Still, this could be dangerous...

“Will I ride with you on the stallion?” She asked quickly before reason asserted itself.

“That or walk. Suit yourself.”

Adi managed a snippy look to admonish him. The man obviously wasn’t capable of civility.

She glanced at her torn dress and muddy slippers. She hadn’t brought proper riding clothes but had noticed a cotton skirt in Stuart’s armoire. It probably belonged to one of his lovers, but it

would have to do. She certainly couldn't traipse around a swamp in a silk dress, not even a torn one.

"I need to change first."

"Try not to rip this one. You have nothing beneath that corset I want to see."

Chapter 2



Grayson had lied. It was so bold a lie, it surprised him God hadn't struck him dead.

There was plenty of Adi McLaurin he wanted to see beneath her corset and even more under that skirt. Her body reminded him of thoughts he knew he shouldn't be thinking—especially about a woman who was too white, too rich, and too unattainable. The likes of him could never have the likes of her.

Grayson cursed in silence. That realization was what had kept him standing in Stuart's kitchen watching the woman cry for her dead brother. And he had watched her, silently savoring every graceful movement and delicious curve of her body. By the time she noticed him, the brainless shaft in his pants was stirred into a frenzy. It had also made him temporarily mute and stupid. Damn. He had even pulled a knife on her.

Grayson didn't care for the way Adi's hands clutched at his waist while she rode behind him in

the saddle. Her cheek pressed against his back when he urged the stallion into a faster gait. If he hadn't known she'd lived on a ranch all of her life, he'd have thought riding frightened her. Perhaps he was what frightened her. Either way, he wished she weren't holding on for dear life. He wished he'd brought another horse for her so they wouldn't be this close. Too close for him to ignore her.

A sudden change in wind direction loosened her hair and sent it flying into his face. It tangled with his, some catching on the stubble of his day-old beard. For just a moment, Grayson saw the contrast of their hair colors before she gathered it back into a knot. His, black; hers... he had no idea what color hers was. There wasn't a name for it: not auburn, not blonde, and not brown. It was more like the shades in a late night campfire or autumn leaves. It was many colors all blended into one.

It was so unique it was distracting.

Then there were her eyes. Eyes that vaguely reminded Grayson of his friend Stuart, but hers were a richer color than her brother's. Deep blue. Not like water or the sky. Like some rare bird or exotic flower. Eyes that he was sure would haunt him long after she had left this place.

She definitely smelled like a woman. Fresh and clean. Expensive, like silk and fine lace. A subtle lavender scent pulsed its sweet smell from

her wrists and neck. Grayson had noticed it first as he held her on the floor at Stuart's house.

He'd noticed many things then.

Her complexion and features were delicate—looks designed more for an afternoon social in a fancy parlor than riding through rough trails straddling a horse. But something about her made him think she wasn't nearly as delicate as she looked. After all, she had punched him not once but twice. No woman had ever tried that before.

Why had he been picked for this task? Stuart had, of course, spoken of his sister but he'd described her as prissy, aloof, and as flat in front as the mesa. He must not have seen Adi in a long, long time. She was fiery, temperamental, and most certainly not flat.

So much for any thoughts of returning home for some peace and quiet. Adi McLaurin didn't look like the kind of woman who created peace and quiet anywhere she went.

"Is your lip all right?" she asked softly.

Grayson grimaced. Apparently, when it suited her, Adi McLaurin could be honey-sweet. In Stuart's kitchen, her words had snapped and struck like a blacksnake bullwhip. These words curled around him like a woman's arms.

"It's fine," he answered, purposely keeping his voice flat.

"I am sorry about what happened, about what I did. I'm not in the habit of striking people. I

thought you were..." She paused so long Grayson finished it for her.

"A rapist and a killer?"

"What did you expect me to believe? I find you in my brother's kitchen dressed like this." She grazed his neck with her fingertips and they both jumped, causing the bay to whicker and side step. "Anyway, I got scared. That's why I hit you."

"I didn't mean to scare you, but I often dress this way. It's more comfortable than my jeans."

"Jeans," she repeated. An inflection in her voice made Grayson respond to it as a question.

"I wear white man's jeans. Does that destroy the image you have of me as a murdering, raping savage wearing only a breechcloth?"

"No."

