



No Longer a Stranger

By Joan Johnston

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1865: The Civil War was over, but new dangers lay in wait across the open frontier. Disguised as a boy in buckskins, pretty Rebecca Hunter wasn't afraid of any enemy who might cross her path in the Rocky Mountains. She vowed never to belong to any man...until she met city-bred Christopher Kincaid, the stranger she rescued from a fierce band of Sioux. All too quickly she learned how powerful an attraction can be between a man and a woman.

No Indian ambush could scar Kincaid as deeply as the tragic loss and broken heart he suffered in the war. Now, being nursed back to health by Reb in an isolated mountain cabin, he found himself coming alive with a powerful desire for her. But how could he know that his mission for the government would jeopardize his chances of winning Reb's heart, bring down the wrath of a renegade Sioux chief, and test the lengths he'd be willing to go to convince this passionate woman to stay beside him for all time?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Joan Johnston is the *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author of more than fifty novels and novellas with more than 15 million copies of her books in print. She has worked as a director of theatre, drama critic, newspaper editor, college professor, and attorney on her way to becoming a full-time writer. She lives in Colorado and Florida. You can find out more about Joan at JoanJohnston.com.

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Chapter 3

Kincaid woke to the throbbing pain in his massive shoulders and arms, which were stretched out taut away from either side of his body. The effort to flex his benumbed hands resulted in agony as tightening thongs bit into raw wrists. His head hung forward, so that when he blinked open his eyes to the early-morning light he saw only the muddy ground, strewn with pine needles, below him.

A slight turn of his pounding head in either direction revealed his black-booted feet, spread far apart and secured by rawhide at the ankles. His eyes followed the rawhide on one side to where it wrapped around a thick spruce.

Kincaid closed his eyes and struggled mentally to orient himself.

A pulsing ache in the muscles of his right thigh took him back to a scene from the past. The scream of the shrapnel that had left him with a slight but permanent limp resounded in his ears. He jerked unconsciously at the memory of that first awful impact of metal on muscle. It was a nightmare he relived time and again, but always with the same painful ending. He remembered anxiously watching the slender woman, her long blond hair windblown around a terrified, heart-shaped face, racing toward where he had been pitched from the saddle by the blast. He'd warned her to get down, but was unheard amidst the chaos of defeated soldiers fleeing on horseback and on foot.

Suddenly, a blossom of red unfolded on the front of her high-necked gray wool dress. A tentative hand reached up to admire the deadly corsage, and she sought Kincaid's steel gray eyes with her own silvery blue ones, a poignant sadness replacing the fear for him on her face. Stumbling unsteadily, she took one more step. Then he watched helplessly as his wife crumpled, like a flower trodden to the ground.

He dragged himself to her side, forced to pause occasionally by the bursting shells around him. Finally, he cradled her head in his arms as he lay full-length beside her on the red clay. He searched her face for signs of life, but when he saw none, gathered her close to him, their long bodies molding perfectly, and pressed gentle kisses on each closed eyelid, and finally on the still-warm mouth. The taste of his loss was bitter on his lips. Tenderly, he laid her head down and rested his own cheek beside hers on the cool clay.

His throat constricted so that he couldn't breathe without turning his gaze away from the precious young face to the sky above, dotted with ugly clouds of black smoke. If only she hadn't insisted on being where she didn't belong in the first place. If only he'd demanded she obey him and leave. But, oh, how he'd secretly admired her for staying.

"Damn you, Laurie!" he raged. He hugged the lifeless body to his own in frustration, while tears of anguish squeezed from eyelids drifting closed in unconsciousness.

But the war of brother against brother was over now and had been for more than a month. Kincaid realized he'd remembered too far back in the past, and wished he hadn't. He'd awakened an ache in his heart as persistent as the one in his wounded thigh. He forced his mind to focus on solving the puzzle of how he had come to be tied, spread-eagled, between two trees in the middle of a forbidding pine forest.

Two other minds worried over the same problem from another perspective.

"I count nine Sioux, including the lookout," Adam whispered to his lanky, buckskin-clad younger sister. "Too many for us to kill before one of them kills him."

"Why do you suppose they kept him alive?" Reb asked, as they observed the unknown man from their hiding place behind a mammoth boulder.

"Don't expect we'll ever know. Could be his size. That is one *big* man. Maybe they just want to see if the extra inches give him extra courage."

Millions of pine needles and spruce branchlets rustling in the wind muffled their voices, and the strong breeze carried the softened sound away from the Indian camp.

Reb appraised the body that was stripped to the waist and suspended between two trees. She found no fault in the impressive shoulders and chest, the defined muscles across the abdomen, or the strong, sinewy thighs molded into a pair of Union Army pants. She was curious to see the face that went with such a body, but the head hung forward, hidden in the shade of the forest.

