



Assiniboin Girl

Kathi Wallace



ASSINIBOIN GIRL

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CHAPTER ONE

MARY TWO DOGS CLUTCHED HER BOOKS TIGHT AGAINST HER CHEST, DUCKING

her head as she tried to walk faster. Maybe they wouldn't see her. Or if they did, they would leave her alone. She had hoped with school out for the summer the teasing would stop. She'd been wrong.

"Do you smell something nasty, Amber?" The voice made Mary's heart sink. "All of a sudden, it smells like dog crap."

Under Mary's feet, the cracked sidewalk seemed to sprout bits of rubble. Tears blurred her eyes, and she tripped, skidding on a loose pebble. Instinctively Mary's hands flew out to her sides to catch herself as she fell, her books flying away from her to land with an ominous rip somewhere off to her left. Her right hand betrayed her, though, landing on a glittering shard of glass. It stabbed into the meaty part of her palm, under her thumb. Mary gasped at the sharp pain.

"Yeah, I smell it too, Cissy." A chorus of giggles. "I think it's coming from that clumsy mutt lying on the ground over there."

Mary pushed herself upright with her good hand. Keeping her head down, she glanced around under her lashes in search of her books. Just ignore them, she said to herself. Find your books, and go.

As she searched, she heard footsteps come close. A red tennis shoe appeared in her field of view. Slowly, Mary raised her head, cursing the tears that spilled from her eyes to roll down her cheeks. The blood from her hand hit the ground with a steady plopping sound.

Standing close to her were two girls with long blond hair, their blue eyes sparkling with malice. One of the girls, Cissy, reached out a hand and poked Mary hard in the ribs. "Hey, Red Girl. Why are you crying?"

Did you lose your peace pipe?"

Her partner-in-crime widened her eyes, and then clapped a hand over her mouth, laughing through her fingers.

"Oh, I forgot. Squaws don't have peace pipes, do they?" Cissy sneered, her voice reflecting the relish she took in this game.

The other girl pointed, nudging her friend. "Hey, Cissy. She's hurt. Let's go."

Mary had always felt that Amber wouldn't be so cruel to her if it weren't for the leadership of the other girl. Grateful to the kinder of the two, more tears threatened.

"No!" Cissy said, shrugging her friend off, eyes hard. "My dad says they don't feel pain like real people do. They're just dirty, stinking Indians."

Mary shook her head, wanting to clear her ears of the awful things spewing from Cissy's mouth. She spied her books lying off to the side and moved to get them.

Cissy stepped out quickly in a blocking move. "Where do you think, you're going, Red Girl?"

Amber was starting to look a little anxious, and she tugged on her friend's arm. "Leave her alone, Cissy. She's bleeding."

Mary stared into Cissy's eyes, afraid. She wanted to defend herself, but as always happened when she got scared, her brain froze and her mouth dried up. She took a step backwards.

Cissy's hand shot out, pushing her hard on the shoulder. Mary stumbled backwards, her arms windmilling to maintain her balance and some of the blood from the gash on her hand splattered onto the blonde girl's face.

"Gross!" Cissy wiped the blood off, glaring at her.

Amber was scrabbling in her shoulder bag and came out with a tissue. "Here," she said, handing it to her friend.

Taking advantage of the moment, Mary darted around the pair and snatched up her books. Seeing the torn pages, she groaned. Great. Now she was going to have to pay for them. Holding her injured hand out to the side, she hurried away, Cissy still screaming at her.

"I've probably got AIDS now! I'm going to tell my daddy about this! You wait and see if I don't!"

The voice seemed to push Mary along, making her feet move quicker and quicker until she was running. Her house came into sight, and breathing a sigh of relief, she slowed to a walk, her side aching. Pausing at the side door—the front was only for company—she leaned her head on the cool wood, her shoulders shuddering as she tried to catch her breath.

The tears gone, Mary examined her hand. Ugh. The glass was still in her palm. Putting the books down, she gritted her teeth, then wincing, pulled it out. Fresh blood welled, and she wished she had something to wrap it in.

Walking around to the back of the house, Mary lifted the lid off the plastic trashcan, and tossed the glass inside. No sense some little kid or animal cutting themselves on it.

The sound of tires on the driveway reached her ears, and she looked up to see Aunt Janet's car pulling into the driveway. Mary groaned again, and then hurried back around to the side door. Grabbing her books, she let herself inside, fumbling awkwardly with her house keys.

"Mary, wait up! You can help me carry some of these groceries ... Mary?"

Janet Two Dogs' voice followed Mary into the house. Tossing the books on the counter, she turned on the faucet, letting the water run over the gash. Red swirled on white porcelain to disappear down the drain. In her mind, she could still hear Cissy's voice calling her Red Girl.

Her aunt entered the side door in a rustle of paper bags. The faint scent of the perfume she wore filled Mary's nose—the same perfume as her mom had worn—and for the second time that day, Mary's eyes filled with tears. Her aunt was talking to her, but Mary ignored the words, concentrating on the pain of the gash to drive away the ghost of her mother.

A hand came down gently on her shoulder, and Mary turned the water off. She grabbed a paper towel off the roll hanging under the cabinet, using it first to swipe at her face before wrapping it around her hand and turning to face her aunt.

“You’ve hurt yourself! Let me see.”

Mary pulled away. “Leave me alone,” she muttered.

“Look at me.” Janet grasped Mary by the shoulders, but Mary kept her head lowered, refusing to make eye contact. “You’ve been fighting again.” Her aunt’s words were flat.

“I haven’t been fighting! It’s those girls—” Mary stuttered to a stop. “I mean, I fell down on some glass.” She pulled away. “It’s nothing,” she snapped, flopping into one of the kitchen chairs.

“It was that Cissy, wasn’t it?” Janet’s voice was grim. “I have half a mind to call her father. It’s a disgrace, the daughter of the chief of police acting like that.”

Mary’s anger was gone, leaving behind only a dull feeling of despair. “It wouldn’t make any difference if you did tell him. He wouldn’t do anything. She gets it from him.”

Sitting down at the small kitchen table, Janet closed her eyes and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “You’re right,” she sighed. “Cissy does get her attitude from her father. He’s a racist and a bigot who should never have been allowed to hold a public office. That’s part of the reason I was sent here, you know—to try to get enough evidence to get him removed from office.”

Mary’s aunt worked for the FBI, though everyone in the town thought Janet was just a clerk in the circuit court. There had been rumors of corruption for some time now in the small Southern town where they lived, but they were just that—rumors. People who had evidence against the police for abuse were too afraid to testify. Desperate, the Bureau had finally decided to place one of their own people inside the town. Janet Two Dogs had volunteered, arguing that she was the best choice. As an American Indian and a woman, she was a double minority, with a greater opportunity to experience firsthand some of the abuse that the FBI suspected was instigated by the chief of police. That was before the accident, though.

“I know,” Mary replied in a small voice, picking at the paper towel wrapped around her hand. “You just never figured on having me here to complicate things.”

“Mary.” Janet got up and walked around to where the girl sat. “You aren’t a complication, sweetie. You’re my niece, and I love you.”

Mary left off worrying the paper towel to glance up at her aunt. “I love you too. I just wish—” She broke off, tears threatening again.

“I know. I wish too.” Janet turned away, looking out the small window over the sink, “I’ve been thinking, Mary ...”

Mary knew that tone. It was the one adults used when a Decision Had Been Reached. She sighed. What now?

“I’ve been thinking,” Janet repeated. “I’m going to send you to Grannie’s for the rest of the summer. Things are heating up here, and I don’t want you in danger. This thing with Cissy is the last straw.” She turned back to look at Mary, face firm. “You’re going to the Reservation.”

Mary stared in disbelief. “The rez? You have to be joking!”

Janet shook her head. “No joke. It’s the safest place for you right now.”

“I don’t know anybody there! That woman’s not even my real Grannie!”

Janet frowned. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. She may not be your real grandmother, but she chose the job. She and your grandmother were best friends—they each agreed to step in for the other if needed. You’ll be welcome there!”

“You just don’t want the bother of having me around.” Mary closed her eyes, feeling desolate. First losing her folks, now her aunt was shuttling her off to somebody not even related to her.

Swiftly Janet came to kneel next to her. “That is not true!” She placed an arm around Mary’s shoulders, her voice breaking as she spoke. “Your dad was my brother. I loved him dearly. And I love you just as

much. Too much to put you in any danger.”

“If you love me, then don’t send me away!” Mary begged, turning to face her aunt. “I won’t fight anymore!”

“Honey—”

I’m not afraid of these bigots! Just let me stay with you. I don’t want to go to another strange place where I don’t know anyone. It was hard enough coming here!”

For a moment, Mary thought she’d swayed her aunt. Then Janet’s gaze fell on Mary’s battered hand, where the blood had begun to seep through the makeshift bandage covering it. Her lips tightened and she stood. “I’m not discussing it any more. You’re going to Fort Belknap, and that’s that.”

Too angry and hurt to speak, Mary fled to her room. She didn’t hear Janet’s anguished words, “I’m the one that’s afraid, honey. I can’t lose you too.”

CHAPTER TWO

STILL IN THE HABIT OF WAKING EARLY FOR SCHOOL, MARY LAY IN BED

listening to her aunt make coffee. Usually, she got up and joined Janet for a cup, the two of them watching the morning news in companionable silence, but this morning Mary had no desire to see her aunt. She still felt betrayed and angry at being too young to have a voice in her own future. Mom and Dad would never have sent me there!

Thinking of her parents filled Mary with a terrible sadness. She listened to the rattle of the pipes as Janet started her shower, concentrating on the noise in an attempt to chase away the tears that trembled and blink away.

A short time later, Mary heard the side door open and close, then the burr of the car starting. Janet was leaving for work. Safe from another confrontation, Mary got up and padded into the kitchen to get herself a cup of coffee.

Coffee wasn’t something her folks had ever let her drink. She felt a twinge of guilt lacing the dark liquid liberally with cream and sugar, but she’d quickly become addicted to her morning fuel so pushed the feeling away as she did every morning.

Sipping at the coffee, Mary sighed with pleasure. She carried the cup with her into the living room and plopped sideways into one of the overstuffed chairs, her legs hanging over the chair arm.

Watching the news was no fun without her aunt, so Mary didn’t turn the television on, choosing instead to stare out the window, wondering why in the world anyone would choose to live in Georgia. It was hot and muggy, with creepy bugs she’d never seen before, and though she had yet to experience winter, everyone said that it never snowed. What was winter without snow?

Outside, the little boy that lived next door was riding his trike, furiously pedaling back and forth from the sidewalk in front of his house to the end of the sidewalk in front of Mary’s house.

Mary stood and went to the window, watching the boy zoom back and forth, his short blond hair fluttering in the self-created breeze. She reached up and toyed with a piece of her own hair—short, bone straight, and a deep, inky black, another thing that marked her as an outsider. Most of the girls in town seemed to favor long hair, and definitely, nobody had hair like hers, so black it had a bluish sheen.

Turning from the window, Mary wondered what she would do to fill the hours that stretched out before her. Stretching, she listened to her back crack, and then drank down the last of her coffee, abruptly deciding to go back to the library.

I should pay for the books that got damaged yesterday, at least that way I can take them to Montana with me. Mary wrinkled her nose, realizing her decision was a form of capitulation but unable to see a way around her aunt’s decision. Besides, she thought, I don’t know if there’s a library on the rez and without something to read, I’ll go stir crazy!

That train of thought led to wondering about the rez in general. She knew next to nothing about the place, except for the fact that both her parents had been born there. Now, curiosity niggled at her. Maybe I can look up Fort Belknap on the library's Internet connection.

Heading into her room to get her clothes prior to taking her shower, Mary thought about how weird life was. Before coming to live with Janet, she'd never thought one way or another about being Sioux—she'd always been just Mary. Now look at you, she thought wryly, going to research your roots! Next you'll be joining a genealogy group. An image of herself dressed in old lady clothes, drinking tea, and poring over dusty archives made her giggle.

After a quick shower, she grabbed her money and the books and headed outside, where the day was already oppressively hot. In seconds, her shirt was clinging damply to her back. Mary shook her head and, turning right instead of left, started up the sidewalk. As she passed the neighbor's house, the little boy on the trike paused to stare at her, thrusting two fingers into his mouth.

"Hello," he mumbled around them.

Mary laughed and crouched beside the boy. Without thinking, she used her injured hand to steady herself. "Ow." She pulled the wounded hand up, cradling it against her chest.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"Yes, I did."

"What happened?"

"I fell on some glass."

The boy's eyes widened. "My mommy says, 'Be Careful Timmy. You Don't Want To Step On Glass!' all the time when I run outside with no shoes on."

Mary laughed again. "You should be careful. Your mommy knows what she's talking about."

"Mom is pretty smart," said a new, deeper voice.

Mary looked up but the sun was directly behind the speaker's face, making it impossible for her to make out his features. She stood awkwardly.

"Hi. I've seen you around school. My name's Steve Shield. I see you've already met Sprout here." The boy stuck out his hand.

Mary vaguely recognized him as one of the guys from school. He was a senior, but she'd never had anything to do with him. "Uh, hi. I would shake but ..." She gestured with her bandaged hand.

Steve grinned self-consciously, dropping his hand. Fair cheeks stained red, he shook his head. "Sorry. Silly of me. I heard Timmy talking to you about it, too."

Smiling tentatively in return, Mary bent down again to say goodbye to Timmy, who had been listening solemnly, little head swiveling back and forth.

"I'll see you later Timmy. It was nice meeting you."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to the library."

He nodded. "I know what that is. That's where there are lots of books. And mommy says 'Timmy, You Have To Be Quiet And Not Run In the Liberry.' "

"Right." Mary laughed, straightening. She looked at Steve. "Well, I guess I'll see you later."

"Hey" —Steve turned a little rosier—"I was going to the library, too." He shrugged again, affecting a nonchalant air. "I could walk with you, if you don't mind."

"Uh, sure," Mary said. "I don't care." She could feel her own face begin to burn.

"It'd be kinda silly, both of us walking down there on the same sidewalk, just ignoring each other," Steve grinned and ruffled his brother's hair. "See you later, Trouble."

"Bye Steve! Bye Mary!" Timmy returned to the task of racing up and down the sidewalk.

Shifting her books, Mary swallowed and looked away, feeling a little awkward. She was startled to feel the books eased from her grasp.

“Hey!”

“Sorry,” Steve replied with a serious expression. “My Daddy’d have my hide if he saw me walking with a girl who was carrying a load and I had empty arms. He’d say I was being ungentlemanly.”

Mary frowned, but let him keep the books. They walked for a time in silence.

“So, where are you from? I’ve seen you around school, but never had a chance to talk to you.”

“I’m from New York,” she said, her voice flat. She didn’t want to talk about where she was from or why she was here. That would lead to—Mary swallowed hard, pushing the thoughts away.

“New York City?” he asked.

At Mary’s nod, Steve grew animated. “Man, are you lucky! I’ve always wanted to live somewhere like that. Instead,” he waved his hand, encompassing the area around them, “I’ve been stuck here—in Podunk, Georgia ... better known as Peachtree.” His face looked determined. “But soon I will. I’m going away to college in the fall. My folks promised.”

“It sounds like you’re looking forward to it.” Mary slid a sideways glance at him just as he looked at her questioningly.

“Is that where your folks are? In New York?” he asked.

The familiar tightness returned to Mary’s chest, replacing the small flame of happiness that had been kindled. Without answering, she sped up a little, wishing the library would come into view.

“Hey, wait up!” Steve trotted to catch up to her. “What’s wrong? Did I do something?” He sounded honestly perplexed and Mary took a deep breath. He didn’t know, she told herself.

“My parents are dead,” she blurted, surprising herself. “They were killed in a car wreck on their way to perform in a concert.” Pausing, she stared down at her feet. “They were musicians.”

Mary closed her eyes, returning once more to those long ago afternoons when her parents had played for fun, for each other and Mary. She let the haunting music wash over her for an instant before pushing the memory away and slamming the door on it, afraid she would use it all up. And without even the memory of her parents ... She shuddered.

Steve’s hand came to rest on her shoulder. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“The only reason I wasn’t with them was because I had the flu.” She opened her eyes and stared ahead, but instead of seeing the tree-lined street with its quaint homes behind white picket fences, Mary saw her mother, leaning down to kiss her goodbye.

Her lips had been cool against Mary’s feverish cheek. Unconsciously, the girl raised a hand to her face. “I always went with them. Always. My mom came in to say goodbye and my throat was so sore, I didn’t even answer. She must have told my dad not to bother me, because he never came in.” Now she looked at Steve through tear blurred eyes. “I didn’t say goodbye,” she repeated.

“Oh man,” Steve breathed. He took a hold of her arm and gently pulled her off the sidewalk and under a big oak that stood near, its branches low enough that it hid them from view of the street. Then he dug in his pocket and held out a neatly folded handkerchief.