He barely heard her denial. There was something different about her voice. Again. Not admonition. Definitely not fear. Apology, perhaps. Grayson suddenly felt a little guilty for his sharp remark and decided to change the subject. "How was the funeral service this morning?"

"It was well-attended by Stuart's female friends. Several of them introduced themselves to me. I also had a chance to meet Stuart's attorney."

"Ryland Cuevas," Grayson supplied.

"Yes. He's the one who sent me news of Stuart's death. I didn't even know where Stuart was before I heard from Mr. Cuevas." Her voice slipped a notch. Adi bit her lip, refusing to cry

another tear of grief over her brother, especially in front of this man. “He also told me I was Stuart’s beneficiary. Did you have any idea Stuart was going to do that?”

Grayson indicated he didn’t with an efficient shake of his head. “It doesn’t surprise me though. Stuart always spoke well of you. He told me he had two more sisters and a brother. Why didn’t the others come?”

It was a difficult question for Adi. The truth was neither her sisters, Ray and Elizabeth, nor her brother, Logan, wanted to come even though she tried to talk them into it. The three still harbored a grudge, or perhaps indifference, because Stuart had walked out on the family so many years ago. Since Stuart had made no attempt to contact them in ten years, they would not to attend his funeral.

“They’re busy in McLaurin with the ranch and some of the family businesses,” she finally answered. “We’re having problems with someone cutting our fences.”

Grayson shifted, his attention obviously peaked. “How much of a problem?”

“Enough. I plan to put sheep in a particular pasture, and evidently someone objects.”

“A neighboring rancher perhaps?”

“Maybe.” She shrugged as if she hadn’t given it much thought. It wasn’t true. Adi had given it plenty of thought lately and still didn’t have answers.

She was grateful when Grayson took the hint and changed the topic. “You traveled to Pass Christian alone?”

“Yes.”

He made a sound of disapproval. “Why didn’t you bring your personal maid?”

“I don’t have one,” she remarked crisply. “The ranch has a household staff, but I didn’t expect them to drop everything to accompany me on a two-hour train ride.”

“You should have. It was stupid for you to travel here alone.”

Lord, the man could rile her. “Well, it appears this is my day for doing stupid things.”

She adjusted the saddle scabbard that kept brushing against her skirt. The leather sleeve didn’t hold just a gun, she noticed, but also a rather long thick stick. “What is this thing?”

“A *kapucha*.”

“What’s it for?”

“Inflicting pain.”

“Oh.” She stopped herself short of saying “*of course*.” Deciding the scenery was a safer subject, she concentrated on it. “Is that Devil’s Swamp?” Adi asked after they crossed the grassy ridge.

He merely nodded, offering nothing else.

Adi’s eyes widened at the incredible beauty that lay in front of her. It wasn’t a swamp at all but a lush valley with pine and live oak trees, and a lazy creek banked with bright blue buffalo

clover. It wasn't at all what she had expected.

There was a lone house in the valley. And it was a real house, Adi noted. Not a teepee or hut but a small whitewashed house with a porch and glass windows. Honeysuckle and jasmine vines meandered through the latticework railing on the porch. A barn stood nearby.

In front of the house, Grayson dismounted and without assisting Adi, he started inside.

"What did I expect?" Adi mumbled beneath her breath.

He apparently heard her because he glared over his shoulder but never broke his stride. He was inside before Adi's foot found the stirrup. She lowered herself to the ground and cautiously approached the house, all the while nervously wiping her hands on the sides of her skirt. Before she reached the steps, the door swung open, and an old woman stepped onto the porch.

Adi froze in her tracks.

"*Sa hohchifo ut Chichene,*" the woman said, apparently introducing herself.

Adi didn't have the breath to answer. The woman looked at least a hundred old and was no more than four feet tall. She wore a sack dress of bright red cotton with a beaded neckline. A gaudy silver crucifix hung around her neck. She was nearly bald, but what hair she did have stuck to her scalp like black pencil marks. Wrinkles layered her craggy face, and a limp cheroot dangled from

her ruttled lips.

“*Iyaganasha* said you would come.” The woman motioned for Adi to follow her.

Once inside Adi was actually glad to see Grayson. He seemed normal compared to the woman. He sat at a plain oak table drinking from a china cup that appeared absurdly small in his large hands. Still, he managed a delicate grip on the fragile-looking vessel. The old woman said something to him in her native language, and Grayson responded before looking at Adi.

“Chichene wants you to drink some tea.”

