



THE MAN SHE FEARS
IS HER ONLY CHANCE
OF SURVIVAL.

Heart of a
WARRIOR
ANGELA K. COUCH

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Dedication

To my sister...Christine
Thank you for the inspiration.

1

Autumn 1859

Eyes clamped shut against the subsiding ache in her abdomen, Christina Astle sucked in cool mountain air. Pine saturated the breath and constricted her lungs like the corsets she'd happily given up only months earlier. Her hand stole across her extended stomach. What had she been thinking, agreeing to follow Anthony away from society, safety, and a house with four walls? What if they didn't make it to Oregon in time? She refused to give birth with nothing but canvas overhead.

The wagon wheel dropped into another rut, and a gasp escaped her, drawing her husband's gaze. "I'm sorry. I wish I could go slower, but we're at least a mile behind them." He glanced at the sun hovering above, then slipped the gold watch from his breast pocket and flipped it open. "It's after three already."

"I know...and I am fine." Christina raised her chin a degree but refused to look at him and his perpetually concern-laden eyes. Anthony did everything within his power to keep her comfortable, stopping often, even when it meant trailing behind the rest of the wagon

train. As long as they caught up by nightfall. Still, heat rose in her chest. They should have waited another year, or—better yet—never left Cincinnati in the first place.

The crack of a discharging rifle pierced the valley and deepened into echo. Then a scream, soft and haunting. More gun fire followed, ricocheting off the high mountain ridges.

The wagon lurched to a halt, and Christina grabbed for the seat. She stared ahead at the empty trail scarred with evidence of those who led the way. Horses. Cattle. Families with children. *God, no!*

The wagon jerked and rocked off the trail, reins slapping the backs of the mules.

Christina dug her fingertips into the raw wood. “What are you doing?”

“I’m taking it away from the trail. I’m not leaving you sitting in plain sight.”

“Leaving me? You can’t. We don’t know what’s going on.” Her head spun. “No, Anthony. Not with these mountains full of savages. Don’t you dare leave me here.”

The wagon tipped slightly then righted, dropped over the slope, and rolled into an aspen grove. White bark glimmered in the bright sun, and young saplings sprang back into place as the wheels passed over.

“There’s only one way to find out what’s happening. If they’re being attacked, they’ll need help.” Anthony lunged to the ground and unharnessed the mules, fastening them farther out of the way. All except the one trained to ride. Anthony left him near the wagon, heaving a saddle over his withers and forcing a heavy bit into his mouth.

Christina remained paralyzed on the seat.

“Anthony...no. Don't go.”

He said nothing as he loaded his revolver and strapped it to his thigh. With the Winchester tucked under his arm, he swung onto the back of the animal and twisted the reins through his fingers. “You'll be safe here. Most likely it's nothing.” He looked away, giving the mule an angry kick. The animal balked but lurched to a trot toward the trail.

“Anthony!”

He rotated in the saddle enough to meet her gaze and yanked back on the bit. His brown eyes studied her face, and his chest released a sigh. “Chris, I have to go. You know where the other rifle is, and the shells are under the seat if you have any need of them. I'll be back soon.”

Christina sagged against the back of the wagon seat. The edge bit her spine. Hooves scraped the loose rock of mountain trail and faded with the distant gun fire.

~*~

William T. O'Connell.

The sharp point of the flint scored the flat surface of the boulder, deepening each letter, faded by time. Eight years. One would think the memories, the pain, and the anger would have faded as well, but those wounds had been etched deep.

Towan stood and chucked the flint against the broad base of an overgrown pine. He dusted the forest debris from his buckskin leggings. Enough hiding. He was no longer the hate-filled boy. Eight years in these mountains had made him a man. A warrior. Sucking breath into his lungs, he stepped away from the

headstone, the resting place of everything he had been—everything his father had made him. William O’Connell Junior was dead. A fate that should be shared by the man who gave him that name.

Resting his palm over the hilt of his knife, Towan turned to his horse and mounted. A few more days would see him in Fort Bridger. If rumors held any truth, his father would be there.

The horse jerked its head as the cliffs behind him echoed thunder. Yet not a cloud in sight. He encouraged his sorrel mare down the slope into the thicker foliage and toward the Oregon Trail. He’d planned on staying away from the wagon trains and settlers that frequented it, but curiosity nagged.

With the sound of gunfire reverberating off every mountain ridge, it could not be trusted to pinpoint the source. Keeping to the shadows, he followed the trail east until the first team of horses came into view. Angry and frightened shouts had already replaced the booming discharge of rifles, and Towan slipped to the ground to secure his mare out of sight. He didn’t want to draw the fire of a nervous teamster.