Mary took it without thinking, scrubbing at her eyes. “Some drunk was driving down the wrong side of the road,” she spit the words out. “He plowed right into them, and then just drove off. The only reason he was even caught was that he ran into a light pole a block away. I wish he’d killed himself, but he was fine.” Mary turned and beat her fists against the unyielding bark of the tree. “That jerk was fine! He killed my parents and walked away without a scratch! It’s not fair.” Her voice rose until she was screaming. “It’s not fair! I didn’t even get to say goodbye!”

“Hey ... hey.” Mary felt Steve cup his hands around hers, stilling the blows against the oak that had left her hands raw. He turned her away from the tree and gathered her in a hug. “It’s okay.”

Clumsily, he patted her back. “They knew you were sick. I bet they’d be more upset about you still beating yourself up about this. You need to let it go. For their sakes.”

Mary felt the dam of emotion break inside of her. All the tears that had been pent up inside of her for so

long came flooding out. She cried until she felt utterly empty, drained of everything. Finally she pulled away, and wiped her eyes a final time on the cloth. She held up the hankie, laughing weakly. "I won't give this back now," she said. "I seriously have to wash it first." She was surprised that she wasn't embarrassed, odd considering she'd just had a complete breakdown in front of a virtual stranger. Instead, she'd felt safe.

Steve poked at the sodden handkerchief dangling from Mary's hand and wrinkled his nose. "You know what? You're right—it does need a touch of laundering. Despite what my daddy'd say about being a gentleman, I think I'll let you handle that job."

They both laughed and Mary realized why she wasn't embarrassed: Steve wasn't acting like her crying had been a big deal. 'It happened, it was over, move on' seemed to be his attitude. She grinned tucking the hankie in her pocket. She felt suddenly and absurdly happy.

"Deal." She leaned closer to him and whispered. "And I promise not to tell your dad."

Laughing, he pulled her back out from under the tree and they headed toward the library, Mary poked Steve in the arm. "Who walks around with a clean hankie these days? I thought only old ladies did that."

"That would be my mama's influence. She's as old-fashioned as my daddy in her way, and one of her rules is to always make sure to have a clean handkerchief in your pocket before leaving the house." He shook his head. "I'm pretty sure between the two of them I'm doomed."

"Doomed to being a gentleman, you mean?" Mary smiled. "There are worse things to be, trust me."

"I guess." Steve bowed and then held out an arm. "May I escort you to the library, madam?"

Fluttering her lashes, Mary took the arm. Affecting a drawl, she said, "Why thank you sir!"

They joked and laughed the rest of the way.

CHAPTER THREE

THE AIR INSIDE THE LIBRARY FELT LIKE HEAVEN. Mary grasped the collar of her tee shirt and fanned it back and forth, allowing the cool air to dry her sweatdampened torso. She turned to Steve and gently removed the books from his arms. "I need to go and pay for these."

"Okay. I'm gonna cruise around a little, try and find something to read." The boy headed off into the towering bookshelves.

Mary watched him for a few seconds with a smile, and then went to the front desk. "Hi. I checked these out yesterday, but they got damaged. I'd like to pay for them." Mary placed the books on the counter. The librarian was an older woman with her hair pulled back in a long gray ponytail secured with a plain rubber band. With no make-up, in jeans, sandals, and big gauzy shirt, with chunky earrings dangling from her ears, she was the epitome of a "flower-child." Mary remembered her from previous visits as being pleasant, if a little distracted—almost as if she were reading a book in her head all the time. Now though, her gaze sharpened as she looked at Mary. "Personal responsibility," she said. "I like that." The woman pulled the books across the desk toward her and ruffled the pages. "Most kids your age would just toss them into the book drop and claim they didn't know a thing about the damage." She frowned. "Hmm. The spine on this one is cracked. And there's a stain on this cover." Her gaze rested briefly on Mary's bandaged hand, resting on the counter. "Blood?"

"Uh, yeah." Mary pulled her hand back down by her side, not wanting to talk about it.

The librarian didn't pursue it. She merely raised her eyebrows before consulting her computer. "These were due to be weeded out soon. Let's say ... five dollars for both?"

"That's great!" Mary was relieved as she pulled her wallet out of her back pocket, removing a five. It would have eaten up most off her ready cash to pay the full price for the books. Handing over the money, she asked, "Would it be okay if I took the books? I'm going away for the summer, and it will give me

something to read.”

“Sure. If you left them here, they’d end up in the trash anyway.” Pushing the books back to Mary, the woman smiled. “I’m Willow Sanborn, by the way.”

“Mary—”

“Two Dogs. Right, I issued you your card, remember?” Willow winked.

Feeling silly, Mary nodded. “Right, you did.”

The phone next to the computer began to ring. Willow glanced at the display and sighed. “That’s Mr. Harvey again. He likes to use the microfiche, but needs help loading and unloading the film.” She picked up the phone. “Yes, Manny. I’ll be right there.” Another wink and the woman hurried away.

I wonder if there’s a fee to use the Internet here? Mary wondered. She decided to wait and ask Willow when she returned, a little surprised at how much she was looking forward to finding out about the rez.

“Ewww. I didn’t think they let dogs in the library.” From behind Mary came a malicious giggle and she felt her heart sink. Turning, she faced Cissy and Amber. Amber at least, had the grace to look uncomfortable.

“Give it a rest Cissy,” Amber hissed, tugging at her friend’s arm.

Cissy pulled away, ignoring her friend. “Can you even read, Indian Girl?”

“Hey, Cissy. Hey, Amber. What’s going on?” Steve walked up.

Cissy’s eyes widened and the hateful smirk on her face morphed into a simper. “Steve Shields. Amber and I were just talking about you!”

“Were you?” Steve’s voice was pleasant, but noncommittal. Glancing at Mary, Steve asked, “Are you all done?”

Mary nodded wordlessly. Steve reached over and took the books from her again as the two girls watched, open-mouthed.

“You ... you two are together?” Cissy’s face had gone pale under her tan.

“Why?” Steve asked.

“Never mind!” she snapped, her face ugly again. “It’s none of my business who you hang around with.”

Now it was Cissy who grabbed at her friend’s arm. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Steve watched them disappear into the shelves, Cissy flouncing, Amber being tugged reluctantly along.

“That is one spoiled girl. Just because her daddy is the chief of police, she thinks she can treat people like dirt. Amber isn’t too bad, just silly, and she lets Cissy do too much of her thinking for her. Her brother is cool, though. He graduated last year. Goes to Cal Tech now.”

Mary barely heard the words, too busy processing the fact that Steve had actually stood up for her. Maybe everybody around here didn’t suck after all. She peeped up to find him studying her.

“You didn’t think I would just let them run you into the ground, did you?” His eyes widened. “Oh my gosh, you did!” He sounded amazed. “My Lord, we must have given you a really bad taste in your mouth.” Guiding Mary toward the door, Steve opened it, gesturing for Mary to walk out first. “There are a few jerks here, just like everywhere. In Cissy’s case, the bad behavior comes from her father. He’s pretty bad.”

Outside, it seemed hotter than before, if that were possible. Heat shimmers danced over the asphalt and the air slapped down on Mary’s exposed skin like a soggy, woolen blanket.

“I’ve heard he’s a racist.” Mary looked around, wondering how anyone had the energy to do anything in such brutal heat. She had a vision of men in hoods and sheets dancing around a burning cross, all of them passing out from heat stroke and giggled to herself.

“He is.” Steve’s voice was short and Mary looked at him. He was sending off a weird vibe suddenly.

Without thinking, Mary said, “My aunt works for him.”

Steve didn’t answer. The silence between them grew more awkward and they didn’t speak again until they reached the sidewalk in front of Steve’s house. Timmy was nowhere to be seen. Probably inside,

Mary thought wistfully, where there's air conditioning. Instead of saying goodbye, Steve hesitated, hands thrust into his pockets, jingling the change there. Casting a longing look at her own air conditioned house, Mary said, "Thanks for walking with me. Do you want to come over for awhile, maybe get something to eat?" "No, I can't. Mom wants me to keep an eye on Timmy while she runs to the store." He rattled the change again, looking down. Finally, taking a deep breath, he said, "Mary, does your aunt have to work for the chief of police? I mean, there are other places in town that'd hire her." Mary frowned, unsure of how to answer. Janet had cautioned her to tell no one of her real reason for being in the small town and while she felt she could trust Steve, she wasn't comfortable ignoring her aunt's request. Besides, she reminded herself, you could be wrong about him. She decided to play it safe, countering with a question of her own. "What's the problem with her working there?" There was a pause. Mary watched Steve struggle with himself. He knows something, she thought. What is it? But whatever he knew, Steve wasn't going to share it today. "Nothing," he sighed, shaking his head, "nothing." He handed her books back to her. "I better go." Taking the books, Mary watched as Steve went inside. The heat wasn't as oppressive as it had been a few minutes ago she realized, rubbing at the gooseflesh on her arms. But she knew the cold had nothing to do with the temperature outside and everything to do with what Steve had left unsaid.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHY IS JANET HOME? Mary thought, spying her aunt's car pulled up next to the house in the driveway. It was about lunchtime, but she didn't usually come home for lunch. Is something wrong? Hurrying up the steps, she opened the door and went inside, only pausing long enough to toss her books on the kitchen table before calling, "Janet?" "I'm in here." Janet's voice sounded muffled. Going into the living room, Mary gasped. Janet sat on the sofa, holding a cloth to the side of her face. She'd obviously been crying. "What happened?" she cried, kneeling in front of her aunt, trying to see under the cloth. "I'm fine." "You aren't fine! You're hurt! What happened?" "I said, I'm fine." Janet wouldn't meet Mary's eyes. A queer fluttering sensation started in Mary's stomach. She tugged hard on the cloth, finally pulling it away from her aunt's face to expose a livid bruise, in the center of which was a nasty looking gash. "What happened?" Mary's voice was controlled but inside she was frantic. Oh god, please don't let anything bad happen to Aunt Janet! She's all I have left! "Officially?" Janet's laugh was bitter. "I fell in the records room and hit my cheek on the filing cabinet." "And unofficially?" Mary couldn't stop staring at the injury. Janet took the cloth back and covered the bruise again. "It was the chief of police." Janet's eyes filled with furious tears. "That bastard! He made a pass at me. I slapped his face, and he pushed me. I did fall— into the file cabinets." "Well, that's that, right? You've got your evidence!" Excited now, Mary jumped up, squeezing her hands together. "We can leave! We can leave right now!" She leaned down, tugging on Janet's arm. "Come on! There's no reason for you to stay any longer!" "No, Mary." Janet pulled her arm away. "It doesn't work like that. There was no one else around. Any

halfway decent attorney would just tear that to shreds. Claim I could have done the injury myself, and then used it to entrap him.”

“But ...you wouldn’t do that. You’d never lie to send someone to jail. It’s not fair.” Mary sounded childlike, even to herself, and she knew she wasn’t going to win. Her shoulders slumped.

“You’re right, Mary. I wouldn’t lie—not even to send somebody like him to jail. And it’s not fair, but we both know life often isn’t, don’t we?” Janet took a deep breath. “There’s something else.”

“What?”

“I made your plane reservation. I’m sorry. You have to leave in the morning for the rez.”

“All right,” Mary replied dully, the fight gone out of her. “I guess I leave for the rez in the morning.”

CHAPTER FIVE

MARY WENT TO HER ROOM AND STAYED THERE, CALLING THROUGH THE

bedroom door that she wasn’t hungry when her aunt offered to make her a sandwich.

I want to go back home to New York! I miss my friends, and the ice cream from O’Malley’s on Sullivan Street. I miss real pizza, and the noise of the city! Mary slumped on her bed, staring out into the darkened back yard.

“I miss the noise,” she whispered. “Even the cab drivers, honking and yelling at everyone. But mostly ...” Mary turned away from the window, where the gentle sound of crickets drifted through the screen and lay down in her bed, staring blindly at the wall. “Mostly, I miss my folks.”

She must have cried herself to sleep. Sometime later Mary started awake, dripping with sweat, and peered at the clock next to her bed. “After midnight,” she mumbled before going to the kitchen for something to drink.

Gulping down the water, Mary realized it was hot everywhere in the house. She went to the wall where the switch for the AC was located and flicked it back and forth several times to no avail.

“Stupid house. Stupid Georgia and its stupid heat!” she whispered viciously. She felt like punching the wall, but knew the noise would waken her aunt and she didn’t feel up to any questions.

Grinding her teeth, Mary slipped out into the backyard, hoping for a cool breeze. Climbing onto the picnic table, she stretched out, staring up at the stars.

Plucking at the rough wood under her fingers, Mary remembered when Janet first got the table. She’d made such a fuss, talking about how great it would be to eat outside every night. That was before the full force of a Georgia summer impressed itself upon them—no one ate outside by choice. It was simply too hot. Now Mary listened to the cicadas, their eerie wailing interspersed with crickets chirruping, and wondered again what it would be like on the reservation. Would it be hot and humid like it was here? I wonder if there’ll be anybody my age there and if there are, will I get along with them? It’d be nice to have a friend again, she mused.

Mary searched out the Big and Little Dippers. She felt a special affinity to the star groupings; they reminded her of her father, who’d shown them to her so many years ago. There’d been a blackout and everyone in their building had gone up to the roof for an impromptu party. Mary had been afraid of the unaccustomed darkness, but her father had held her, soothing away the fear by showing her the stars, saying they made light too. He’d traced the Dippers, calling them Mother Bear and her Child. She swallowed hard. They’ll be at the rez too, she told herself, taking comfort from the thought.

Somewhere off in the distance a car coughed and spit, the gunfire-like sound out of place amidst the quiet country noises. Overhead, the drone of a plane made her think of heaven—was heaven somewhere up there, over the plane, over the stars? Was that where her folks were?

Mary wondered if her folks could see her and if Steve had been right. Did they really understand that she hadn’t been a bad daughter? That she had just been sick? She felt the familiar ache in her throat and chest.

Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes, running down to fill her ears, tickling her into sitting up. Wiping at her face, Mary froze when she saw something moving in the darkness.

“Mary?”

It was Steve. Letting her breath out in relief, she wiped away the last of her tears and cleared her throat.

“Yes. It’s me.” She moved over so he could sit next to her.

He must have just showered, she thought, smelling the soap and dampness.

“I leave tomorrow,” she said.

“What?” He sounded startled.

She lay back, scooting down, so she could rest her legs comfortably on the bench. “Yeah. My aunt wants me to visit the rez.”

“The rez?”

“The reservation. My people are Sioux–Assiniboin Sioux. My parents were born there. I have some relatives who still live there.” She gave him a sideways glance. “She thinks it will be safer there for me.”

Steve paused before saying carefully, “She might be right.”

Mary sat up. “Steve, what are you not saying?” Her voice sharpened. “If you know something, you need to tell me. My aunt’s still going to be here, after all.”

Steve picked up her hand, holding it loosely. “Mary, there’s more going on here than you realize.”

“Tell me about it,” she muttered.

“Mary—”

Mary pulled her hand from Steve’s and jumped off the table, facing him. “Steve Shields, I’m leaving. My aunt is sending me away because she thinks it might be too dangerous for me to stay here. If you know something, and you aren’t saying, for whatever reason, I don’t want to have anything else to do with you.” Blinking back tears again, she continued, “I thought we were friends. Friends trust each other.”

“We are friends! At least, I’d like us to be.” Taking a deep breath, Steve seemed to come to a decision.

“Mary, if anyone knew I was saying this to you, I’d be as good as dead.”

Mary froze. “You mean like ‘killed’?”

“I’ve lived in this town my whole life,” he replied quietly, ignoring the question. “I’ve known the chief of police and his friends since before I could talk.” At that moment, a stray headlight from a turning car on the street caught him, giving Mary a brief snapshot of his face. In that momentary flash, he looked ancient, carved deep with lines of worry. “You know how Cissy feels, and how I told you that she gets views about people from her father?”

She nodded.

“Well, that wasn’t just something I guessed at. There’s a group of men in this town” —Steve paused, and then continued in a lower voice, as if he were afraid of being overheard—“this group, they make the KKK look like boy scouts. I don’t know if the chief of police started it, or if he just inherited his post as “leader” from somebody else, but they’re dangerous, Mary. They don’t like anyone different from them— not different religiously, not different in the way they look.”

He gave a harsh laugh that caught in his throat, turning into a cough. “Haven’t you noticed, Mary, there aren’t any minorities here? No blacks, no Hispanics. No one that isn’t white? There aren’t even any Catholics here!”

Mary crept back to the table to sit beside Steve, and this time it was her hand that found his. “I did notice that. It’d be hard not to, since I stick out like a sore thumb.”