Adi stuttered through her first attempt to answer. “Tea? Uh... what kind of tea?”

He pulled his lips together into a scowl. “It’s not poison.”

“I didn’t think it was.” Adi quickly turned to the old woman and smiled. “I’d love some tea. Thank you.”

When the words brought a wide smile to the woman’s face, Adi saw that Chichene had no teeth. The old woman took Adi by the arm, led her to the table and all but pushed her into the wobbly hickory chair next to Grayson. While Chichene poured another cup of tea from what appeared to be a black clay teapot, Adi looked about her.

The house was clean and simply decorated. A bed on one side of the room was neatly made-up with a colorful woven blanket and several pillows.

The other side of the room was the kitchen , where they sat. There was a small smooth stone fireplace in the middle of the wall. Several braided rugs covered part of the floor, and woven cane baskets hung on the walls. There appeared to be another room, but the door was closed to it at the back of the house. A bedroom, she guessed.

“*Iyaganasha* said you would come,” Chichene repeated when she placed the cup of tea in Adi’s hand. Adi looked inquisitively at Grayson, but it was Chichene who answered. “*Iyaganasha* is a spirit who trains me to use my power.”

How should Adi respond to that? Not wanting to risk offending the woman or her religious beliefs, Adi smiled politely and took a sip of the tea. It was surprisingly good and smelled like mint and honey. Like Grayson’s mouth, she realized.

“What’s the name of your tribe?” Adi asked, hoping she could soon move on to the subject of Stuart.

With a lumbering effort Chichene sat across from her. “*Siah* Choctaw. I am Choctaw.”

“Choctaw? I didn’t realize there were any Choctaw Indians in Texas. I thought your tribe was in Oklahoma.”

“Choctaw are many places,” Chichene continued while Grayson virtually ignored the women and their conversation. Chichene flicked the ashes from her cheroot toward the hearthstone and missed. “Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma. Some

on the reservation. Others own their tribal lands. I am from the red village of the Choctaw *Ocdentle*, The West Choctaw.”

“And you live here in Devil’s Swamp?”

“Yes. I am a *hopoye* and *aliktce*.” She paused before she translated. “I am a holy woman and healer for the red village.”

Adi wanted to remain courteous and ask about the red village, but more than that she wanted to finish her business and return to Pass Christian. “Chichene?” Her pronunciation didn’t sound right, but neither the woman nor Grayson corrected her. “My brother, Stuart—”

“Ah, yes,” she interrupted with a gaping, toothless smile. Her plum-colored gums rubbed together in a chewing motion. “Stuart.” Chichene made three syllables of his name. “He was a friend of the red village.” She gave a reluctant nod. “A friend of mine, too.”

“It pleases me to hear that.” Again, it was rote politeness. What followed wasn’t. Adi knew it sounded brusque, but she didn’t want to waste any more time. “Do you know why Stuart wanted me to come here to see you?”

Chichene and Grayson exchanged enigmatic glances, and it seemed to Adi that Grayson looked away much too quickly. He hadn’t done that even once when they were still in Stuart’s kitchen. She knew from experience that he was very good at holding a stare.

The old woman spoke several sentences to him in Choctaw, but he merely shrugged. After Chichene asked another question, Grayson answered with one word. “*Keyu.*”

“You had not seen your brother in many years, I believe?” Chichene asked Adi.

“Ten years.” The silence that followed made her want to add more, but it didn’t seem an appropriate time for her to bring up the McLaurin family squabbles and the reasons Stuart left. Yet another raging argument with their father and Stuart had fled the family home never to return. Adi couldn’t even remember what had started the argument. If either her father or Stuart were alive, she doubted they could remember either.

“Seven years ago, Stuart married someone from the red village,” Chichene explained dispassionately.

“Married?” Adi repeated and nearly burst out laughing at such a thought. Stuart married? Stuart married to a Choctaw Indian? That didn’t sound like her brother at all. When he still lived at the ranch, he spent most of his time trying to seduce as many women as possible. He must have really changed in the past ten years.

Chichene nodded. “Her name was Helen.”

“Was?”

“She died two years ago from cramp colic.” Chichene lifted her hands to the ceiling and whispered a short chant. Adi figured the gesture

was akin to saying, “*May she rest in peace.*” Chichene continued, “Your brother loved Helen.”