They were several hours' ride south of Blue's cabin, on their way home with the beaver skins they'd picked up from the loner in exchange for the coffee, flour, and beans they'd delivered to him. Located where the Laramie River crossed the plateaulike summit of the mountains, the cabin was more than fifty miles, as the crow flies, from Fort Laramie on the plains directly to the east, and equally distant from their home at the base of the mountains to the southwest.

Reb wondered whether the presence of this captive meant another massacre of soldiers on patrol like the many throughout the winter. "Aside from the blood on his forehead, he doesn't appear to be hurt," she said.

"Not yet," Adam replied. "Those eagle feathers identify that lookout as one of Standing Buffalo's renegades, the ones Dad warned us about. I've seen samples of their handiwork. The kindest thing we can do for that stranger is shoot him."

Reb's senses rebelled against the mutilation planned for the magnificent specimen of mankind she saw before her. Surely the fates that had caused them to stumble onto this warrior camp could not have intended they pass without changing the now dismal outlook of this stranger's life.

"There must be a way we can save him. Think, Adam."

"Whatever we do should be done soon, before those sleeping Indians wake up," he said, "Or we could take a chance that they're planning to postpone their entertainment until they get to wherever they're headed. We might be able to steal their prisoner away during the journey."

Adam figured the band was headed for the Powder River far to the north near the Black Hills, where Red Cloud's Oglala and other Sioux less inclined to peace than Spotted Tail were congregating. If so, he didn't like the idea of trekking across mountains and plains after the Indians. They were too likely to be discovered and share the stranger's fate. He said as much to Reb.

"You're right," she agreed. "What about a trade?"

"We don't have a snowball's chance in the sun of bargaining with Standing Buffalo for that man's life, even if I were willing to give up Blue's beaver skins, which I'm not. Those Brulés won't trust us as far as they can throw us. They'll kill him sure if we charge in there. No, I'm afraid he's a goner, Reb. There's nothing we can do."

As he finished speaking, a far-fetched idea came to Adam of how to save the doomed man. He rose, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Yep. The kindest thing we can do is shoot him."

Adam clamped a hand over Reb's open mouth as she jumped up to protest.

"Listen," he whispered excitedly. "I've got a crazy idea, but it just might work. What's the first thing those Sioux will do if we start shooting?"

Reb mumbled against Adam's hand, but he ignored her in his exuberance.

"Kill that stranger, that's what! So we're going to 'kill' him first. That is, we're going to make them *think* we've killed him, so they're more concerned about escaping our ambush than hanging around here to carve up a dead body."

The large, liquid brown eyes rimmed with long black lashes, together with the light dusting of freckles visible across Reb's nose above his callused hand, reminded Adam of a startled fawn. When she mumbled again in frustration, he took his hand away from her full, still-parted lips.

"How?" she hissed.

"You're going to shoot him. I think if you hit him just above the heart, that ought to convince them he's dead."

Reb sucked in a breath of air between clenched teeth, but said nothing.

"I'll sneak around to the far side of the clearing. When I'm set, I'll shoot the lookout. That'll leave eight Indians. We've got two seven-shot Spencer rifles, four Colt repeaters, our knives, and the element of surprise on our side. We can't lose," he said with a lopsided grin.

"When the lookout falls, you shoot the stranger," he continued. "I'll unhobble the Indian ponies so that they stampede when the noise starts. Don't stop firing till they're all dead or gone. I'll be doing my part from the other side. Any questions?"

"What if I miss?"

"You miss those Indians, and we'll be dead ducks."

"You know that's not what I mean," Reb said. "What if I accidentally kill that stranger?" She gnawed her lower lip with her straight white teeth, her forehead wrinkled in concern. She was a crack shot, but had never aimed her gun at a man before, only at animals and standing targets.

"Like I said, the kindest thing we can do is shoot him. Besides, you're too good a shot to miss. If it bothers you so much, we can just leave the way we came. He's no worse off if we leave him dead than if we leave him alive."

Adam might be a pragmatist, but Reb was an eternal optimist. Besides, she very much wanted to see the stranger's face, and she was more likely to get her wish if they tried to save him.

She had no qualms about killing the nine Sioux when she remembered the Morgans. Those horrible deaths, among others over the winter, were evidence that a state of undeclared war existed with the Indians -- at least, undeclared on the white man's side.

The previous November, Colonel John Chivington had ordered the murder of Cheyenne men, women, and children waiting at Sand Creek to begin peace talks. The unprovoked attack of the army on the peaceful Cheyenne was the last straw. In retaliation, the Sioux, Arapaho, and Cheyenne had indulged in what many mountain men considered a quite justifiable rampage.

The Indians began paying the white man back for the degradation of drunkenness caused by his whiskey, for diseases brought back to Indian husbands by wives who prostituted themselves with the soldiers for scraps of food, for the theft of government annuities by dishonest Indian agents, and above all, for the lies of the White Father who br...

Users Review

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