“I had a friend,” he said. “He was Black—his name was Steve, too. Steve Wilson. His folks were down from Abermarle way. His daddy was a preacher.” His hand squeezed hers tightly once. “He must’ve thought he was another Martin Luther King or something, because he’d heard about the town, and wanted to force the issue. Mr. Wilson thought no one was evil enough to kill these days. He thought there’d be some name calling, at worst maybe a cross burned in the yard.”

There was silence. Even the insects seemed to be holding their breath— nothing stirred, not even a breeze ruffled the trees.

“What happened?” Mary finally asked.

A drop of moisture fell on their clasped hands. Steve was crying, Mary realized.

“They died. All of them,” he said, his voice a croak. “Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, Steve’s two little sisters—they were twins. And,” —a gulp— “and Steve.”

“How?” Mary was aghast. People being killed in this day and age because they were different? It didn’t seem possible.

“A fire. They said it was an accident, but I knew better. I heard some guys bragging about how they’d “cleansed” the town again. They didn’t know I could hear them.” Steve pulled his hand from hers and wiped his eyes. “I used to clean up in one of the bars in town twice a week. They’d come in while I was taking out some trash and didn’t hear me come back in. It freaked me out so bad, Mary. I didn’t know what to do, so I went back outside real quietly, and then came back in again, making a lot of noise this time. They shut up quick, but I think they were suspicious of me for a long time after that.”

“You’ve never told anyone?”

“Who could I tell? And if I did, then what? They’d just shut me up and probably whoever I told, too. And there’s something else—probably the biggest reason why I couldn’t tell anyone.” He turned toward her.

“One of the guys sitting in the bar bragging? One of them was the chief of police.”

CHAPTER SIX

MARY COULDN’T SLEEP AFTER STEVE LEFT. She waited in agony until Janet’s alarm went off, practically wearing a hole in the carpet with pacing back and forth, then pounced when Janet came out for coffee, quickly relating what Steve had told her.

Janet brushed away her talk. “Mary, I know this.” She pulled Mary over to the sofa, where she forced her to sit. “Why do you think it’s so very important that I stay here and try and finish this job?”

“But—”

“But nothing! This is my job. Do you think the killers of those children should go unpunished?”

Mary bowed her head. There was no way to answer that question that would allow Janet an out. The chief of police and those horrible men should pay, but why did it have to be Janet who tried to bring justice here? Why did she have to be in danger?

Janet cupped one hand under Mary’s chin, gently bringing her face up. “Our people are warriors. Do you know what the men used to shout before going into battle?”

Mary shook her head. She didn’t care about that old stuff. She cared about the here and now—about keeping Janet safe.

“It’s a good day to die,” Janet said. “That’s what they said.” She smiled. “We all die eventually. You know that, better than me, I think. If I die here, in this place, while trying to bring those evil men to justice, I’m okay with that. I’m okay with that because I think that nobody should have to walk around afraid. If no one stands up to bullies, we all end up afraid. That’s no way to live and not the kind of world I want for you.”

Mary looked at Janet, so strong and determined. So fearless. It made her feel weak and cowardly. She turned away to get her bags.

Now, almost to the airport, they still hadn’t spoken—Janet seemed preoccupied with her thoughts and driving, while Mary was a whirl of anxiety, the worst of it lodged firmly in her stomach. She thought a time or two she was going to have to ask her aunt to pull over so she could throw up, but she gritted her teeth and each time the feeling subsided.

Janet parked the car and started to open her door, then paused, reaching down and grabbing her purse

from its resting place by Mary's feet instead. Opening it, she pulled out a cell phone, handing it to Mary. "I'm not sure of the reception you'll get out there. It's supposed to be a nationwide carrier though, so I assume it'll be okay." Flipping open the phone, she scrolled through the contacts. "See? There's the house phone, and there's my office ... and," this last was said with a sly wink at Mary, "I even put in the neighbor's number."

"Aunt Janet!" Face hot, Mary grabbed the phone and snapped it shut. "Thanks."

"What?" Janet's face looked totally innocent. "I thought, if you couldn't get in touch with me, you could call Mrs. Shield and that might ease your mind."

Opening her door instead of answering, Mary retreated to stand by the trunk of the car, hoping Janet would blame her flushed face on the heat.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PLANE RIDE WAS A LONG ONE, WITH A STOP AND PLANE CHANGE IN SALT

Lake City. This fact had caused Janet some concern.

"No talking to strangers—"

"Duh, Janet! I'm not a baby!" Mary had rolled her eyes.

"Hush and let me finish." Janet held up a hand, using her fingers to tick off the list. "No talking to strangers, no stopping for food—"

"What? But what if I'm hungry?"

"Your layover is only forty-six minutes. You won't have time to get anything to eat." She'd glared at her niece. "You won't starve. Just go from your plane to—tell me again your connecting flight."

With a long suffering sigh, Mary recited, "Delta flight 4500."

"And what do you do if you need help?"

"Ask a skycap."

"Maybe I should request that someone escort you." Janet frowned, looking worried, but the idea had horrified Mary.

"I am not a baby! Only little kids have to be escorted!" She'd crossed her arms. "I won't get on the plane if you do that to me."

They'd bickered back and forth for a time, with Janet eventually abandoning the notion of Mary being escorted between flights.

Now though, looking around the bustling airport, Mary was secretly glad that Janet had drilled the connecting flight information into her. She tucked her bag tightly under her arm and quickly found the counter for her flight and checked in, pleased to be allowed onto the plane right away.

Once seated, she dug in her bag for one of the damaged library books and tried to read, but the sleepless night caught up with her and she ended up dozing, instead.

She woke to the announcement that they were starting the landing approach. I hope I wasn't drooling, she thought. She wiped at her mouth, relieved to find it dry. She wondered who was going to meet her at the airport since Janet had mentioned that Grannie didn't drive.

Looking out the small window at the Billings airport, Mary listened to her fellow passengers murmur as they gathered their belongings.

Tiny airport compared to Atlanta and New York, mused the girl.

Another announcement by the pilot, this one reminding everyone to turn off their cell phones, reminded Mary that she now owned one. Reaching into her carry on, she rummaged around until she found it, then flipped the phone open and looking thoughtfully at the last number Janet had programmed in. She grinned a little, wondering if she'd have the nerve to actually call Steve, then shook her head and powered the

phone down, stuffing it back into her bag along with her book

Mary stood in the airport terminal, bags by her feet, waiting for someone to step out of the moderately sized crowd and claim her.

Now this could have been planned better, she thought, starting to feel cranky and wondering if she should call Janet.

Just then, a tall man with long black hair stepped forward, a big smile on his face. Like most of the men in the terminal, he wore a battered looking cowboy hat and jeans. “Hau! You must be Mary! You look just like your mother did when she was your age.”

Mary felt herself enveloped in a rib-crushing hug. Then she was released while the man held her at arm’s length, studying her. “A little of your dad too, around the eyes, I think.” The man grinned again. “I’m one of your uncles,” he said. “Frank Spotted Pony.”

“Pleased to meet you Mr. Spotted Pony,” Mary said, feeling a bit faint from the enthusiastic greeting. She’d never been a real touchy-feely kind of girl.

“No, no, no.” Frank wagged a finger in Mary’s face. “None of that mister nonsense. Just plain old Frank, or Uncle Frank if you feel like you have to stand on ceremony.” He bent down and grabbed her bags. “Is this everything?”

At her nod, he started toward the exit. “Don’t lose me. I’d hate to have to fight my through this mess again trying to find you,” he called over his shoulder.

Looking around at the “mess”, Mary smiled. This was nothing compared to a New York City sidewalk. It’s all relative, I guess, she thought.

“Come on!”

She hurried after Frank, caught by the familiar cadence of his voice. Memories of her parents rushed over her, of how sometimes after sharing a bottle of wine they would forget their clipped New York way of talking, falling instead into this same rhythmic way of using words. She found the fact that he sounded the same as her folks oddly comforting and she smiled, hurrying after him. Maybe being here wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Frank headed toward another area of the terminal, instead of toward the parking lot as Mary expected. Pausing at the arched door he’d hurried through, she noticed a sign with a small propeller-driven plane on it. Swallowing hard, Mary caught up with her new uncle. “Where are we going?”

Frank glanced over his shoulder, flashing his ready smile without slowing. “We have to take another plane. I have a small prop that will take us right to the Fort Belknap.”

Mary stopped. “You’re going to fly us there?”

“Come on, cinja,” he called, still not stopping. “Get a move on! People are waiting.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

MARY TIGHTENED HER SEAT BELT A THIRD TIME, FUSSING OVER THE BUCKLES,

taking deep breaths, and trying not to think about how incredibly small the plane was. Frank was doing something with the controls while speaking into his headset. Suddenly the small engines on either side of the plane thrummed to life, scaring a frightened squeak from Mary.

Frank smiled, then handed her a set of headphones as well. Mary examined the black headset for a moment, noting the small microphone curving out in front. She felt a tap on her shoulder and glanced at Frank, who was gesturing for her to put it on.

“Oh, okay,” she said, then grimaced, realizing he couldn’t hear her. Mary slipped the headset on, settling the black cushioned ear pieces securely over her ears, and immediately the noise went from an overwhelming distraction to a dull thrum more felt than heard.

Mary looked at Frank and frowned. His mouth was moving, but she couldn’t hear anything. He

gestured again and Mary shrugged helplessly, not understanding what he wanted her to do.

“Hold on,” Frank mouthed, and then leaned over, reaching toward the left side of her head, where he did something to one of the earpieces.

Suddenly, Mary’s ears were full of a different sort of noise. She realized it was Frank’s breathing.

“Sorry,” he said. “I should have shown you how to use your headphones first, but I’m not used to having a passenger.” His voice was quite clear, but had an alien, tinny quality.

“That’s okay,” Mary replied, a bit startled by the way her voice seemed to echo back at her, the words rolling around in her head. She was about to say something else, for the fun of listening, when she felt the plane lurch backward, as Frank angled the plane into position. Her delight was replaced by a sudden queasiness as she realized they were about to take off.

“Hang on!” Frank said but Mary needed no prompting; she was already clutching the armrests of her seat. The plane lurched forward before settling into a smooth motion, gathering speed.

Realizing her stomach wanted to stay on the runway behind them, Mary slammed her lids shut and pressed one hand against her midsection, praying she wouldn’t throw up. She felt terribly unprotected and was positive the plane wouldn’t be able to win its fight against gravity.

Tears leaked from under her tightly closed lids. Please let it be quick, she thought. At least I’ll be able to see my folks soon.

A gentle laugh sounded. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. Open your eyes and see the land of your people—land that is yours, too.”

Mary cracked one eye reluctantly and gasped, tears and thoughts of death evaporating. She’d had no idea they’d climbed so high in such a short amount of time.

“When did we get up here?” she demanded.

“While you were praying,” came the dry answer.

Far below them were rolling plains bisected by a sparkling river. How beautiful! She was delighted by the view and leaned over Frank, ignoring his amusement. From his side, Mary could see what she guessed were mountains, surrounded by sky that was such a deep blue that it looked like a picture from a magazine.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Frank sounded proud, as if he alone were responsible for the gorgeous landscape.

“Oh my gosh, yes!”

Now that she’d gotten over her fear, Mary couldn’t get enough, drinking in the sights, marveling at how small everything looked. It looks like a quilt, she thought. Like a big blanket some giant threw down and forgot. A tiny ribbon snaked over the endless plains below her; Mary frowned at it for a minute before realizing it must be a road. A road with no cars. How weird! Finally, she turned back to Frank. “It looks so different from up here, doesn’t it?”

“It does. I’ve always loved being up here,” Frank leaned toward Mary, looking across her, pointing out the window on her side. “Look, cinja!”

Turning, Mary looked down and gasped. “Are those buffalo?”

“They are.”

“I thought they were extinct or something.”

“Not yet,” Frank sounded grim. “But they almost were, thanks to greedy hunters and developers. But things are changing. Now there are breeding programs, land set aside for them. We will never see the great herds our ancestors hunted, but some is better than none.”

The look on his face made Mary uncomfortable. She liked him better when he was cheerful and wished they hadn’t seen the great shaggy beasts that at this height looked like brown dots. In an effort to distract him, Mary asked, “What did that mean? That word you called me?”

“What? Cinja?”

“Yeah.”

Frank smiled again. "It means girl."

"Is that Indian language?"

"Not Indian, Nakota. Nakota is the name of our language." Shooting Mary a puzzled look, Frank asked, "Didn't your folks teach you that?"

Mary clenched her hands in her lap and stared down, willing the anger away. He didn't know anything about her parents. It wouldn't be too smart to get into an argument with the one person she knew here. And besides, a small voice mocked, he's right, isn't he? They didn't teach you anything at all about being Sioux.

Closing her eyes a moment, Mary swallowed hard and then, ignoring the question, she said, "Nakota, then. I'd like to learn it." She glanced at Frank, trying to smile. "What's the Nakota word for uncle?"

"Atena."

She tried the word a few times, Frank correcting her until she had it right. Pleased, her anger and discomfort gone, she began to pester him for more words, learning how to say grandmother: "Not Grannie," Frank said with a laugh. "That's wasin oyade talk. She's your mikusi."

The next half hour was filled with hoots of laughter from Frank and giggles from Mary at her pronunciation, which the girl had to admit was pretty awful.

Finally, Frank said, "Okay. I need to concentrate now. Time to land this bird."

Mary settled back, the happy feeling replaced by a small frisson of anxiety as she wondered what her grannie, no, that was wrong—her mikusi, would be like. Will she like me?

The plane dipped lower and lower. The feeling in her stomach was the same as the one she'd experienced on roller coasters in the past: that almost queasy sensation of tickling. Again, she laid a quieting hand on her midsection and looked out the window, fighting back the fear that threatened to return. The ground came closer and closer and just when it seemed to Mary that there was bound to be a crash, she felt the wheels touch the runway and the small craft bounced a few times before settling into a speeding roll.

Glancing at Frank, Mary guessed that this was a normal landing; sure, he seemed to be concentrating, but he didn't seem to be worried. As Mary watched, he applied the brakes and the plane slowed, finally rumbling to a halt close to a small building.

It was the only structure around, Mary noted, unbuckling her seatbelt. She swallowed nervously, noticing the small group of people clustered under the tinroofed porch attached to the front of the building. My people, Mary thought, the words sounding odd in her mind. Before, her people had been her parents and later, her aunt, but now the words meant something totally different.

She took a deep breath and pulled off the headphones as Frank shut down the engines. He hopped out and walked around the plane, opening her door and reaching out to help her down.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered, giving her hand a squeeze before releasing it. She smiled back, grateful for the attempt at reassurance, even if it didn't do any good.

Frank went to the small luggage compartment on the side of the plane, leaving Mary to stand awkwardly on the tarmac. The day had evidently been a hot one, residual heat crept up through Mary's thin soles and she shifted uncomfortably as the waiting people came toward her. They chattered to one another in Nakota, smiling at the girl; the noise sounded like doves cooing.

A few of the women had on dresses, but most wore jeans, like Frank. All of the people had long hair, some in braids, some loose, blowing free in the warm breeze.

Mary turned her face toward the wind, letting it push her short hair off her face and cool the nape of her neck.

Then she was surrounded by women, the men hanging back, talking together in low tones. She felt her clothes being touched, and several of the women stroked her hair, clucking their tongues. They murmured and laughed, addressing her in Nakota until Frank came back around with her bags. He uttered a short, flat sentence, and there was a pause. The women looked at each other, dismay plain in their faces. Then one

of them, a girl in shorts and tee-shirt who looked close to Mary's age, smiled again and took hold of Mary's hands. "Mary. We are so glad you have come to us! I'm Sue White Hat."

She hugged Mary, and, one by one, the women introduced themselves. There seemed to be one important omission, and Mary craned her neck, looking around. "Where is my mikusi?"

There were soft cries of approval from the women at her use of the word, and Mary was pleased she had asked Frank about the proper form of address. Sue stepped closer. "She's coming. She had to use the—" she used a word, and then laughed, "you know—the bathroom." Sue leaned in to whisper in Mary's ear, "She really just likes to make an entrance."

Mary swallowed hard. I hope she likes me.

Suddenly, the women parted to make way for someone. Sue giggled, clapping a hand over her mouth, while giving Mary a reassuring wink. Mary grinned back weakly, and then turned her attention to the incredibly old woman who walked up and stood before her.

Mary felt herself beginning to shrink under the sharp-eyed gaze, the feeling of inadequacy she'd become accustomed to during her brief time in Georgia creeping over her.

Then she stiffened her spine and stared back. I'm not going to do this anymore, she thought and Janet's words rang in her head, 'Our people were warriors.'

The old woman narrowed her eyes, noting the squared shoulders and lifted chin. She nodded in approval and the carved cane banged once on the ground. "Inhiyun, Mary Two Dogs. It is time you came back to your people."