Keeping his head down, Towan crept through the underbrush lining the trail, the silent placement of each step foremost on his mind. With little more than a dozen wagons, and this late in the season, it was improbable they delayed their journey for anything trivial. Something had armed every man and put them on alert. Most perched on their high seats, scanning the forests, rifles ready, while others hurried along the line, also carrying weapons. The only sign of women or children were the round eyes peeking from behind canvas.

“What do you see, Cal?” a large man hollered as

he made his way from the front.

A lanky one slapped his wide brimmed hat against his thigh. "Not a thing. Do you reckon they've gone?"

"One can hope." The first swore. "I thought the folks at Fort Bridger said we shouldn't have any problems with Indians through here. Anyone hurt?"

"Just Wilson. He dislocated his shoulder. Still hasn't learned to hold that Winchester right." He pulled the hat back over his greying head, his gaze wandering over where Towan crouched behind a low juniper. "Makes you wonder if they were even trying. What if they're scouts for a larger war party?"

"Let's pray that's not the case. With all that paint on their faces..." His head shook. "They obviously have something on their minds. I think its best we move again, find a safer place to set camp."

Cal sent a worried glance to the back of the train. "What about the Astles? We can't abandon that young couple out there with Injuns set on trouble. I don't want that woman and her baby on my conscience."

The large man spewed a string of curses. "Do you propose we wait here, or send someone back for them?"

A cry rang out and both men spun. A rider appeared around the last bend. "That might not be necessary after all. There's Anthony now."

Towan sank deeper into the woods and started back to his horse. Enough wasting his time. The first snows would soon settle into these passes. The fate of these people was none of his concern, and if he left now, he could travel another mile or so before nightfall.

Besides, as far as he knew, none of the people of the valleys were on the war path. Only vigilantes...like

him.

~*~

Christina pressed her eyes closed, her breath jagged. The sounds of approaching night closed in around her. She'd waited for hours, and still Anthony had not returned. Why? Between pacing back and forth in the confines of the small grove and huddling in the back of the wagon, she listened with the hopes of hearing beyond the pounding of her pulse.

Nothing.

The first few hours she had cursed her husband, cursed leaving civilization, and cursed her stupidity for letting Anthony talk her into anything. Now her cursing faded, becoming silent pleading, sometimes vocal, to the God she hardly knew.

With hands clasped and knuckles white, Christina tried to remember everything Anthony had taught her about prayer. She'd joined her husband enough times to understand what was required. Pray to the Father in the name of the Son. Ask in faith. Have faith.

If only it were as easy as it sounded.

From a nearby branch a small bird sang its lonesome farewell to the sun. Christina shivered, whether from the growing chill in the evening air or the fear gripping her heart so tightly. Still no sign of Anthony.

Oh, please hurry back.

The darkness would be more than she could bear alone, but what could she do? Christina crawled into the small space at the back of the wagon and curled into a ball. With the rifle loaded and tucked close, she closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

Impossible.

The animals of the night began the many rituals they carried for the torture of innocent women abandoned by their husbands. Owls passed along hidden messages to the coyotes or wolves, who answered back in their mournful, yet oft times disturbingly gleeful calls. Deer wandered close, acting as spies. All would soon know she was a helpless woman.

A sharp crack, like a large tree being felled, or the discharge of a gun, jerked her head up and tightened her grip on the rifle.

All this work of espionage against Christina's poor nerves was soon put to shame by a high pitched, soul rending cry. The scream tore through any resolve she had to stay relatively sane. Though Anthony had told her only last night it was nothing more than a lonely mountain lion, Christina pictured the evil face of a painted Indian. He crept through the woods toward her, aided on by the animals who betrayed any form of trust she'd once had in them.

After the longest night ever endured by humankind, the early light of a dearly coveted dawn glowed through the thick canvas. How could nature feign such peace and serenity while a nightmare continued? Anthony still hadn't returned.

Eyes burning from both lack of sleep and all the tears she'd cried in the dark, Christina yanked Anthony's satchel from a hook at the back of the wagon and stuffed two-day-old flatbread on top of the book already nestled in the bottom. She didn't bother to change from the blue calico dress she'd put on yesterday morning but hung the satchel over her shoulders with a canteen and tucked the rifle under her

arm. One of the mules brayed, and Christina released a sigh. She could probably figure out the harness if she had to, having watched Anthony enough times, but to back the wagon through the grove and up over that incline? Forcing her lungs to expand, she turned and took the first step toward the trail.

On foot, the way proved only slightly less rough than on the wagon. The trail wound in the easiest course through the Rocky Mountains, around boulders, up and down slopes, and through valleys. With sharp and jagged rocks raking the worn bottoms of her boots, her feet and ankles soon ached. How much farther could the wagon train be? At least in the daylight the nightmares weren't quite as pungent, though they remained vivid.