Adi didn’t know how to react. It pleased her that Stuart had finally found happiness in his life, but at the same time, she was sad that he had lost the one woman he loved enough to marry.

“Helen was Grayson’s sister,” Chichene went on to say in her discussing-the-weather tone.

“Sister?” Adi looked toward Grayson, but he was staring into his tea. His long fingers completely encircled the cup. “But Mr. Renaux isn’t really Choctaw.”

“I am Choctaw,” he corrected, a roar of thunder in his voice. As if to emphasize his point, he slammed the cup onto the table.

“He’s half Choctaw,” Chichene amended, seemingly enjoying Grayson’s fit of temper. “As was his sister, Helen.”

“I don’t understand why I needed to come,” Adi pointed out. “If my brother’s wife is dead, why would he want me to come here and take care of personal business?”

Grayson rose abruptly and started toward the closed door at the end of the room. Chichene reached across the table and patted Adi’s hand as if to comfort her. “Your brother’s personal business is Kit.”

Adi decided Chichene’s comment clarified nothing. Who or what was Kit? Adi prayed it wasn’t a disgruntled lover like the Lanieri woman

whose brothers were so riled at Stuart. Perhaps she would get lucky, and Kit would be property or something impersonal like a boat. She had no time to question Chichene further because Grayson reappeared.

“This is Kit,” he said.

Adi looked beside him and saw a little girl. With cinnamon brown hair and large blue eyes. She wore a bright green gingham pinafore over a white dress. Tiny ribbon bows dangled from the laces of her high-topped shoes. The child peered around Grayson’s legs, but she didn’t look frightened. An impish smile was on her mouth. Adi guessed she was no more than five or six years old.

Stuart’s smile, Adi realized.

“Is she...” Adi started, but found she had a difficult time asking what she wanted to know.

“Stuart’s daughter,” Grayson answered, almost in a bark.

The child giggled and bolted from behind Grayson. In a leaping bound, she landed squarely in Adi’s lap. Then she wrapped her small arms around Adi’s neck and kissed her soundly on the cheek.

“*Nanih*,” the little girl whispered.

Still reeling from the child’s show of affection, Adi looked at Chichene. “*Nanih*? What does it mean?”

Chichene smiled a toothless grin. “Mother.”

Chapter 3



The little girl sat on the rug playing with a pair of small wooden horses while Adi watched. Occasionally, Kit made whickering sounds to accompany the toy's movements. Only a few minutes had passed since Adi learned the girl's name and identity, but to Adi it seemed a lifetime ago.

This child was Stuart's daughter? It was hard to deny it. Adi could see the strong family resemblance. Kit certainly had the McLaurin eyes. The chin. She also had the small oval shaped birthmark on her arm that both Adi and her sister, Ray, had.

Kit was definitely a McLaurin.

Now what? She knew this was more than just dealing with Stuart's personal property. Why hadn't Stuart told any of the McLaurins he had a daughter? Why not at least send them a letter? Something?

"How old is she?" Adi asked Chichene.

"Why don't you ask Kit? She can talk,"

Grayson snapped with more than a hint of anger in his voice.

Adi gave a nervous smile and looked at the child. "How old are you, Kit?"

She held up five fingers and giggled again. "After next month, I must use two hands."

"And your name, is it just Kit?"

"Katherine Adina Renaux McLaurin," she said thrusting out her chest.

Adi suddenly felt a little teary-eyed. It pleased her that Stuart had named his child after her. Perhaps her big brother hadn't forgotten her after all. She had to clear her throat before she managed to say anything. "Well, Kit, it appears we share the same name. I'm your father's sister, your Aunt Adi. You called me *Nanah*, but you do understand I'm not your mother?"

"I know that," she said in a singsong voice with the smile never leaving her face. "You're daddy's Best Beloved."

Adi reluctantly smiled at the description. It was what Stuart had called her when she was a child. It was extremely flattering since he called one of his other sisters Mule Ears, and he referred to his brother, Logan, as Churn-head. The youngest sister, Elizabeth, he had teased with Prissy Pants. "You look very much like your daddy," Adi told the child.

Kit cocked her head to one side and spoke in a mock Scottish brogue. "Aye, Lass, I'm a

McLaurin from the tip of my wee nose to the tips of my wee toes.”

Adi laughed before she could stop herself. Her father, Grange McLaurin, had used that expression often with her when she was Kit’s age.