It was as though a spell had been broken. Everyone laughed and began chattering again. Feeling relieved—it would've sucked so much to spend the summer with someone who hated her—Mary smiled. "Mikusi, I am glad to meet you, too," she said. She was almost surprised to realize that she meant it.

CHAPTER NINE

MARY LOOKED AROUND THE SMALL BEDROOM. The suitcase Frank had carried in for her was placed neatly on the bed and she moved it to the floor before flopping down, one arm thrown over her eyes.

The sound of conversation floated down the hall, into the room where she lay. Great, Mary thought. I can see I'm going to have a lot of privacy.

She sat up and looked around the room again, wondering if there was a fan anywhere she could use. It didn't seem as though there was any air conditioning in the small trailer and Mary was already sticky with sweat.

Making sure the door was fastened securely; Mary slipped out of her jeans with a sigh of relief, and then dug in her bags until she found some cotton shorts and a clean tee-shirt.

After getting into the lighter weight clothes, Mary glanced guiltily at the still packed bags. "I promise, I'll unpack later," she murmured.

Frank and Mikusi were still speaking to one another in Nakota, but switched to English immediately when Mary joined them.

"I almost forgot," Frank said. He dug in his pocket and came out with a pouch, which he gave to grandmother. "This is for you."

With a cackle, the old woman took it. "Thank you, koshkalaka."

Frank looked at Mary and grinned. "Tobacco," he said, motioning toward the pouch that lay on the table. Clamping his hat on his head, he said, "See you soon, cinja," and stepped out the door. Moments later, his old pickup roared to life, the noise fading off quickly into the distance.

Mary and her grandmother stared at one another for a moment, and then the old woman motioned for Mary to sit at the table.

Complying, Mary propped her chin up with her palm and watched her Mikusi putter in the small kitchen. A blue flame leapt to life on the stove and the old woman filled a kettle with water before placing it over the flame. As Mary watched, she dug in one of the cupboards, bringing out two mugs and a tin. She appeared to have some trouble prying off the lid of the tin and without thinking Mary got up and reached for it, wanting to help. Quick as a striking snake, her grandmother whipped her head around, freezing the girl with a look and after a moment, Mary eased back into her chair.

Guess she doesn't want my help, Mary thought. She realized for the first time that she wasn't the only one that was going to have to make an adjustment. It had to be hard to go from living by yourself to having a teenager dumped on you.

After a moment of staring at the girl, the old woman seemed satisfied that Mary would mind her place. She went back to struggling with the tin and by the time the lid had been removed, the kettle was whistling.

A few minutes later, she came over to the table carrying two steaming mugs of tea. The old woman placed one in front of the girl and took the other with her to the sofa, where she settled herself with a comfortable sigh. As Mary watched, the old woman took a noisy slurp of the tea before rooting around in her pocket, frowning and mumbling to herself, finally withdrawing a pipe and the pouch Frank had given to her earlier. Mary's eyes widened. Her grandmother smoked a pipe?

To cover her confusion more than anything else, Mary took a sip of the tea. It was the last thing she wanted right now. She'd much rather have a nice cold glass of soda.

The tea was delicious, with a pungent, almost bitter tang. After a few sips, the girl was surprised to realize she actually felt cooler.

Looking up, Mary noticed her grandmother watching her, a smile playing on her lips.

"You thought that hot drink would make you feel hotter?"

Mary nodded, wondering how she knew.

The old woman chuckled. "You are young, cinja. Your thoughts still show on your face."

Looking away from the too-knowing eyes, Mary studied the walls around her, taking in the scarred brown paneling and lack of decoration. A sudden noise made her start. Casting a look over her shoulder in the direction of the noise, she realized it was just the old white refrigerator's fan clanging to life and relaxed back into her chair, sipping again at her tea. Studying the avocado green faux leather of the sofa, Mary wondered if this kind of poverty was what her parents had been trying to escape from and wrinkled her nose. She decided she didn't really blame them.

"Your mother and father never saw the value of their life here, Mary."

Wanting to groan, Mary buried in face in her mug. How come I didn't get the Indian poker face?

Puffing on her pipe, the old woman studied Mary through a cloud of blue smoke as the girl fiddled with the now empty cup, unwilling to meet her grandmother's eyes.

Sighing, the old woman turned to gaze out the small open window by the sofa. There was a small breeze, not strong, but steady enough to waft away most of the smoke from her pipe. Instead of looking at her grandmother, Mary stared at the twisting smoke as it drifted away. She noticed that there were several small stands of trees by the trailer, but mostly the landscape was made up of tall grasses growing on gently rolling ground.

"Your parents were not bad people." Pausing, the old woman looked down at her pipe. "Ai," she muttered to herself, "I think I am too old for this journey." Then she placed the pipe carefully on the battered coffee table and motioned Mary to leave the kitchen and come sit by her on the sofa. After the girl had reluctantly complied, the old woman leaned close and continued.

"Your mother and father were born at a bad time in our history. Not"— Grandmother held up one finger—"not the worst. But they did not know that. For them, it was bad enough. When they were young, it was a shameful thing to be one of the People. Our children had to attend a special school, run by wasin

oyade. They could not speak the Nakota language. When they watched television, they saw silly white men pretending to be one of the People, acting like they had no brains in their head.

“These things made your mother and father not want to be Assiniboin anymore. When they were old enough, they left here and never looked back.” The old woman sighed and leaned back again. “This was their choice to make, Mary,” she said. “I knew they had a path to follow and said nothing. But now ... I see that their choice became yours, and I think they did not have the right to make this decision for you. You do not walk in the ways of the People. You are like a lost one.”

Stung, Mary looked down. “I’m not ashamed of my parents,” she said in a low voice.

“Ai!” Grandmother stared in amazement at the girl. “Of course not! Cinja, they are your parents!” She leveled a finger at Mary. “But they are not the world.”

The old woman pushed back from the table. “Go outside.” She waved toward the door. “Go out and see where your ancestors walked.”

Gathering the mugs, she took them to the sink where she rinsed them out before setting them to dry on a small towel laid out on the tiny counter. Apparently, she was done talking for now. Mary stood and went to the door.

It was a little cooler outside. The initial happiness of her arrival had passed, replaced by a sort of aimless discontent. Mary wandered in no particular direction, kicking at rocks, wondering how she was ever going to fill the time until she went back home. Then she stopped. Home? Did she even have a home anymore? Georgia wasn’t her home. She supposed that when Aunt Janet was finished, they would move on.

She shivered, a feeling of foreboding settling over her. When would Janet be done, and what would it take for that to happen? Mary frowned, not really wanting to think about that; instead, she shrugged the feeling off and forced herself to think positively. When Aunt Janet finished the job in Georgia, they would move somewhere else, it was as simple as that.

Mary spent the next few minutes dreaming idly about where that somewhere else might be. Alaska, maybe, where it was never hot and she had to spend all her time bundled against the cold. She sighed, wondering what it would be like not to be surrounded by stifling heat all the time.

A clattering noise made her look up. A scrubby looking pony ridden by Sue White Hat was headed toward her. Sue smiled, waving in greeting.

“Hau, Mary!” Sue called. She pulled the pony to a stop and jumped down as easily as Mary would’ve jumped off a bike.

“Hey,” Mary waved back. “Wow, that’s so cool! You make riding a horse look easy!” She looked at the pony, wondering if it would let her pet it. The pony snorted and began to graze. Maybe later, Mary thought, stepping back.

Sue noticed the movement. “Have you been around many horses?”

“Um, let’s see,” Mary pretended to think. “That would be a big fat ... no.” They both laughed and Sue stroked the dappled pony’s side. “Do you want to have a ride?”

“No!” Mary took another step back then grinned, shamefaced. “I mean, maybe later ... but I wouldn’t mind petting him, if you think he’d let me.”

“Just don’t get between him and his feed—he’s a greedy thing.”

“What?”

“I’m just kidding, he’s really very gentle.” Grabbing for the rope dangling on the grass, Sue hauled the pony’s head up.

Mary realized that the rope was the only thing on the pony’s face and thought that was odd. “Where’s the ...” she made a circular motion with one finger in front of the pony’s muzzle.

Sue frowned.

“You know,” Mary clicked her teeth and pretended to hold reins in front of her, snapping her wrists

sharply. "With the metal thing that goes in his mouth?"

"Oh! You mean a bridle?"

Mary nodded.

"He doesn't need one." Sue shrugged. "We've got a deal. He promises to do what I want if I keep the metal out of his mouth. It's hard to eat with that in there, you know. Can you imagine doing it?"

Mary laughed, realizing she felt a little envious. It must be nice to have a horse, she thought. Again, Mary's face betrayed her.

"I bet he'd like it if you pet him."

"Okay." Mary needed no more urging. Stepping closer to the animal, she tentatively rubbed the space right above his nose. The pony rolled his eyes and snorted, startling the girl into stepping away hastily.

"He's just telling you he likes to be scratched behind his ears," Sue smiled. "Don't be scared."

"Okay," Mary said, then paused. "You're sure he won't bite?"

"Lazy, bite?" Sue sounded astonished. "No way!"

She sounded so startled by the question that Mary was convinced. She reached up and began to scratch the area behind the animal's left ear. Lazy leaned into her, huffing with pleasure, and both girls laughed.

"Have you found the river yet?" Sue asked.

Mary shook her head, still scratching.

"It's a good place to swim." She clicked her tongue and Lazy reluctantly swung his head away from Mary's ministrations and stood, waiting. He rolled one eye at the girl in a long suffering manner and Mary laughed.

Sue shook her head and then swung herself up on the pony. She extended a hand to Mary, who bit her lip.

"I don't know ... maybe I'd better walk."

Sue laughed. "Don't be silly. You're acting like a wasin oyade." Then the girl clapped a hand over her mouth. "Sorry," she said. "My mother always tells me to watch my mouth. It runs like a chicken after grubs."

Perplexed, Mary gazed up at Sue. It wasn't the first time she'd heard the word. "What does that mean?"

Sue reddened. "You don't know?"

"No."

"It means white person."

"Oh." Mary looked down.

"It's not bad! It isn't a term of disrespect—just a name, like Assiniboin." Sue held out her hand again.

"Come on!"

Deciding to let it pass, Mary asked, "Can he hold us both?"

"Sure! You're small. Lazy will barely notice you."

Mary grasped Sue's hand and felt herself being hauled up.

The coarse blanket on the pony's back itched against the exposed skin of her legs and it took a moment for her to get settled comfortably, Sue waiting patiently until Mary stopped squirming before kicking the pony lightly with her heels and murmuring something in Nakota. Lazy turned and walked in the direction of a group of trees, still some distance away.

"You will always know where the water is by the number of trees growing together," said Sue, pointing.

"Look how thickly they grow over there."

"That's interesting." Mary noticed the other girl pressing her knees into the pony's sides. Lazy began to trot.

Clutching Sue around the waist, Mary said, "Is that how you drive him? With your legs?"

"I don't drive him, silly!" Sue laughed. "I ride him. But, yes, I let him know which way I'd like to go by using my legs. Like I said, we understand each other. He knows what I'm thinking."

Mary found the notion that an animal and a person could have the sort of unspoken communication that Sue

implied odd, but she didn't say anything. Maybe she's teasing me.

Then they were at the small copse. Lazy slowed to a walk then stopped in a small clearing next to the water, lowering his head again to graze. Mary looked down at the river. It was extraordinarily clear as it flowed between tree laden banks. She frowned. Was that a fish zipping through the water? "It doesn't seem very deep for a river."

"We haven't had rain in a while. This is the dry time of year. It's still plenty deep enough in the middle."

Mary clambered down awkwardly. Sue waited until Mary was safely on the ground before dismounting, jumping off the pony in a nimble motion.

"You're going to have to show me how to do that." Mary said. "Or I might have to start hating you."

Sue laughed. "Walk before you run." Then she pulled Lazy's face close and stroked his nose, whispering something to him before slapping him gently on the side of the neck. The pony chuffed into the girl's hair before moving away a few feet. Sue watched him with a fond look on her face. "I was telling him not to go too far," she explained in response to Mary's questioning look.

"That's crazy." Mary's voice was flat. She turned away from Sue, sure now that the girl was making fun of her.

"What?"

"You know, I might not be from here, and I might not know a lot about my culture, but I'm not a total idiot."

"What are you talking about? Why are you acting mad?" Sue seemed honestly perplexed.

"You don't really expect me to believe that your horse understands what you're saying to him, do you?"

"Why not?"

"Because it's dumb, that's why!"

Sue shrugged, smiling easily.

Unreasonably annoyed, Mary turned to walk back the way they'd come.

"Hey." Sue touched her lightly on the back of her arm and unwillingly, Mary paused.

"It doesn't matter what I say—you're going to believe what you're going to believe. I figure the best thing to do is wait and let things happen. If you're supposed to believe that people and horses can understand each other, you will." She let her hand fall from Mary's arm. "It's not worth arguing about, either way, right?"

Mary studied the other girl. Finally she decided that Sue wasn't teasing her, she honestly believed she had a mystical connection with her pony. "You're right. It's not worth arguing over."

Sue grinned. "Let's walk in the water and cool down."

Mary shivered, making a face.

"Now what?"

Peering at the water, Mary asked, "Aren't there fish in there?"

"Oh my gosh!" Sue laughed. "Of course there are fish in there! But they don't bite!"

"Okay, okay." Slipping off her shoes, Mary stepped down into the river and sighed with delight. The water was cool and silky against the bare skin of her legs and her toes curled under, capturing bits of the silty riverbed. Mary was slightly surprised that the feel of mud under her feet didn't gross her out, but it didn't. Sue splashed in next to her and the two spent the next half hour giggling like much younger children as they threw and dodged handfuls of water.

Finally, they found a place where they could sit in comfort on the bank while dangling their bare feet in the water.

"How did you like the plane ride with Frank?" Sue asked, chewing on a long piece of grass.

Mary shrugged. "It was scary at first. But then it was okay."

Sue shuddered. "I would be so scared! He keeps asking me to go up, but I won't."

"Now who's being silly?" Mary teased, pushing Sue's shoulder.

“Oh my gosh!” Sue pointed at the water, shrieking. “It’s an attack fish! Look out!”

Mary jerked her feet out of the water and scrambled back a few feet before she realized Sue had been teasing her.

“Hey!” Mary dived for her and they wrestled for a bit, giggling, before falling back against the ground, panting in the heat.

“Whew. It’s so hot!” Mary sat up and leaning forward, wet her palms in the water before dabbing at her face.

“Wasn’t it hot in Georgia?”

“Yeah, but it was a different kind of hot.” Mary looked around, trying to figure out how to explain it.

“There, the heat is sort of soggy, like if you sit outside too long, you’ll start growing mold on your legs.”

“Gross!”

“Tell me about it. Here’s it’s hot, but not wet.” She made a face. “Let’s stop talking about heat. It’s making me feel more warm, if that’s possible.”

“Okay,” laughed Sue. “What should we talk about?”

“I don’t know. How about ... Where did Frank learn to fly?”

Sue picked up a pebble, sending it skidding across the surface of the water. “He joined the Navy after he finished college. My mother—she was in school with him—said Frank always wanted to learn to fly, so he went in, and they taught him how.”

“I can’t imagine anyone wanting to learn that.” Mary looked up at the sun. It was dipping lower in the sky. A fly was buzzing around her head, irritating her. She waved it away.

“Me either. My mother said Frank was in Desert Storm, and he was different after that. He quit the Navy and now just stays here, on the rez.”

“Wow.” They were both quiet again for a time. Mary could hear Lazy moving around behind them.

“Mary.” Sue looked at her. “What do you know about your mikusi?”

“Not much.” Mary shrugged. “I know she isn’t, like, my real grandmother. More like an adopted one. That’s all I really know.”

“Right.” Sue seemed to be weighing something.

Shifting a little, Mary asked, “Is there something I should know?”

“No.” Sue’s answer came across as evasive to Mary.

Gently, she shook the other girl’s shoulder. “Come on! Tell me.”

Sue looked around as though she were afraid someone might overhear what she was going to say, then she whispered, “My mother says she thinks your mikusi is White Buffalo Woman, born again.”

“White Buffalo Woman?” Mary frowned. “Who’s that?”

“You don’t know much about the People, do you?” Sue frowned. “She was a very wise and powerful woman. She helped the People often. And ...” Sue lowered her voice again, “she had magical powers.”

Mary stared at her new friend in amazement, then burst out laughing. “Magical powers?” she hooted.

“Okay, maybe I can accept that you’re some kind of a horse whisperer, but Mikusi? Some kind of born-again magic person?”

Sue held out her hands. “I’m only telling you what I’ve heard.”

“Which is?” Mary was still skeptical.

“Which is that she Dreams.”

“She dreams? Big deal. I have dreams every night. Don’t you?”

“I don’t mean regular dreams.” Sue looked annoyed. “Everybody has those. I mean Dreams. Visions, stuff like that.”