Coming around a sharp bend, a dark form appeared on the edge of the meandering trail. As she drew near, what at first looked to be large stone, or perhaps a tree trunk, transformed into a man. A corpse. Two feathered arrow's marked the deed. One protruded from his shoulder, the other from his chest. A wide brimmed hat lay near, no longer covering the familiar, peppery head of Cal Stewart.

Not Cal. He'd been one of their closest friends for the last thousand miles, his encouragement and sense of humor making their journey so much more bearable. And now he was dead? She lifted her gaze upward, but froze at the sight of two brown boots protruding from the brush only ten feet away. As she staggered forward, her jaw sagged, and her free hand rose to cover her open mouth. The tan pants. The moss green shirt. Crimson stains.

Anthony.

The revolver lay at his fingertips. His eyes stared

blankly toward the heavens.

"No." The cry scratched Christina's throat. She stumbled forward and pulled his head onto her lap. A sob strangled her, and she buried her face in his tousled locks. She screamed, her eyes stinging. How could this have happened? Surely it was still a dream—and not real...it couldn't be real. He wouldn't leave her like this.

No, God, no!

How could she possibly keep breathing, keep existing, when the very foundation of her life lay dead? Nothing else mattered. Not the numbing of her legs from how she sat, the sharp pains spiking up and down her back, or the persistent kicks of the child within her womb. She couldn't let Anthony go. Not until she woke from this insanity.

A throaty cry from the thick foliage directly behind her jolted her to her feet. Not a loud cry, but it sent lightning through her. Christina whirled to the shadowed man, the high jaw, the narrowed eyes, and the dark, evil face.

Anthony's murderer had not left.

Forfeiting the rifle not three feet away, she scrambled into the thick branches of the nearby aspen and down a slope which steepened with each step. Horses' hooves against stone and shale drove her on. The yells of the Indians behind her chilled her blood. Did they follow? How long before the cold tip of an arrow pierced her own back? Hopefully it would kill her instantly. She'd heard enough gruesome stories about what they did to captives. Better to die quickly.

In the depth of the valley, a stream meandered as much as the trail. The sight of it did not slow her as she raced forward, sending a fury of spray into the air. She

grabbed at her hem, trying to keep it from getting soaked. The water deepened past her calves. Her foot slipped on a slime-coated stone, and she fell sideways, arms flailing. The cold mountain water pulled her down, the current twisting over and around her, drowning out her scream.

The force of the stream towed her deeper, rolling her over, the weight of the baby making it all the harder to claw her way from the water's grasp. Then warmth clasped her upper arms, and strong hands pried her upward. As her legs gained possession of the ground, she rotated to her rescuer. Charcoal hair hung wildly past his shoulders, feathers braided into the thick locks. Buckskin leggings with loincloth and shirt were stained with soil and sweat. And the face she had seen in the shadows.

Christina scampered backwards about three feet before her heel slid between two rocks, catching. She shrieked as her body sank. The man lunged at her, again snatching her from the water's cold embrace. Mouth agape, she stared at him and his icy glare. Icy blue. A color at odds with the bronze of his skin and everything else about him.

She jerked away, this time backing up slowly, the placement of each step meticulous. "Stay away from me."

He remained in place.

As her feet touched dry land, Christina dared a stray glance, looking for anything that would fend him off. She stooped and wrapped her fingers around a knobby branch. The coarse bark pricked her palms. Hardly a weapon compared with the bow that hung across his shoulders or the long bladed knife at his side, but she wouldn't go down without a fight.

2

Towan raised a brow but stood his ground—if it could be called that. The stream swirled around his feet, saturating his moccasins and leggings. He tightened his lips against a smile at the sight of the half-drowned woman threatening him with a spindly stick, her red hair plastered to pale cheeks. What a spunky one she was. Scared out of her wits, but spunky.

She continued to inch away from him, her chest heaving. “Just go back to wherever you came from.” Her teeth gritted together and fire lit her eyes, what appeared to be hate covering the terror he’d recognized moments before.

The semblance of a chuckle rose in his throat, and he choked it back. Twice he had saved her, but of course, she hated him...hadn’t they all? He’d gone to their schools and lived in their world, but they’d never seen him as one of them. Not once they learned of his mother.

Towan reversed his steps. Why should he waste any more time on this woman? She obviously wanted nothing to do with him.

He blew out his breath as he reached the bank opposite her, forcing past the resentment that burned in his chest. How could he abandon her in the middle of the mountains, soaked to the bone and obviously pregnant? Was that her husband's body she'd held? Likely.

So no one would come looking for her.

Still, she needed time to burn off some of that hate, and the sun was warm enough to dry her clothes. He'd be back.

Towan kept track of her direction while he hiked up the slope to where he'd tied his horse. A curse formed on his tongue as he reached the spot. The rope hung limp, severed at the knot. He fingered the smooth cut. Why had he been foolish enough to leave his mare so close to the trail? No wonder she'd been found.