“So you don’t doubt her paternity?” Grayson asked sternly.

“Of course not. Anyone would know she’s Stuart’s child after a mere glimpse.” She crossed her arms over her chest and nervously rubbed the sleeves of her blouse. “Perhaps we should talk further in private?”

Grayson’s expression soured even more. “Anything you have to say, you say in front of her.”

Adi glanced at Chichene who had walked to the fireplace. “Why didn’t Stuart’s attorney, Mr. Cuevas, tell me about this situation? I spoke to him right after the funeral, and he said nothing. There’s no mention in Stuart’s will either.”

“Kit is not a situation,” Grayson interrupted. “She’s a child.”

Adi accepted his criticism of her choice of words and nodded apologetically. “Why didn’t Mr. Cuevas tell me about Kit?”

“He probably didn’t know about her,” Grayson also mellowed his tone, no doubt remembering Kit was listening to every word. “Stuart rarely took Kit to his house in Pass Christian. Not because he tried to hide her away from the

world,” Grayson hastily added. “He did have plans to move her there when she was a little older, but he wanted her to spend her childhood in the village.”

“What exactly did Stuart want me to do about Kit?” Adi was almost afraid to hear the answer. Kit obviously had to come back with her to the McLaurin ranch. But how would such a young girl adjust to moving so far away? And would she be able to help Kit adapt with so many things unsettled at home?

Her fiancé, Mark Wainwright, had said he didn’t want children. Even though Adi wanted children of her own, she had reluctantly agreed with him. She shuddered to think what Mark would say if she returned to McLaurin with the young girl. She shuddered even more when she thought of leaving Kit behind.

“I mean, the way I see it,” Adi continued before either Grayson or Chichene could speak. “Kit is a McLaurin, and she belongs at the McLaurin ranch. With me. With her father’s family.”

“And what am I?” Grayson snarled. “Have you already forgotten I’m her uncle? Kit has as much of my blood as she does yours.”

“I am aware of that,” Adi said crisply, “but who would take care of her if she stayed here? You?”

“The village will take care of her, and this is not your decision to make, Miss McLaurin. Stuart

wanted Kit to live with the Choctaw. With me. With her mother's family. It was his dying wish. Even a white woman should be able to understand that."

Adi pinched herself very hard to keep from yelling at him. Grayson Renaux was the most pig-headed man she'd ever met. "Of course I understand it. But can you also understand I'm concerned about my niece's future? Stuart might have made that dying wish because he thought he had no other choice. He might have thought he couldn't turn to his family. Well, he was wrong."

It was as if Grayson returned fire. His voice matched hers in severity. "And how do you know this? Stuart—"

Chichene groaned so loudly it got everyone's attention. "You both give me a pain in the head. Sit," Chichene motioned for Adi to sit at the table, and she reluctantly obeyed. "And listen." Chichene cast a squinted eye in Grayson's direction. "We have many things to talk about. Important things. Too many for you two to carry on like piglets squealing for their mother."

Adi conceded to her part in the "carrying on" with a thrifty nod of her head. She had wanted so badly to win the argument with Grayson she had forgotten the point of the conversation. And the point was Kit. The decisions made here today should be made for Kit's benefit. A quick glance at Grayson revealed he felt the same way. All

right, she hoped he felt the same way. It was hard to tell when she looked into his narrowed eyes. “Fine. Then let’s talk. What important things did you want to discuss, Chichene?”

“The land of the red village.” She made a circular motion with her hand. “It all belonged to Stuart.”

Adi didn’t really see that as a problem. “Where is the red village?”

“It is here, where we are now. Stuart kept the land in his name so we could stay here. Had a Choctaw purchased it—”

“The state would have stolen it from us and sent us all to the reservation,” Grayson interrupted. “We were smart enough not to let that happen again.”

His remark took Adi by surprise, but she decided not to address his obvious anger. She knew all too well that most Indians were bitter about the way the government had treated them. “How much land is in the red village?”

“About three hundred acres, perhaps a little more,” Chichene answered.

Adi thought she understood their concern. Grayson and Chichene thought she would take the property since she was Stuart’s beneficiary. “Well, I certainly have no intention of claiming your land. I wouldn’t dream of forcing your people to leave.” She turned to Grayson. “How many of the Choctaw are here?”

He looked away, and Adi saw yet another glimpse of anger. Not just anger. Fury. “Just Chichene, Kit and me.”