Mary looked back out over the water, wondering if it was possible. Could she be living with some kind of a witch? There had been a couple of times that the old woman had seemed to know what she was thinking, but still ... Mary shook her head. Janet would have mentioned something if Mikusi had some sort

of magical powers. Come to that, if Mikusi could use magic, Janet would just have her come to Georgia and zap the chief of police. Turn him into a mouse or a toadstool or something. "It's getting late."

Sue scrambled to her feet. "Yeah, we better get back. I don't want my mom to worry."

Mary discovered that her leg muscles had stiffened up, making it painful to get back on the pony.

Sue noticed her friend's discomfort. "Oh, Mary, I'm sorry! I didn't think about that! Your leg muscles aren't used to being on a horse yet."

"Is it that obvious?" Mary grimaced.

"Yes." Sue bit her lip. "Do you think you'll be able to ride back?"

Mary flexed her leg muscles, bouncing a little. The pain was there but tolerable. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure I can."

"I shouldn't have let you get off until we were done riding," Sue sounded annoyed with herself as she mounted Lazy. "It's going to take a few weeks of riding to get you in shape."

"Wow. I'm totally looking forward to that."

Sue giggled.

The ride home was quiet. Mary was bracing herself against the jarring trot. She hadn't been totally truthful with Sue—she really did hurt, but hadn't wanted to look like any more of a wuss. Wasin oyade might not be a derogatory term, but Mary wanted her new friend to think of her as Sioux, and whining about her legs probably wouldn't win her any cool points.

When they reached the trailer, Sue dismounted first, and then helped Mary down.

"Thanks," Mary said, rubbing the insides of her legs without thinking about what she was doing. "I really enjoyed myself."

"Yeah, I can tell," Sue grinned, miming rubbing her legs.

"No, I really did!" Mary insisted. She looked down, suddenly shy. "I hope you come again."

"You just try and keep me away! You have no idea how great it is to finally have a girl my own age so close."

"Oh, I think I have some idea," Mary murmured. Sue looked at her inquiringly, but Mary shook her head.

"I'll tell you about it next time," she promised.

"Deal!" Sue waved and got back on the pony. Mary stood watching until Sue and Lazy disappeared from view before going into the trailer.

Grandmother had dinner on the table when she got in; a hearty stew accompanied by what looked like homemade bread. She waved the girl to a chair, setting a plate before her, and watching as Mary piled it high with stew. Mary added several slices of bread. She was surprised at how hungry she felt. It took no time at all for her to demolish the food and help herself to more.

The old woman waited until Mary was nearly done with the second helping before speaking. "Sue White Hat will be a good person to know while you are here."

Mary paused in surprise, her fork halfway to her mouth. How did she know who she'd been with? Was it possible that Mikusi had some sort of powers?

"It is not magic. You smell like horse. Sue is friendly and maybe a little lonely for a girl her own age. It doesn't take much connecting to put the two of you together."

"I smell like horse?"

"Just a little." She yawned, covering her mouth with one hand. "I am going to sleep now, cinja. Put the food away when you are done, will you?"

"Sure." Mary watched the old woman walk down the hall. She helped herself to another slice of bread, slathering it with butter before taking a huge bite. I should take a bath before I go to sleep.

But by the time she'd finished eating and tidying up the kitchen, Mary was so exhausted, she simply kicked off her shoes and tumbled into bed, falling asleep immediately.

CHAPTER TEN

MARY CAME OUT OF THE BEDROOM BLINKING IN THE EARLY MORNING LIGHT

streaming through the windows. Grandmother was seated at the kitchen table, sipping at a cup of tea. “Today,” she announced, “you build a sweat lodge.” Mary gaped at the woman. “What?”

“I Dreamed last night.” Grandmother settled herself more comfortably into her chair, motioning Mary to the other seat at the table. Mary sat down, cupping her chin in her hand to listen.

“A warrior on a tall white horse came to me. He said, ‘Old woman. You are worried about a certain girl.’

“I looked at this warrior. I looked at his horse, and I wondered if he came from White Buffalo Woman. ‘What you say is true,’ I told him. ‘My heart has been troubled about this girl. She is one of the People, but like a young child that knows nothing.’”

Mary stirred restlessly in her chair. Now Grandmother had mentioned two of the things Mary had heard from Sue yesterday: “Dreaming” and “White Buffalo Woman.” She opened her mouth, but Grandmother held up a hand and Mary settled back, swallowing her questions.

“Then the warrior spoke again. ‘This girl, she knows nothing of her people. The Person in her is trapped.’ ‘This was something I knew to be true. I said to the warrior, ‘How can the Person inside of this girl be set free?’

‘She must pray. Have her build a sweat lodge. She should build this sweat lodge alone, so when Wankan Tanka hears her pleas, he will know the strength that lies behind them. When she prays, give her the sacred tobacco, and let the smoke carry the sounds of her prayers through the sky to Wankan Tanka. He will set the Person free.’”

Grandmother clapped her hands once, the sound short and sharp. She looked expectantly at Mary, who didn’t know what to say. She blurted the first words that popped into her head.

“This girl? I have a name, you know.”

Frowning, Grandmother looked at Mary. “This is what I mean. You know nothing of the ways of the People. It isn’t proper for a young man to speak the name of a young girl. The warrior knows this. And, besides,” the old woman struggled to her feet. “Mary is not your true name.”

“My true name? What’s that?”

“I do not know what your true name is yet. It is the name of who you are”—the old woman leaned across the small table and tapped Mary on her breastbone— “who you are, in here.” Cocking her head, Grandmother looked at Mary. “You do not think your true self hides in the name Mary, do you? Come, get up. The morning passes.”

Alarmed, Mary looked at the old woman. “What are we going to do?”

“Did you not listen to the things I have been saying?” Grandmother looked astonished. “You are building a sweat lodge!”

“A what?”

“A place for you to sweat and pray! It is only in this way you will hear your name. Now, come—get up!”

“I don’t know anything about building,” Mary muttered, pushing herself up sullenly.

“That is why I am here,” the old woman answered serenely. She exited the trailer, stepping briskly down the two steps leading to the ground, pausing only long enough to grab a small ax that leaned against the trailer.

Seeing no choice, Mary dragged after her, wondering what the old woman was going to do with the sharp looking ax. Her question was quickly answered as Grandmother headed for one of the small stands of saplings that grew scattered around the trailer.

She moves pretty fast for such an old woman, Mary thought, yawning. But I wish she’d waited until I got some coffee.

“Nothing to eat today,” Grandmother said. “Only water to drink. You must be empty of everything except your thoughts.”

Again, the fact that the woman seemed to answer her thoughts disturbed Mary. Maybe she was a witch. The trees were farther away than they looked. It took fifteen solid minutes of walking before they reached the small copse. Mary wouldn't have minded sitting down for a minute to catch her breath but Grandmother didn't seem the least bit winded, humming deep in her throat, examining one sapling after another. Using the ax, she marked a few of the trees by taking a swipe from the bark, leaving a pale white slash against the brown of the trunk. When eight trees had been marked, Grandmother handed the ax to Mary.

“Cut those down,” she ordered.

Mary reached out, automatically taking the ax. She watched as the old woman went some distance away and sat under a larger tree before rooting around in a pocket, coming out with her pipe and the packet of tobacco. She noticed Mary staring and waved the pipe with a frown. “Cut! Cut!”

Shaking her head, Mary hefted the ax. “I hope I don't cut my leg off,” she muttered. Bending slightly, she grasped the sapling firmly with one hand, whacking hard at the tree trunk with the ax.

The impact caused the tree to shudder slightly under her hand, a jarring sensation traveling all the way up her arm to her head, where her teeth clacked together painfully. The tree itself was barely nicked.

Mary shot a look out of the corner of her eye at Grandmother, but the old woman was contentedly puffing away at her pipe and seemed to be ignoring Mary.

Gritting her teeth, Mary tried again. This time the ax bit deeply. Encouraged, Mary swung again, felling the small tree with five more blows. She stood straight, absurdly pleased. That wasn't so bad, she thought, moving on to the next one.

One hour and seven trees later, Mary had a blister on the web of her hand between the thumb and first finger and was dying for some water. Sweat had dampened her hair and was making her scalp itch where it trickled toward her neck. She wondered what was next.

“Trim all the branches from the trees, and then stack them all together in a pile.”

Right-mind reading again. Mary sighed and bent to her task. It actually didn't take too long. She was used to the feel of the ax in her hand now and the young trees didn't have too many branches.

The eight trees made an awkward pile. Mary realized she was probably going to have to haul them somewhere and wondered how many trips it would take.

The sound of grandmother's pipe hitting the ground several times in rapid succession caught Mary's attention. The old woman had scooped out a small depression in the soft dirt and was tapping the contents of her pipe into it. Smoothing the dirt over the remnants of the tobacco, Grandmother stuffed the pipe back into her pocket and stood. She walked over to where Mary waited next to the piled saplings and held out her hand for the ax. Wordlessly, Mary handed it over, watching as Grandmother went back into the stand of trees.

What is she doing? Mary wondered, as she watched the old woman reach toward the ground and begin tugging at something Mary couldn't see. As the girl watched, a snaky brown vine came away from the ground where it had been rooted.

Humming again, Grandmother pulled until she had a length about six feet long, and then used the ax to free it from what remained against the ground. She repeated this process until she had a large handful of the tough flexible vines. When she returned to where Mary had piled the saplings, she bent to loop several of the vines around the tree, snagging them deftly around the small stumps left behind from where Mary had trimmed the branches off. She used the remaining vines to form a circle, running this through the vines holding the trees together. “Pull,” she said, and she held the vine harness out to Mary.

Despite herself, Mary was impressed by the ingenuity. Taking hold of the loop, she tilted her head. “Where to?”

Grandmother didn't bother to reply, just began walking, but not back toward the trailer as Mary had expected. Shaking her head, Mary gave an experimental tug to the burden. While it was heavy, it wasn't going to be impossible to move.

The sun beat down on Mary. Sweat dripped down into her eyes and stung the small scrapes she'd gotten while cutting the saplings. A dull ache was starting right between her shoulder blades and her arm muscles burned. Mary paused several times, just long enough to shift the vine loop from one hand to the other.

After what seemed to Mary to be a long time, they finally stopped. She'd had her head down, staring at the ground as she walked and didn't notice that Grandmother was no longer moving until she collided with the old woman.

Oomph! Mary staggered backward, and would have fallen had her grandmother not grabbed her arm and hoisted her back to her feet.

"Thanks," the girl muttered.

Mikusi shook her head, as if such clumsiness was only to be expected.

Ignoring the implied insult, Mary looked around. She dropped the vine and rubbed her sore hands together, stopping almost immediately. She looked down at her hands ruefully. I didn't realize how many raw spots I had, she thought, moving her shoulders to ease the ache that lay between them.

The sound of water came to the girl's ears and she frowned. Shielding her eyes against the sun, Mary looked around for the source of the noise. It was fairly flat where they stood, but Mary noticed a thick stand of trees off to her left and Sue's words came back to her: "You will always know where the water is by the number of trees growing together."

"We're by the river!" She said, pleased with herself.

"Very good!" Grandmother nodded approvingly. "You are learning."

Now Mary turned in the direction she thought the trailer lay and was again pleased to note a small glint in the far distance—the sun reflecting off the small aluminum structure.

She felt a tap on her arm. Grandmother gestured toward the trees. "Drink."

"Where?" Puzzled, Mary looked around. Did Mikusi have a water bottle stashed in the trees?

"From the river," Grandmother said patiently. "Where else?"

"The river?" Mary repeated in disbelief. "You've got to be kidding me! Fish poop in there!"

The old woman merely raised her eyebrows before heading for the trees. "Then remain thirsty." She called over her shoulder. "I have walked a long way though and will have some water, I think."

Mary trailed behind her, wondering if her mikusi was really going to drink from the river or if this was some sort of a trick.

But it wasn't a trick. As Mary watched, the old woman knelt at the water's edge, which had indeed been hiding behind the trees. Using one hand to brace herself against the ground, she used the other to lift some water from the river.

Mary swallowed hard, watching as Mikusi smacked her lips in pleasure and repeated the process several times. The water sparkled in the sun and looked very refreshing. She edged forward, her thirst made almost unbearable by watching someone else drink.

Grandmother stood. She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth and tilted her face up to the sky, saying something in Nakota.

"What are you doing?" Mary asked, curiosity warring with thirst.

"Giving thanks to Wankan Tanka for putting this good water here when I needed it." The old woman looked slyly at Mary from the corner of her eye. "It is very good water—cold from the mountains."

Again Mary swallowed. Then abruptly, she stepped to the river's edge, ignoring her grandmother's soft chuckle.

I'm probably going to get a parasite, but at least I won't die of thirst.

The water was cold. First Mary rinsed her hands, feeling the small stinging in them ease as the water rushed over them. Then, she cupped her hands together and drank until she felt her stomach would burst. The water tasted good, a fact that surprised Mary—somehow she'd expected it to have a rank or muddy flavor.

She felt a soft touch on her shoulder. It was her grandmother. "You must rest for a few minutes to let the water settle." Mikusi looked down at Mary, her eyes twinkling. "It was a great deal of water." Mary watched the old woman walk away and shook her head. She totally just played me, the girl thought, and then realized she didn't care. She grinned and lay down on the bank, letting one hand dangle into the rushing water.

I wonder if my folks ever came here? The mental question was followed by a jolt and Mary sat up. I haven't thought about them ... she calculated quickly—not since I woke up! It was the longest time since the accident that she'd gone without their shadow laying over her. Realizing that made her feel both guilty and relieved.

She sat for a time, shoulders hunched against the sudden misery overwhelming her, tears threatening to trickle from under her closed lids. Her feelings of sadness were in direct contrast to the cheerful noises surrounding her—the sound of the water burbling mixed with birdsong—the sounds that her parents had grown up with. Suddenly it struck Mary that this wasn't what her parents would have wanted, for her to wallow in her loss. They enjoyed her happiness when they were alive, why would it be any different now?

She'd been told that by many people, including Steve, but until now the words had been empty—a meaningless phrase people used when they wanted you to stop feeling the pain of loss, as if it might be contagious and somehow infect them too. Sitting in this place where her parents had grown up, had probably laughed and gone swimming and played—the notion that they wouldn't want her to be unhappy took on a new and different complexion.

It was too much to deal with right now. Pushing the thoughts away until later, when she could unravel their meanings in peace, Mary leaned forward and used the river water to cool her overheated face.

A few minutes later, she returned to where Grandmother waited patiently. After giving the girl a searching look, the old woman nodded.

"Build here," she said, then turned and headed back in the direction of the trailer.

Mary stared after her, astonished that she was being dumped here on her own. "Wait!" She lunged forward, catching the woman's sleeve. "That's it? Just 'build here'?"

Grandmother paused. She looked at Mary. "Thank you for reminding me."

She leaned closer to Mary, whispering in her ear, "It will go quicker, if you sharpen one end of the saplings before you put them in the ground."

Then, cackling madly—just like a witch, Mary thought—the old woman trotted off.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MARY WAITED UNTIL GRANDMOTHER WAS OUT OF SIGHT, THEN—SUDDENLY

feeling very sorry for herself—flopped to the ground, one arm covering her eyes. After a few minutes, her stomach gave a loud growl and her self-pity intensified. She began to daydream about food: thick, juicy cheeseburgers, loaded with pickles and ketchup, maybe a side of golden, crispy fries, so hot you had to eat them carefully or risk a burnt tongue. She groaned and rolled over onto her stomach. Stop thinking of food! She scolded herself. It's not going to do any good. You can't have anything to eat until you're done building this stupid whatever-it-is!

She pounded the ground with a closed fist, crying out when her already abraded skin hit the small pebbles that littered the area where she lay. This infuriated Mary so much that she jumped up and stomped

over to the pile of cut saplings, kicking them furiously.

Then she realized how dumb she was acting and how ashamed her parents would be if they could see her now.

And how do you know they can't? The small voice in her head had a mocking tone. She looked around guiltily. Maybe they can, she thought.

Don't you think this pity party has gone on long enough? The mocking voice was back. Mary blinked. If you're hungry, get to work! You'll be able to eat when you're done, right?

"Right," Mary murmured aloud.

So get to work, dummy!

"Right!" Mary placed her hands on her hips and stared down at the pile of saplings, knocked askew from her childish fit. Frowning, she wondered how she was going force those thin little trees into anything remotely structure-like. Grandmother's advice floated around in her head. Sharpen one end...

Mary mulled the words over in her mind. She told me to sharpen one end, right? Why? To make it easier to go into the ground.

Well, duh! She shook the mocking voice away, and pictured the eight sticks, each with one end buried in the ground. Something was missing here. How would she get the sticks to stay together? Nibbling on her lower lip, Mary glanced at the vines she'd tossed carelessly off in a pile. Wait a minute ... The trees were slender and flexible enough to bend. The vines seemed strong enough and supple enough to use as rope.