Dropping the end of the rope, Towan set his jaw and turned east. The marauders couldn't have gone too far. Keeping to the trees, he followed the trail. Less than a mile brought him to a halt where hooves had scarred the earth down a shallow slope and through an aspen grove. A wagon had passed through, as well.

With movements low to the ground, Towan stole toward the makeshift campsite. A mule's throaty bray greeted a higher pitched whinny. He crouched behind a partially uprooted pine leaning against its neighbors and peered past the white bark of a dozen saplings. Two...three...four men. All with their own mounts and one to spare—Towan's mare. Stained buckskin clothes and painted faces. Too painted. These weren't men from any of the valley's tribes. They were white.

Towan rocked on his heels, his fingers clenching the hilt of his knife. What crimes had they committed, only to turn the blame on his people? Terrorizing a

wagon train. At least two murders. Theft. And there was nothing he could do about it. Not today. He settled back to wait as glass shattered, fabric ripped, and men laughed. Soon they had scavenged what they wanted and led the mules from the grove, again heading east on the trail.

Crawling from his hiding spot, Towan surveyed the damage. Women's gowns strewn across the thin grass, a busted sack of flour spilling its powdery contents near the back of the wagon, and books scattered by a broken wooden crate. He stooped and brushed his fingers over the words engraved in a black spine—*The Pickwick Papers* by Charles Dickens. The pile was a treasure of novels. *The Three Musketeers*. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. *Persuasion*. *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Towan picked up *North and South* and thumbed through the pages. He hadn't read this one, but no wonder. It had been published only four years ago. His chest expanded with air saturated with pine and weathered pages. Strange how much it ached. How tempting to sit under the shade of the aspen's golden leaves and lose himself in fiction. Isn't that how he'd survived his youth?

He straightened and dropped the book back in its pile. That had been another life—one he'd put behind him. And what of the pregnant woman? He couldn't risk losing her trail, as unlikely as that was. What was he supposed to do with her? With no horse or wagon? How long would it take them to reach Fort Bridger now? Fort Hall was no closer.

Towan made his way over the littered ground and into the back of the wagon. He tossed a shovel out. He'd need that for burying the two men alongside the trail. The wagon train wouldn't come back for them,

and it seemed wrong to leave their bodies over winter to rot or be eaten. Besides, since most of his supplies had been taken with his horse, a burial would only be fair recompense for what he'd scavenge from the wagon.

He rummaged through the crates and sacks remaining. What would he need for their journey? What would *she* need? How greatly would this detour slow his revenge?

~*~

The shale shifted under Christina's shoes, and she slid backward. Sharp rocks bit her knees. She yelped, her petticoat and skirt providing little shield. Pressure built behind her eyes and spilled as droplets of moisture. She rotated into a sitting position to look out over the valley. The mountains loomed over her. How would she ever survive with Anthony dead and unfriendly savages lurking near? What had even become of the wagon train?

Setting her hand over her contracting abdomen, Christina forced a breath. "Somehow...somehow I'll survive this. We'll survive this." She stared at her rounded middle and blinked back more moisture. "I'll be all right, darling. All we have to do is find the trail. We can make it back to Fort Bridger." *Somehow.*

And then?

Pulling her torn skirts higher, Christina hauled herself to her feet. She couldn't think about that right now. She had to reach the top of this ridge. The wagon had to be close. A few more steps.

Christina ignored the burning ache of her muscles as she picked her way over the bald slope and into the

thicker foliage. When the terrain levelled, she quickened her pace. A branch snapped to her left, jerking her head in that direction. Nothing...except the feeling that someone watched.

She pushed past the tightening in her center and ignored the growing ache that accompanied the contraction. The trees thinned ahead. Surely she was close. But instead of the trail, the forest opened for another stream, winding its way downward. Two sharp cliffs v-shaped to the trickle of a waterfall. A dead end.

Where was she?

A misty breeze touched her face, sending a shiver through her. She hugged herself. Little good it did since her clothes refused to dry on the inside, and the sun had already sunk halfway behind one of the peaks. Another shiver. The sun was in the wrong place. If its setting could be trusted, she was headed directly west, not south-east as she had planned. Could her sense of direction be that faulty?

Two stones ground together and she spun again, her breath hitched in her throat. A shadowed form passed out of sight. The Indian. He had followed her. Backing away, she tracked his course until he reappeared, closer now. Christina gathered her dress to her knees and waded across the narrow stream. Then glanced back. He leaned against a large tree that had died years earlier. The last rays of the sun played against the contours of his face. She stared at the feathered arrows peeking from behind his shoulder. *Like the ones that killed Anthony.*

Willing strength into her legs, Christina bolted from her pursuer, racing to the forest. When she looked back, he had not moved. She needed to lose