Adi was certain she misunderstood him and waited for Grayson to explain. Instead Chichene spoke. “We are all that’s left of the red village. Influenza took many lives three years ago. Others left to join family elsewhere. The white village has about one hundred and fifty people.”

“White village?” Adi repeated.

Her question seemed to rile Grayson even more. He explained as if teaching a history lesson to a difficult student. “Our tribe is divided into two villages: red and white. The red village rules in times of war; the white, during times of peace. Since we haven’t been at war in decades, the red village has dwindled.”

“There were also no other males born to carry on the lines of the red village,” Chichene explained further. “Grayson is the only remaining *tushka*. The last Choctaw *Ocdentle* warrior. Unless he has a son, the red village will be no more.”

Despite what seemed to be grave news, Chichene showed no emotion about her revelation. Neither did Grayson. Adi thought carefully about her next question for Chichene. “If Stuart’s final wishes are carried out, and Kit remains here, what will happen to her?”

A long awkward silence followed until Chichene finally spoke. “She would live in the

white village until she was of age. She will be better cared for there, and I can go with her.”

So Kit wouldn't be raised alone by either Chichene or Grayson. She would live with other children, other families. With the Choctaw. That wasn't what Adi wanted, but part of her had to accept it was what Stuart wanted for his daughter.

“Could I possibly visit this White Village?” Adi asked. “I wouldn't feel comfortable just sending her there. I want to know if she'd be all right.”

Grayson mumbled something and shook his head. “There might be a problem.”

“What problem?”

“The white village may not take her.” He glanced at Kit, and the soft smile they exchanged caused Adi's heart to melt. It was obvious to her that Grayson and Kit loved each other very much. It softened Adi's feelings toward Grayson. Slightly.

“Within our district, birth determines where a Choctaw lives, either the white or red village,” Grayson continued. “Chichene can live in either place because she is a holy woman. I live here because my mother was of the red village. Her father and brothers were *tushkas*.”

“And what about your father?” Adi asked so quickly she didn't think about it first. She should have. The scowl returned to Grayson's face.

“He has no part in this. The point is Kit was

born in the red village through the blood of my sister. For her to live in the white village, the *mingo* must agree.”

“*Mingo*?” Adi asked cautiously.

“The leader of the white village. He is responsible for all peacetime tribal hold decisions.”

“What is tribal hold?”

Grayson answered her slowly, almost impatiently. “Tribal law. Tradition unique to our particular district of the Choctaw people. We must petition the *mingo* for Kit to live there.”

Again, Adi was almost afraid to ask another question since it was all she had done for the last several minutes. “How do you make this petition?”

“We, you and I, must go to the *mingo*,” Grayson began.

“Wait,” Adi interrupted. “Why do I have to go?”

“Because you’re the father’s family,” Grayson continued. “The father’s family must make the petition because the red village has patriarchal descent. We are traced and identified through our fathers.”

Adi rubbed her temples to relieve the pounding headache she felt coming. She thought she understood. “How do I make this petition?”

“You must go to the *mingo* and the council and make the request.”

“And who sits on this council?”

“Prominent men and women of the white village.”

“Women?”

“Both men and women govern the white village. Because this is a peace time matter, the council holds the opinions of the women highest.”

“How long does this petition take? I planned to return home tomorrow.”

Grayson rose from the table and walked to the window. “If we leave now, we can perhaps have a decision by this evening or morning.”

Adi groaned. “You mean I would have to spend the night in Devil’s Swamp?”

“The white village is in Honey Field,” Chichene corrected. “And yes, you will probably have to stay the night because it will take you several hours to get there. The white village will give you provisions and provide you with sleeping quarters. Kit can remain here with me until you return.”

Adi felt she really didn’t have a choice. She couldn’t very well turn her back on this, not when it involved Stuart’s child. One more day of her time wasn’t so much to ask. “Then I suppose we should leave right away.”

Another long silence followed. It was so long Adi knew something else was wrong. “We must still work out the problem with the land,” Chichene calmly added. “By your law, you will inherit these lands because of your brother’s will.”

“That isn’t a problem. I’ve already said I don’t

want the land. I'll sign it over to whomever necessary."

"You cannot place it in the care of any of us," Chichene pointed out. "Grayson is right. If the land is in possession of the Choctaw, the whites may take it."