Now that she had a plan, Mary was excited. She looked around for the small hand ax, finding it propped against a tree close by. Picking it up, Mary weighed the ax thoughtfully while looking at the saplings again. She realized it would be best to make some sort of a rough guide on the ground where she planned to place her sticks. Otherwise, she'd probably have to dig them all up again because they were too far apart or something. She considered again the shape she had in her mind, trying to decide how close or far apart the trees should be. Well, she pursed her lips, they should be close enough together so that when I bend them, the tops can be tied almost in a closed shape. Mary cupped her hands upside down over the ground, giving herself an idea what the finished result would look like.

Hunting under the trees, Mary found a sturdy looking stick. Using it, she drew a rough circle on the ground, scuffing her attempts away a few times until she was satisfied she'd gotten the shape that would work best. Then she marked out eight evenly spaced places where she planned to put the saplings.

Next, she used the ax to carefully sharpen one end of each of the saplings, piling them neatly as she finished each one. When she was done, she took the saplings and lay them down in front of the spaces she marked.

She took a step back and gave her progress a critical look, making a few small adjustments here and there. Then, finally satisfied, she took a deep breath and picked up one of the sharpened sticks, wincing a little against the pain it caused rubbing against the blistered skin.

She aimed it like a spear pointed at the earth, and plunged the sapling straight down. Mary was delighted to discover that she wasn't even going to need to dig a hole, the tree had buried itself a good five inches into the earth. She quickly repeated the process with the remaining trees.

Next she untangled the vines and laid them neatly on the ground, side by side. After some trial and error with the piece that had been wrapped around the saplings, Mary figured out the length that would work best for what she wanted.

She bent one of the supple sticks, forcing it down so it was close to the stick across from it and, straddling the bent stick, tied it to its mate about halfway up its unbent length. The stubs left from where she'd cut the branches off helped to anchor the vines in place. Then she took the second stick, the one she'd tied the first one to and bent it down, tying the tip of it to the first one. The result was a sort of clumsy arch. Mary realized she'd need to cross at least two of these arches to make it sturdy enough.

Once Mary realized what she needed to do, it didn't take long. She paused a few times to get water and to

stand back and examine what she was doing. She didn't hear Grandmother come up behind her.

"You have made progress!"

Mary turned, startled to see the old woman, who nodded approvingly and held out a small spade. "You should dig a hole in the center of the lodge," the old woman gestured with her hands, "about this wide and this deep." The dimensions Grandmother indicated were a roughly a foot across and six inches deep.

Mary had already spent enough time around Mikusi that she didn't ask any questions, she simply took the spade and walked around the structure to what she'd already mentally designated as the doorway. Grandmother called after her. "And get some large rocks from the river! Ten sounds like a good number to me."

Mary shook her head. "Crazy old woman," she muttered, dropping to her knees and crawling inside the lodge. "You couldn't have told me this before I put the outside up?"

It took another ten minutes to dig the hole and toss the dirt out, then another twenty or so minutes or so to scout out enough large rocks. She found ten that were the size of her fist doubled, and hoped that was a decent enough size.

On her last trip carrying stones from the river, Mary noticed something on the ground next to the structure. Curious, she dropped the rocks with the others in front of the doorway, and then picked up what looked like a folded blanket. It wasn't until she had the 'blanket' unfolded that she realized what it really was: several cured animal skins sewn together.

"Gross!" Mary wrinkled her nose, dropping the hide blanket on the ground and stared at it. "That's from real animals!" She crossed her arms and shuddered. Taking a couple of steps back from the hide, she turned and went down to the river to wash her hands.

Hypocrite. The mocking voice was back.

"Oh shut up," Mary growled, watching the water stream over her fingers as she knelt on the bank.

You are! Not an hour ago, who was dreaming of juicy cheeseburgers?

Mary sighed. There's no use arguing, she thought. You'll just lose. She stood and walked back to where she'd dropped the hides.

"What does she expect me to do with this?" Mary nudged the skins with her toe.

Then it struck her. "Oh my gosh!" Mary picked the skin covering up, forgetting her discomfort with its origin, holding it this way and that, comparing it to the structure. It's supposed to go over the trees!

Mary walked around the small circle, wondering how best to drape the heavy hides over the suddenly too-flimsy looking hut. Pausing in front of the doorway, she gnawed on her lip. Was the hide sewn to accommodate an entry? If so, it would make for a starting point.

Taking a step away from the structure, Mary fluffed the skins in the air, letting the covering settle to the ground before kneeling to look for an entrance flap. The cured skins were slightly lighter in color than the ground they lay on and soft under her questing hands. I wonder what kind of animal these are from? She was a little surprised at how fast her squeamishness had passed, leaving behind just curiosity, such as how the fur had been removed from the hides.

There! The idle questions were chased out of her head by the discovery of a slit in the skin covering. That's got to be for the doorway. She fingered the leather strings on either side of the slit. These must be to tie the door closed when you're inside.

Now Mary was ready to drape the hides over her lodge. She struggled with the heavy hide, watching in alarm as the little structure swayed once or twice. It took almost as long to get the covering on properly as it had to build the frame, but with a lot of tugging and shifting, the hides were finally in place. Pleased with herself, Mary took a step back to look at the finished product.

Hearing footsteps, she turned and saw Grandmother approaching. How does she do that? She always shows up at exactly the right time!

The old woman walked around the hide-covered structure, poking at it with her stick.

“Hmm,” she finally said. “It will do.”

Mary had been expecting some praise—she’d worked hard! At first astonished at the lack of appreciation, she quickly became angry and had to clamp her teeth together on the angry words that bubbled up. Grandmother hadn’t had to haul all those rocks. She hadn’t been the one to bend those green saplings into shape and force them to stay there with vines that just wanted to slip out of a person’s fingers.

While Mary seethed, Grandmother turned her face up to the sun and closed her eyes. In a serene voice, she said, “You are still wikoskalaka—full of fire—and finding it hard to walk in life.”

Unable to keep the anger from her face, Mary looked down. The backs of her hands were covered in scratches and her nails were cracked and broken. This was only her second day here on the rez. How am I going to last?

“Now you must bathe.” Grandmother’s voice was brisk. “Not—” as Mary turned toward the trailer, “—in there.”

“Then where?” There was a pause as Mary processed. Then her mouth fell open. “Oh no! I’m not taking a bath in the river.”

Ignoring the words, Grandmother thrust something at Mary. “Leave your clothes by the bank, and when you are done bathing, wrap yourself in this.” Mary reluctantly took the item. It was a dress, covered with intricate bead and quillwork. Against her will, she was charmed out of her annoyance and held the dress out, studying it.

“My mother made this, tanning the hide and decorating it. I thought it was for me, but she would not let me wear it. She told me, ‘One day, daughter, you will need this to help one of our people find her way home.’” Grandmother looked at Mary. “I did not know what she meant, for at the time I too, was wikoskalaka and angry that I could not wear the dress. But my mother was a very wise woman and I listened to her, putting this away until now. I do not know how she knew you would come to me, but she did.”

Whatever. Mary didn’t believe a word of the story, but she did think the dress was beautiful and folded it carefully, thinking it should really be in a museum. Regretfully, she tried to hand the dress back. “I don’t want to hurt this—”

But the old woman refused to take the garment back. “This was made for you, Daughter. It will help you find your way back to the People.”

“Fine,” shrugged Mary. “Don’t get mad at me if I mess it up, though.” With a sigh, she turned and headed to the river. Then she stopped, struck by an awful thought. “What if somebody sees?” she whispered over her shoulder.

“Sees?” Mikusi frowned. “Sees what?”

“Me!” Mary waited for the older woman to register her meaning, then stomped her foot when that didn’t happen. “Me! Taking a bath!” She was less than pleased when Mikusi began to laugh.

“Child. No one is here but you and me. A bird may see you. An insect may see you. Perhaps even the fish will see you!” She laughed harder at Mary’s expression.

The girl turned and stomped off in the direction of the river, muttering under her breath, “I don’t see you splashing around in the river.”

“I am not the one seeking a vision!” The laughter lasted until Mary reached the water.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ONCE AT THE BANK, MARY LOOKED AROUND TO MAKE SURE THAT SHE WAS

alone before shucking off her clothes and hurrying into the water. She gasped a little, the sheer iciness of the water chasing any thoughts of hidden watchers from her mind

After the initial shock wore off, Mary had to admit the water was rather nice. It was clean and clear

and the sun lowering in the sky made beams of light refract off the water like pieces of gold. Mary relaxed, enjoying the sensation of the cool water running over her body while the tangy smell of pine filled her nose.

Forgetting her previous fears, she playfully grabbed at the few trout that came by to investigate the strange creature in their home but they eluded her easily, dappled scales blending into the shadows cast by the trees.

After a while, Mary tired of teasing the fish and floated for a time on her back, idly watching the intricate dance of the insects that lived by the river. A dragonfly zoomed by, pausing to land for a moment on her bare stomach. Mary held her breath, watching. The creature looked like it was wearing goggles—a fighter pilot prepared for battle. Gently fanning its wings, it sat there for a long time before flitting away again when a small fish broke the surface.

Reluctantly, Mary decided it was time to get out. She ducked her head under the water one final time, pushing the short strands of hair backward, squeezing the excess water out as best she could. As she stepped onto the riverbank, Mary felt calm, but oddly heavy as her body made the transition from being buoyant to gravity-bound once again.

I'd love to have a towel right about now, she thought, but it only took a few minutes in the late afternoon air for her to feel dry enough to comfortably don the dress. She eased the beautiful garment carefully over her head, all the while praying she didn't damage it in some way.

It feels like butter, Mary reflected, smoothing down the knee-length garment. And so pretty! She spent a few minutes looking down, admiring the dress and wishing for a full length mirror before returning to the lodge where Grandmother waited.

The old woman was tending a small fire in front of the lodge. The wood crackled and the smoke smelled good, reminding Mary of grilling hotdogs and how hungry she was. Pushing thoughts of food away, Mary squatted next to the fire, watching as Mikusi looked over the rocks Mary had gathered earlier, placing some directly into the fire, placing others to the side. "What are you doing?"

"These rocks I am heating." The old woman pointed into the fire and then nodded at the ones in a pile next to her. "Those are sandstone. They will explode if I put them in the fire."

"Why do you have any of them in the fire?"

Mikusi poked at the fire again, and then gestured toward the lodge. "Go inside, and I will show you." Moving carefully, Mary knelt and crawled into the small hut. To her surprise, the floor wasn't covered with dirt and pebbles as she'd left it, but vegetation that gave off a pungent smell as she situated herself. Once seated on the far side of the depression, Mary sniffed the air, trying to place the smell that filled the enclosure. It's sage, she thought in surprise.

The opening to the sweat lodge moved and Grandmother appeared with a small, pitchfork-like stick in one hand. She used it to carry one of the heated rocks into the lodge, dropping it in the depression. Then she disappeared, returning moments later with another, repeating the process until all the heated rocks were stacked in the small pit.

Kneeling outside the lodge, she handed in to Mary a pipe from which curled a spiral of smoke. "Your mind must be right. This is a sacred thing. You must pray, pray for a vision while you sweat. This vision will lead you home."

Mary wasn't sure she felt lost. She didn't even feel Sioux, but felt unable to say these things to her mikusi, when obviously they had so much meaning to her.

Seeming to take Mary's silence for agreement, Grandmother nodded, placing a small bucket of water with a dipper within the girl's reach. "Pour some water on the rocks." The hide doorway dropped into place and Mary sighed, feeling a little silly and wondering how long she'd have to stay in the lodge.

She took an experimental puff of the pipe, which made her eyes water and her throat burn. She scooped up a handful of the water from the bucket, gulping it down gratefully before filling the dipper and emptying it

over the rocks.

The water hissed as it hit the rocks and the small lodge filled with steam almost immediately. Mary was amazed how quickly she became bathed in sweat. Her stomach rumbled again so she sipped at some more water, and then closed her eyes.

“Smoke!” Mikusi commanded though the hide wall.

Mary made a face. “You’re so bossy,” she muttered in a low voice. Not low enough to keep her grandmother from hearing her, though. A laugh floated into the hut.

“Yes cinja, this is true. Now smoke!”

Rolling her eyes, Mary raised the pipe again and puffed, this time drawing only a tiny bit of the smoke into her mouth. She’d never experimented with cigarettes like some of the other kids in her school, being of the opinion that they smelled bad and were just a nasty habit to have. This felt different—maybe it has something to do with the way the tobacco is used, she thought. Maybe it’s using the pipe that makes it feel different.

Mary held the pipe out, examining it as best she could in the dim, steamy air of the lodge. About eight inches long from bowl to stem, it looked old and had been painted blue, but now the paint was wearing thin in places, exposing the dark wood underneath. From under the bowl dangled three tattered feathers and the stem was thin and cracked. How many mouths have used this, she wondered? How many people have held this in their hands? Were they like me, seeking a vision? She took another puff, realizing she had become a part of the history of the object in her hand.

It was relaxing in the hot lodge. Mary closed her eyes as sweat trickled down her body in small rivers. She brushed a drop off the end of her nose and yawned, wondering how long she should give this before exiting the hut. She was tired, hungry and wanted to go to sleep. She sighed. I’m not going to have a vision. Unless— Mary looked at the pipe in her hand —unless she’s put something besides tobacco in here. Wacky baccy. Mary giggled, and then realized the steam was lessening a bit. She poured some more water on the rocks, watching as steam billowed up again, once more filling the small space.

She puffed one last time on the pipe, and then set it aside before drawing her knees up and resting her forehead on them. Her mind began to wander again. What had it been like, to be Sioux before the reservations existed? Was it like she’d seen on television? Mary had a vague notion of Indian life in the 1800’s, mostly based on movies such as *Dances with Wolves*.

Mary realized she was about to fall asleep. The long day, filled with manual labor, wasn’t something she was used to and for the first time, she understood the term bone weary.

Wondering how much longer Grandmother expected her to stay inside the steamy lodge, Mary forced her eyes open. It took a minute for them to focus and then a few more seconds for her brain to process what she saw, but when the message came through, it was all Mary could do not to scream.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SITTING OPPOSITE MARY WAS A YOUNG SIOUX GIRL OF ABOUT HER AGE,

dressed in traditional clothing, who stared silently.

“Uh, hello?” Mary’s mouth was so dry, she could barely form the words. How did Grandmother sneak her in here and why? But a few seconds later, it was obvious that grandmother hadn’t been involved.

This was her vision.

As Mary watched, sores began to blossom on the girl’s face and arms. They spread rapidly, changing from lesions to weeping festers in the space of a heartbeat. A sweet stink filled the lodge, the stench of corruption and of illness and Mary leaned as far away from the girl as she could, pressing into the hide

covering, the saplings to either side of her shivering under the strain while the hut creaked ominously.

There was no way Mary could evade the girl as she reached out. Stomach twisting with revulsion, Mary watched as her hand, oozing with sickness, rested a moment on Mary's forearm. "Giksuya," the girl said softly before fading away. Not wanting to inhale in the tainted air, Mary had been holding her breath, but when the girl disappeared, she gasped and realized that the stink had disappeared as well.

She waited a minute to make sure the apparition had truly gone before crawling shakily out of the lodge, where the night air greeted her with the force of a chill hammer. Mary swayed and would have collapsed had not her grandmother caught her. Crooning, the old woman pulled her up and made sure Mary was physically whole before beginning the journey back to the trailer, a process which seemed to take forever.

Once there, Mary was surprised that the old woman didn't pepper her with questions. After all, she'd been so pumped about Mary having a vision. But Mikusi remained silent, first helping her change into pajamas, then tucking her into bed as though she were a small child. It wasn't until Mikusi turned off the bedside lamp and turned to leave the room that Mary felt strong enough to ask something. "What does giksuya mean?"

A stray beam of moonlight illuminated Grandmother's face as she frowned down at Mary. "It means, 'remember me'."

Mary was asleep before her grandmother had left the room.

Mapiya hopped from one foot to the other in an agony of impatience. Later that day a group of young men was going to go to Fort Belknap to trade, and her father had finally given his grudging consent for her to accompany them in the care of her elder brother. It was just after dawn, but Mapiya had risen and bathed in the river, then dressed in her finest clothes and carefully braided her hair, hoping her father wouldn't object as she daubed a tiny amount of red paint on her face.

She'd never seen one of the wasin oyade and was very curious. She'd laughed the day before when her friend Anpaytoo had whispered to her that she'd heard that the men had hair on their faces, hair of different colors, instead of a proper black, or the gray of age. "Their eyes are different too," Anpaytoo had said, "in strange shades, like their hair."

Mapiya had stared open-mouthed a moment, then laughed and pushed her friend. "Liar!" But Anpaytoo insisted, shaking her head "No! My mother's brother told my father. I was outside cooking, but I heard them."