It was hard for Adi to argue with that, and she briefly felt she should apologize for being white. "What do you want me to do?"

"Keep the land in your name but give assurance to the *mingo* that you are not the owner and will not claim the land for your clan."

"All right. Can I do that when I petition for Kit?"

Grayson nodded. There was another pause before Chichene spoke again. "There is another problem not so easy to solve."

When Chichene did not elaborate, Adi prompted her with "Yes?"

"The *mingo* may not hear your petition."

"What? You just said—"

"You are white and cannot hold council," Grayson quickly explained. "You are not part of the Choctaw tribe."

Adi stammered several times. "And what can I do about that?"

She could tell from Chichene's expression there was a solution, but the woman was very slow to answer. "The only way is for you to become a Choctaw."

Adi nearly laughed. “That’s quite impossible. My father was Grange McLaurin, a Scots-Irishman. My mother is of German ancestry, and I doubt if you’ve ever seen a Choctaw with this color hair.”

She lifted strands of her golden auburn hair in jest. Grayson looked, keeping his gaze on her as she watched the strands sift through her fingers. She felt caught by his intense expression.

Meanwhile, Chichene idly sipped her tea. “You can come into the tribe in another way than through birth.”

“How, pray tell?” Adi asked.

“As Stuart became one of us. Through a tribal ceremony.”

She sighed heavily. “All right. A ceremony. Tell me about it.”

“As a *hopoye* I can perform it,” Chichene explained with no emotion in her voice. “It is an exchange of gifts and promises.”

“I’m a Presbyterian,” Adi said in frustration. “I will not pray to pagan gods.”

“Choctaw do not pray to pagan gods either. There is only one god, *Ababinilli*, and only the *hopoye* address him during the ceremony. You may pray to your own Presbyterian God if you wish, but it may surprise you to learn that He is not much different from mine.”

Adi shifted uneasily. A ceremony. A Choctaw ceremony, no less, with gifts and promises. One

performed by a woman with no teeth. She wanted to give Stuart a good tongue lashing for putting her in this position, but one look at her niece, and Adi knew she had no choice. She wasn't doing this for Stuart but for Kit. For a child who was already part of her heart.

For this child she would do whatever it took.
She would become a Choctaw.

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Delores Fossen

I was born in a small town near New Orleans, but thanks to the Air Force, I've lived all over the world. Now I call San Antonio, Texas home.

As a brand new lieutenant I was assigned to a fighter squadron in England. There were 68 men and only one woman—me. Needless to say, it was a great place to meet guys. I met one, Tom, during a simulated war exercise while I was wearing full combat gear and a gas mask that made me look like a bug. He asked me out anyway. Things worked out because we're married and have 4 children; Charra, Clinton, Justin, and Beth.

Other than the Air Force, I've worked in several fields: as a teaching assistant at the University of Maryland, special education teacher, stained glass artist, and of course, a writer. Writing is and always will be my true passion.

UNBRIDLED is my first novel, but I have also had short stories and articles published in several women's magazines. I love writing historicals as well as contemporary romantic suspense.

I had a lot of inspiration for the setting and characters. My great-grandmother, Lide, was Choctaw. Before her death she told me fabulous stories about bone pickers and lovers, souls that stayed together even after death. I listened and wrote about it. Hopefully, UNBRIDLED captures some of her Choctaw spirit. If not, I'm sure somehow, some way, she'll let me know.



Delores Fossen

“Unbridled is an exciting page-turner with twists and turns that keep the reader enthralled.” *Martha Hix*

Texas rancher and socialite, Adi McLaurin, gets more than she bargained for when she travels to her long-lost brother’s untimely funeral. She discovers she has an orphaned eight-year-old half-breed niece.

Grayson Renaux, the child’s half-Choctaw uncle swore away his own happiness to protect his niece and consequently swore to protect his dead friend’s crazy sister. But, if he didn’t protect her from himself, it would destroy Adi’s well ordered life and his niece’s too.

To save her family’s ranch, Adi had agreed to marry a state politician. Her wedding gown was ready and the guests beginning to arrive for the week long celebration. But her life, Grayson’s, and the lives of all of her siblings are suddenly turned upside down when Adi finds herself unwittingly, but legally, bound to Grayson.

“The lovemaking scenes are imaginative, sensual, tasteful, and include some of the most passionate kisses I’ve ever read.” *Scribes World*