Waiting now, Mapiya wondered about the women of the wasin oyade. What were they like? Was their hair normal, like hers—a beautiful deep black—or was it as the men of their race? And did they, too, have hair on their faces? The girl shook her head. It was all very strange.

She could hear her mother inside the tipi talking to her little sister, Chumani. Moments later, Takchawee ducked through the doorway, carrying the child and stopped, staring.

Mapiya flushed.

A small frown creased Takchawee's forehead as she studied Mapiya, noting the paint and the obvious extra care she'd taken with her appearance.

"Mapiya!" Chumani caught sight of her older sister and squirmed, wanting to get down. Takchawee placed the two-year old on the ground, steadying her slightly before kneeling to start the fire.

"Pretty!" Chubby fingers hovered over the paint on Mapiya's face. Hoping to distract her sister, the older girl grabbed the basket used to carry water. "Do you want to go to the river with me?"

“Yes, yes!” Chumani immediately forgot about the paint and bounced in place.

“Hold my hand,” cautioned the older girl. “You have not yet grown into your legs, little vine.” Behind them, Takchawee snorted. Mapiya’s face got hot all over again and she hurried her sister along toward the river.

The small community was waking up. Smells of cooking food mixed with blue smoke and hung low in the cool morning air, while women tended small fires outside of their tipis, much like Takchawee. Also like her mother, the women stared as the girls passed, most indicating disapproval of the paint with frowns and headshakes, though one old woman laughed loudly, calling out as the girls passed, “Are you looking for a husband among the wasin oyade?”

Annoyed now, Mapiya picked up her sister in order to move more quickly. I have seen fourteen summers and have had the woman-making ceremony! I can wear the paint if I want, and I can choose my husband from wherever I want, even the wasin oyade!

The last idea actually filled her with repugnance though, and she sighed in relief when she saw no one but she and Chumani were at the river yet. Mapiya carefully placed her sister on the ground before removing the child’s moccasins.

“Chumani can swim?” The little eyes were hopeful.

“Not this morning.” The little girl looked so devastated that Mapiya relented, laughing. “You can play in the water, just be careful.”

“I will!”

Keeping an eye on the enthusiastic child, Mapiya kicked off her own moccasins and pulled her dress up over her knees before wading out where the water ran fastest and purest to fill her willow basket.

Moving back to shore, Mapiya waited for her feet to dry, watching as her sister splashed and played. After a moment she was able to slip back into her shoes and held a hand out. “Come, Chumani. Let’s go back, now.”

“Do we have to?”

“Yes, little fish, we have to.” She added in a coaxing voice, “I think there will be meat this morning.”

“Meat!” The child scrambled out of the water and held her arms up. “Carry me!”

“Fine, fine,” Mapiya mock grumbled.

The early morning sun rose red over the horizon, casting a rosy blush over the world. Mapiya hoped her mother really was cooking some of the family’s meat for the morning meal. She was really hungry, not having been able to eat the night before because of the anticipation of today’s trip.

They made their way back to the tipi uneventfully, the other women too occupied with feeding their families to spare the girls any looks, for which Mapiya was grateful. Nearing the tipi, she saw her father was awake and quickened her step, a little anxious over his reaction to her facial adornment.

There was indeed meat. The strong smell of the cooking bear flesh brought water to the girl’s mouth. Chumani squirmed, wanting to get down. “Father!”

Enapay smiled at his youngest child and held out his arms, indicating for her to come forward. As Chumani scrambled into his lap, his sharp eyes noted the paint on Mapiya’s face, but said nothing.

Chumani started her favorite pastime when in her father’s lap, playing with Enapay’s bear-claw necklace, making the wicked-looking yellow claws dance and growl at one another. Enapay ignored the noises and looked into the fire. “There was a time, daughter,” he said, speaking to Mapiya, “that you played in my lap, much like Chumani. But that time is past. You are a woman now.”

Accepting some meat from Takchawee, he tore off a small piece for Chumani before beginning to eat himself. She could wear the paint! Mapiya felt a rush of happiness, but lowered her eyes, waiting until her mother had taken some meat before helping herself. Though hungry, she barely tasted the rich, fatty meat, so pleased was she with her father’s approval.

Enapay spoke again. “I have some skins that you can take. You might get something for them in trade. See

if the wasin oyade have any of those needles made of steel.”

Mapiya smiled to herself. This was his way of appeasing her mother. The wasin oyade needles made sewing far easier. No longer would Takchawee have to pierce the hide with an awl before threading stiff sinew through it.

Mapiya’s mother stood, disappearing into the tipi and returning with a small bundle of hides which she placed on the ground next to her daughter. Then she reached out and touched the girl lightly on the cheek, worry in her eyes. Suddenly feeling guilty, Mapiya reached up, covering her mother’s hand with her own. Takchawee sighed, and went back inside the tipi.

“Good morning. There is meat!” Kangee, Mapiya’s brother settled himself by the fire, reaching out to help himself to some meat. Though he no longer lived with his family, staying instead in the unmarried men’s lodge where he would remain until he chose a wife, he still came to his parent’s fire for his meals. Mapiya watched him, thinking that her elder brother looked especially fine. He was wearing his best, and had placed in his hair the eagle feather he had earned in the last Sun Dance.

He ate quickly, holding out a tender bit of meat to Chumani, who was a special pet of his. “Shall I bring you something back from the wasin oyade, little one?” His eyes fell onto a doll the child played with. “Another doll, maybe?” “No. I have a baby. Mapiya gave her to me. Something else.”

“What?”

Taking the meat, Chumani popped it in her mouth and tilted her head to the side, considering. “Food!”

“Ah, you are greedy.” Kangee tickled the child’s stomach, smiling when she squealed with laughter. “I will bring you more food to make your belly even bigger, then.”

Chumani giggled again, holding her hand out for another piece of her brother’s breakfast. After he complied, he popped a last bit into his mouth and wiped his hands on a bundle of sweet grass beside the fire, there for that purpose.

“We are ready,” he said to Mapiya.

“Wait a bit—I forgot to pack something.”

Kangee shrugged, tearing another bit of meat off the hunk over the fire. “Do not move slowly. The others wait.”

Springing up, pack in hand, Mapiya dashed into the tipi, going to the area where she slept. Having her brother notice Chumani’s doll had prompted her to remember the other dolls that she’d made over the long winter. She hadn’t known what she would do with them, but now ...

Moving the neatly rolled sleeping hide, the girl dug in a tightly woven basket, shifting aside bits of hide and leather loops, odds and ends that she felt she could use in the future, until she found the dolls. She pulled one out, trying to see with the eyes of a stranger, wondering if it might have value in the eyes of another. To her, the cornhusk doll with braided hair made from horse’s mane, wearing the intricately beaded dress was pretty. Perhaps someone else will think so as well, she thought, stuffing the doll into her pack, repeating the process with the others.

“I am ready!” She stepped outside, settling the carry strap onto her forehead as she smiled at her brother. It was time.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE NEXT MORNING MARY WOKE WITH A HEADACHE, HER STOMACH

screaming for food. The night had been a restless one, filled with vivid dreams that slipped away even as she tried to recall them. Sitting on the edge of her bed, Mary sniffed the air. I’m hungry, but I hope that’s not what’s for breakfast! It smells gross! The elusive smell of foul, fatty meat disappeared. Mary frowned, and then shrugged the moment off, quickly forgetting it. She threw on some clothes and headed for the kitchen.

“Hello?” Mary was evidently alone in the trailer. “Man,” she muttered, annoyed until she discovered breakfast in a covered pan on the stove.

Mmmm. Scrambled eggs with cheese, onions and green peppers. She didn’t even bother getting a plate, just grabbed a fork from the drawer and standing in front of the stove, ate right from the pan.

When the eggs were gone—in a matter of seconds it seemed—she drank a glass of tap water. It was cold and had a peculiar mineral taste, not unlike the river. After giving a ladylike burp, she noticed that Grandmother had also left some coffee for her in a tin percolator on the stove.

Mary poured a cup, sweetened it with some sugar from the bowl on the counter, and hunted through the fridge for some milk, making a face when she came up empty. Oh well, just drink it without milk, I guess. She laughed to herself. It’s not like I have a choice, right? Carrying the cup, she opened the trailer’s door and perched on the top step, looking out at the day.

I wonder why the skies here look like they go higher than the sky in New York? Maybe because there isn’t so much pollution pressing down? She turned sideways a little, leaning back against the door frame and tilting her face up to the warm sun, closing her eyes. The air is so much fresher here, she decided, savoring the combination of wild sage, pine trees, and flowers.

Yesterday’s experience lingered in her mind, waiting to be explored but Mary wasn’t ready to think about it yet. Pushing the image of the girl away, Mary decided to call Janet, instead. I hope she’s not too worried, she thought, feeling guilty when she realized she hadn’t spoken to her aunt since arriving at the rez. Finishing her coffee, she stood and carried the empty mug to the sink where she washed the dirty dishes before heading to her room.

What a mess. Mary shook her head, hands on her hips as she surveyed the tiny space. Her things were strewn haphazardly around and clothes rioted half in, half out of the open suitcase, pushed against the wall opposite her bed.

With a sigh, she got started, hanging up her shirts and the one dress she’d brought with her before looking in the dresser, hoping at least one of the drawers were empty.

The top two were empty, so Mary filled them with the items remaining in her suitcase. Then, curious, she looked through the bottom two drawers, finding them stuffed with old letters and other bits of life that get saved in spare places. She lifted out a bundle of letters tied together with faded ribbon. The smell of lilac drifted up, tickling the back of her throat, and unaccountably making her sad. Suddenly feeling as though she were spying, Mary replaced the bundle and shoved the drawer closed.

After making the bed, she went into the ancient bathroom to take a shower, looking distastefully at the rust stains on the tile. She jumped as the water chugged and burped when she turned the faucet. It took some time to regulate itself, and then when turned to the shower, there was no water pressure to speak of, making it a real chore to get her hair clean. Thinking back to the day before, recalling how peaceful it had been swimming in the river and how clean and calm she’d felt afterwards, Mary reflected that so-called civilized life wasn’t always an improvement.

After she’d dressed, Mary dug the cell phone out of her bag. She plopped down on her bed and tried to figure out how it worked, slightly embarrassed by her lack of knowledge. She’d never had a need for a cell phone before, though the kids back in New York and Georgia had used them with ease.

It took a few tries, but Mary finally figured out how to dial the number of the house she and Janet shared, disappointed when the answering machine picked up.

Darn it. Mary glanced at her watch. Duh—she’s at work, silly. She dialed her aunt’s desk phone, but there was no answer there either.

Mary frowned, nibbling on her lip, wondering if she should try again. She’s probably busy. I’ll try later. The front door to the trailer opened, and Mary could hear Grandmother stump inside. Tossing the cell phone back on the bed, Mary went out to join her.

Dangling from Grandmother’s hand was a skinned and gutted rabbit.

“Eww!” Mary’s outburst was involuntary. The old woman shot her an amused look. “You didn’t say ‘eww’ the other night when you ate that stew.” Mary’s stomach did a slow somersault. “That was rabbit?”

“Yes. And wild carrots and onions and some other things from outside.” She waved a hand toward the door, placing the rabbit in the sink. “Get me the big pan from the drawer under the stove please, cinja.” Mary sidled up to the stove and retrieved the pan, staring in horrified fascination at the headless rabbit. “What are you going to do with it?”

Grandmother snorted. Pulling a wicked-looking knife from a wooden holder on the counter, she said, “Cook it. You want to eat tonight, don’t you?” She began to deftly segment the carcass. Tossing it into the pan Mary held out at arm’s length, Grandmother added some water, and then pulled a bundle of wild sage from her pocket, which she tossed in as well.

Setting the rabbit on the stove, she turned the burner on low, and then washed her hands and the knife. “There.” Grandmother smacked her lips. “We will go out later, and I will show you where to gather the best onions.”

Mary felt a little faint, though she realized she was being ridiculous. This was just meat, after all, no different from the steaks or ground beef she relished.

“Where did you get it from? The rabbit, I mean.”

Grandmother poured herself a cup of the coffee, and settled herself at the table. She pulled out her pipe, filling it from the pouch Frank had given her, then lit it. “Traps.”

“Traps?”

Grandmother gave her a considering look. “Cinja, how do you think our people lived before the wasin oyade came here?”

The girl shrugged. “I never really thought about it.”

Shaking her head, Grandmother sipped at her coffee, turning her gaze out the window.

An uncomfortable silence filled the air. Then, abruptly, Grandmother asked, “Janet. What does she do in the white man’s world?”

“She works for the FBI.”

The old woman nodded. “I have had many thoughts of her. Even before she called about you. When I asked her how she went in the world, she would not answer.”

“She probably didn’t want to worry you.” Mary recounted the past few months, telling Grandmother of her own fears for Janet.

But instead of seeming worried, Grandmother smiled. “She is strong, that girl. She walks in the warrior way. I am proud.”

Mary was amazed. She’d thought that Grandmother would be on her side in this, that she’d call Janet and order her to stop before she got hurt. Mary shook her head, wondering if she’d ever understand the old woman.

Taking a final puff off of the pipe, Grandmother rose and knocked the ashes into the sink, chasing them down the drain with the water she used to rinse out her cup. After checking once again on the rabbit simmering on the stove, she turned to Mary. “Come,” she said, “I am going to show you how to trap.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THEY WENT IN THE DIRECTION OF THE RIVER. As they drew close to the water, however, Grandmother turned and entered the woods instead. The old woman was humming as she strode along, while behind her, Mary panted as she tried to keep up.

Doesn’t she ever run out of steam?

The cool darkness of the trees was welcome after the long walk. Mary took a moment to orient herself,

not realizing how fast and silently her grandmother could travel through the woods. Before Mary's eyes had adjusted to the dimmer light, she was nearly out of sight and Mary had to trot to avoid losing her entirely.

Finally, to the girl's relief, Mikusi stopped to examine something on the ground, which allowed Mary to catch up; she accomplished this by crashing noisily through the brush. "Inina, cinja!" Grandmother frowned, looking irritated. "You make as much noise as a wounded buffalo." A glint entered her eye and the corner of her mouth twitched up. "Perhaps that should be your true name—Wounded Buffalo!"

Mary rolled her eyes, and then knelt to see what Grandmother had stopped to look at. It was a small lariat, the loop of which sat over a narrow leafy path while the other end disappeared into the undergrowth. Curious, Mary parted the scrubby bushes, following the rope and saw that it was tied to a stick that had been pushed into the ground.

"Cool," Mary said. "You did this?"

Grandmother nodded.

"What is it?"

"What do you think it is?"

"Hmm." She ran a tentative finger over the looped section. It was silky feeling, almost slick to the touch. Not rope then—that was coarser. Mary bent closer, looking at the color. It was hard to tell exactly, in the tree filtered light, but it seemed to be russet in hue, almost red.

"Is this hair?" she wondered aloud.

"Hairs from the tail of a horse," answered her grandmother, sounding pleased at Mary's deduction. "Sue White Horse brings them to me." She reached up and broke a few pine needles off a low hanging branch, bending the needles to release their pungent oil, which she rubbed on the loop where Mary had touched. Seeing Mary's questioning look, she said, "The smell of human being is strong. I do not want to have the mastinca chased away."

Mastinca? Mary frowned down at the leafy path where the loop lay and suddenly something clicked.

"This is for rabbits! That's what mastinca means!"

"Yes!" Grandmother smiled. "Now, another question for you: What is the one thing every living creature needs?"

Mulling that over, Mary shook her head. "I don't know, food?"

"Yes. What else?"

"Water!"

"Yes again! This trail leads to the river. Many small animals use it, usually in the very early morning, or when it is starting to get dark." Grandmother made a face. "Once I caught a skunk. Yee! I smelled bad!"

Mary grinned slyly. "Maybe your True name is Smells Like a Skunk."

Grandmother stared at the girl a moment, and then whooped with laughter. She clapped the girl on the shoulder. "That is very good, cinja. Very good. Now you begin to think like a True Person!"

Still chuckling, she pointed at the braided horsetail loop. "I have eight of these. They run about a mile back. I have already checked them once today. Tomorrow you will check them."

Mary gaped at the old woman who ignored her, walking back the way they'd come. "Come. We need to find some things to put in our dinner."

Once out of the woods, Grandmother handed Mary a short stick from within her deep pockets.

"What's this for?" Mary asked, turning the stick over in her hands.

"To dig." Grandmother raised her eyebrows. "It is too small to fight off a bear I think," and, cackling again, the old woman set off.

She's got a really warped sense of humor, Mary thought as she looked around cautiously. Bears? Shuddering, she followed her quick-moving Grandmother.

After a few minutes, Grandmother paused before a bush with purple fuzzy flowers. We must be near the

river again, Mary thought. She could hear it gurgling somewhere close. Looking around, Mary saw that the bushes grew very thickly here.

“Dig under this plant.” Grandmother pointed to the one in front of them.

Mary knelt, using the small stick to scrape at the dirt under the plant. “What am I digging for?”

“Tipsinna. The wasin oyade call it prairie turnip. It is good in stew.” Grandmother smacked her lips loudly, one hand rubbing her belly.

Mary shook her head, continuing to dig. Finally, she was rewarded by the sight of a small white tuber. Setting the stick aside, Mary reached for the root. But as her fingers touched it, the world seemed to sway. Dots danced before her eyes as she fell into darkness.

Mapiya dug the tipsinna out of the ground, laying it next to the others she had gathered. There was a huge difference between gathering food by herself and gathering food in the company of the other women. Unused to being alone, Mapiya found herself frightened, though she would never have admitted such a thing to Kangee. Looking around nervously, she tucked the digging stick into her belt before gathering the roots and hurrying back to camp. By the time the fires were in sight, Mapiya was almost running but, not wanting anyone to see her fear, she forced herself to slow, walking sedately over to the fire to finish preparing the meal.

Rummaging inside her pack, she located the buffalo stomach used for cooking and the sticks that acted as a tripod, quickly setting up the portable stove. Normally, the travelers would have eaten dried meat, but the youth now guarding the horses had killed three birds during the walk and on impulse, Mapiya had decided to cook the birds for dinner. Checking the water in the willow basket for freshness, she poured it into the waiting stomach. Her father had recently gifted her with one of the wasin oyade steel knives and now she used it to cut first the tubers and toss them into the water, then to clean and joint the birds, which also went into the pot.

After Kohana had given her the birds, she'd kept a lookout for some wild onions, which she added to the stew as well. She loved the pungent flavor the onions imparted to other food.

Working carefully now, Mapiya used a branched stick to pull a rock from the fire, dropping the rock into the stomach, waiting a few minutes before repeating the process. As the rocks in the water cooled, she gingerly fished them out to reheat. It didn't take long for the water to boil hot enough to cook the tender young birds.

Pulling a tuber from the water with the tip of her knife, Mapiya tested it for doneness. Finding the root ready to be eaten, she motioned to her brother, and then moved away from the food. The men came over, some with carved wooden spoons, some eating directly with their fingers from the buffalo stomach. None of them acknowledged her, but she wasn't offended. Now that she was a woman, it was no longer considered proper for men of her age group and older to speak to her unless his intentions were to court her.

One of the men, Chayton, glanced casually in her direction a few times, trying to catch her eye, but Mapiya ignored him. She and the other girls her age had discussed the young man. It was common knowledge that he'd recently come back from a successful raid on the Cheyenne with several horses and was looking for a wife. Mapiya was not attracted to him due to his tendency to brag, something she found off-putting.

Finally the men were done, loud burps indicating their satisfaction with the impromptu meal as they wandered back to their own fire. Mapiya dug a bowl out of her pack and scooped out half of the remaining stew.

Skirting the men, she made her way to where Kohana sat. He took the stew gratefully, sucking the meat off the bones and, slurping the liquid, drained the bowl dry. Handing the bowl back to her, Kohana cast a look over at the men before asking in a low voice, “What do you think it will be like tomorrow? When we get to the fort?”

Mapiya considered. “I do not know. I have heard that the wasin oyade have hair on their faces, though.”

The boy’s eyes widened. “They do?” There was a pause as he digested this bit of information. “Do the women as well?”

Mapiya giggled. “I have wondered that. How ugly that would be!”

Kohan joined her laughter before abruptly recalling his dignity as an almostman. He thanked her again, his voice grave, before turning back to the horses.

After eating the remainder of the food, Mapiya took her bowl and the cookingstomach to the stream where she cleaned both thoroughly with sand. Returning to her small fire, she wrapped herself in her sleeping robe and lay down, watching the dancing flames until they smoldered into ash and died. She fell asleep thinking about the next day.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MARY BLINKED. The black spots were gone, as was the almost-dream feeling of being someone else for a moment. She frowned. There had been tipsinna there as well—and cooking smells. Mary shook her head. Grandmother had her hand on her arm.

The old woman didn’t say anything, though a shadowed look briefly crossed her face. “That was weird,” Mary laughed shakily. “I don’t usually just tip over for no reason at all.”

“Not for no reason,” muttered Grandmother, but when Mary pressed her, she refused to say anything more. Instead, “We have that rabbit cooking still,” she reminded. They gathered a few roots and headed back to the trailer.

Frank was waiting there for them, a worried look on his face. He spoke rapidly in Nakota to Grandmother, and she paused for a moment.

“Mary,” she said. “Go inside and add more water to the stew. Wash these, chop them and add them, as well.” Then, thrusting the roots into Mary’s hands, she turned away to continue speaking softly in Nakota to Frank.

Mary was confused. What was going on? Something they didn’t want her to know about, for sure, because otherwise they wouldn’t be speaking Nakota.

Inside, Mary added water to the pot, then washed and diced the roots, tossing them in as well. She kept peeking out the window as she worked. Frank and Grandmother still had their heads bent together, talking. For the first time, Mary wished she were fluent in her people’s language. She was starting to get seriously bad vibes from the pair of them.

Mary was giving the stew another stir when she heard the front door open. Turning, she watched Grandmother come in. Without speaking, the old woman went into her own bedroom, returning a moment later with her walking stick. “Mary, I am going with Frank. I will be back soon.”

“Where are you going?” Mary asked, but the door clicked shut in her face. Seconds later, she heard the rattle of Frank’s truck. She ran to the window, watching the cloud of dust raised as the pickup trundled out of sight.

Now what was she supposed to do? Kicking the table leg didn’t really relieve the feeling of frustration, but went a long way toward calming her down after she got over the hurt to her toe. She wandered into the living room and flopped down on the sofa, leaning her head back and staring at the yellowed ceiling tiles. She amused herself for a time by making pictures out of the dots that comprised the tiles, but the pictures were starting to resolve themselves into eerily disturbing images—leering faces and bizarre monsters. Shaking her head, Mary sat up.

I guess I can read one of my books. Standing, she started into the bedroom, when a yell outside made her pause.

“Hau! Anyone home?”

Mary peeked out the kitchen window. It was Sue, astride her placid mount, but this time she had a little boy in front of her on Lazy. The child’s face was so much like Sue’s that it could only be a brother. Mary grinned and went outside. “Hey, Sue.”

Grasping the little boy around the waist, Sue flipped one leg over the pony’s neck and slid down, her brother safely wrapped in her arms in front of her. “Whew, you weigh a ton, Joseph!” Sue staggered comically, still holding Joseph by the waist. The boy laughed.

Turning to face Mary, she said, “This is my little brother, Joseph. Say hello, Joseph.” She poked the boy in the side. Joseph promptly stuck a grubby finger in his mouth and giggled.

Sue made a face. “That’s really disgusting, little brother. I happen to know where those fingers have been.” Shaking her head, she looked at Mary. “Three is a wonderful age.”

Mary knelt in front of Joseph. “Hello, Joseph. My name is Mary Two Dogs. It’s nice to meet you.”

He was a beautiful boy with huge liquid eyes framed by long lashes and a smooth café-au-lait complexion with a hint of ruddiness stirred in. He giggled again, and then buried his face in Sue’s leg.

Sue rolled her eyes, tickling him under the arm. “I was done with my chores except for watching this anunkpesto and thought we would come and see if you wanted to swim.”

“Not a punkin,” came Joseph’s voice muffled by Sue’s leg.

“You are round like one,” laughed Sue. “I wonder if you will float in the river, anunkpesto?”

Joseph pulled away from his sister and began prancing around the yard, snorting air from his nose and pawing at the ground with his feet. “Not a punkin! I am tatenga!”

Mary raised her eyes, looking at Sue. Sue shook her head in the weary fashion of elder sisters everywhere. “Come on, then, Mr. Buffalo. Let’s go swimming.” She glanced at Mary. “Do you have a suit? We have ours on under our clothes.”

Mary blushed a little, thinking about the last time she’d in the river—sans suit—but nodded and dashed inside to change, noticing the cell phone still lying on the bed where she’d tossed it earlier.

I’ve got to remember to call Janet when I get back, she told herself. A picture of Steve’s face flashed in front of her, and she grinned, thinking recklessly that maybe she’d give him a call, too. Then she hurried outside, stopping only to turn off the stew cooking on the stove.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE RIVER WAS COOL AND THE THREE OF THEM HAD A GOOD TIME SPLASHING

around. Joseph was a better swimmer than Mary was. She laughed at the little boy who’d lost his shyness with her as soon as they got in the river, swimming down and tugging at her ankles. The first time he did it, Mary shrieked, thinking some kind of eel had wrapped itself around her, but Sue laughed and told her that Joseph was trying to pull her feet out from under her. Mary obediently toppled into the water and Joseph surfaced, his face beaming. “I am strong!” he shouted, then dove under to attack his sister.

“As if he could move all this!” She motioned comically at her plump figure, then grinned at Mary and fell into the water.

Worn out, both Mary and Sue got out and lay under the trees to dry off. It was a beautiful day and the light breeze dried their suits in a short time. Joseph came up and tugged at Sue’s arm. “Hungry,” he said.

Grumbling a little, Sue sat up. “When aren’t you hungry?”

Mary turned lazily in their direction. “I’ve got some rabbit stew back at the house.”

“Nah, he doesn’t need that. I think there’s a berry patch around here if I remember right.” Sue started walking, following the river, Joseph bouncing along behind her. Mary yawned and dragged herself to her feet, ambling after them. Sure enough, there were some blackberry bushes a little bit back from the water at the edge of the woods.

“Be careful, these stickers are sharp,” Sue warned Mary. Joseph was popping the ripe berries into his mouth, cramming it full, barely taking time to chew. His fingers and cheeks were quickly stained with dark purple juice.

Mary had only ever eaten blackberries from the store. She looked a bit doubtfully at the fruit, but another glance at the blissful Joseph convinced her. Gingerly, she pulled a berry loose and, taking a deep breath, placed it in her mouth. The berry burst as she bit into it, filling her mouth with a juice that was at once sweet and sour. It was wonderful, and Mary quickly took another.

It was amazing how thirst quenching the little things were! After Mary had eaten all she could reach, she moved a little further away from Sue and Joseph, looking for another likely spot. She had just plucked another berry and was about to eat it when she froze. Her toes were nudging something—something that didn’t feel like dirt or a stick. She looked down and shrieked, dropping the berry. “A snake!”

Joseph looked over, and then bent down to get a better look. “Snohena, Sue,” he mumbled around the contents of his mouth.

Sue grabbed a long stick and Mary shuddered in relief. Good, Sue would take care of the horrible creature. But instead of bashing the snake over the head as Mary expected, the girl stuck the stick under the snake and flipped it neatly into the river. Mary watched in shock as the snake swam away.

“Why didn’t you kill it?” she yelled, her legs wobbling as a rush of adrenaline flooded through her.

Sue frowned. “Why would I do that?” She seemed honestly perplexed. “It is niya un, like us.”

“What does that mean? A snake isn’t like us.” Mary’s legs could no longer support her, and she flopped down, taking care to examine the ground first, in case there were more snakes nearby.

“It means ‘a living thing’. Only the wasin oyade kill for no reason.” Now Sue was starting to get mad.

“We share the earth Mary, we don’t own it. It’s thinking like yours that got all the buffalo killed!”

Joseph sensed the tension in the air and came over to where the girls were glaring at one another. Picking up one of Mary’s hands, he looked earnestly at her. “Don’t taste good.”

Mary looked at the little boy, then up at Sue, who was fighting to keep a grin off her face. Both girls burst into laughter at the same time. Joseph shrugged. “Don’t,” he repeated, going back to his berry picking.

Sue dropped to the ground beside Mary. “Sorry I got mad, cinja.” She reached over and gave Mary’s leg a squeeze.

“The only thing I could think when I saw the snake was ‘kill it, kill it!’” said Mary. “They really give me the creeps.” She turned and looked at Sue. “Why did you get mad? I don’t see what the big deal is. Grandmother killed a rabbit this morning. She even took me out and showed me how to do it!”

Sue gazed at Mary a moment, and then turned to look at her brother. “That greedy little Joseph. All he ever thinks about is how to fill his belly. But he is right. The People ...” Sue’s voice trailed off, and she sat silent for a while. Finally, she spoke again. “Of course, we kill animals,” she said. “To eat or to protect ourselves—like if a mountain lion is crazy hungry and wants to have us for dinner. We also honor the sacrifice made by what we have killed, for giving their life so one of the People could live. We thank Wankan Tanka for the gift.”

Mary stared at Sue. She felt like there was a huge gulf between them right now, a cultural gap that she might not ever be able to cross. She remembered Grandmother telling her about her Dream, how Mary was a lost Person. Mary sighed. If she really was lost, she probably wouldn’t ever be able to find her way back. She just couldn’t relate. To her, Sue’s words sounded like New Age mumbojumbo. But it’s not New Age, is it? She thought. It’s a culture that was here long before New Age was even a phrase.

“What if you were attacked by a tiger?” she asked Sue, challenging the girl. “You wouldn’t eat that!”

Sue rolled her eyes. “First of all, we don’t have tigers in Montana, except maybe in a zoo somewhere, and, second, if we were attacked by anything, we would fight. Like I said before, we kill to eat or to protect ourselves. And if we were attacked and won, and, believe me Mary, just because you are human, does not always mean you win, then we would take the skin and claws and honor the spirit of the warrior

that lived in the tiger.”

Mary wrinkled her nose. “The skin I can understand,” she said. “But the claws? Why take those?”

Sue didn’t answer. Instead, she jumped up and called to Joseph. “Come on, anunkpesto! Ma will be looking for us!” She reached out a hand, pulling Mary to her feet. “I’ll try and come over tomorrow, okay?”

Mary nodded, feeling suddenly very alone. “Yeah, okay,” she said. Great, lost another friend, she thought as she watched Sue lift Joseph up onto the pony’s back before jumping up behind him. They both waved as the pony trotted off.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MARY SCUFFED HER WAY BACK TO THE TRAILER. She had hoped to find

Grandmother back, but the place was silent and still. Wandering over to the stove, she took an experimental sip of the stew. Yuck. Whatever Grandmother had added to hers was certainly not in this!

Staring down at the brownish mess, Mary wondering what the secret ingredients were. She closed her eyes, letting the memory of the savory dinner from a few nights back roll again over her tongue. Onions—right. Grandmother had said something about adding onions, hadn’t she?

A search in the fridge came up with some that looked a bit wilted, but still smelled pungent enough. Mary rinsed them in the sink, and then chopped off the worst looking bits of the green stems. Dicing what was left, she tossed them into the stew and stirred. There was still something not quite right. Sage! That was it!

After searching fruitlessly through the cupboards, Mary realized there was no reason that Grandmother would have a bottle of dried sage in her cupboard when right outside her door it grew wild. Walking back outside, Mary looked around. Not more than a hundred yards away grew some wild sage.

Mary grabbed a few stalks, taking them back inside with her where she rinsed them off and then stripped the leaves from the tough stalks. The stew still didn’t look the same as Grandmother’s, but it was certainly starting to taste better.

Mary turned the stove back on to let the stew cook some more, then decided to give Janet another try. Glancing at the clock on the wall, she calculated the time difference. Janet should still be at work.

In her bedroom, she grabbed the phone off the bed and flipped it open. The display didn’t come on. Hmm, which button turned it on again? Oh, right ... the red one. That made no sense to Mary. To her red meant stop, but, shrugging, she pushed the button anyway.

Still nothing. Then, dismayed, Mary realized that the battery charge had run out.

Dimly, she recalled Janet giving her a charger with the phone. Could you make calls when it was hooked up to the charger? Only one way to find out, Mary thought. She pulled her purse out of the closet and started digging around, coming out with the long gray cord. Another few minutes of fumbling, and she figured out how to plug the charger into the phone, then located a wall plug. A red light came on, indicating that the phone was doing something.

Okay . Mary opened the phone again and keyed in Janet’s number. Nothing else happened until she remembered to press the send button. Holding the phone to her ear, she heard it ringing. I guess that answers the question of being able to use it while it’s charging, Mary grinned, waiting for her aunt to pick up.

The phone transferred into Janet’s voice mail. Mary pulled the cell down from her ear and stared at it. I wonder where she is? I should have left a message.

Pressing send again, the phone redialed Janet’s work number. Three rings into the call, Mary heard a fumbling sound. Then an unfamiliar voice said, “Hello?”

The greeting sounded muffled, as though the person answering was being furtive.

Mary frowned. "Hello? I'm trying to reach Janet Two Dogs. Is she there?"

There was a pause. "Who's calling?"

"This is her niece. Is she around?"

There was a long silence on the other end of the line, and Mary wondered if the phone call had been disconnected. "Hello?" she said. "Hello?"

"This is her niece?" the voice asked cautiously. It sounded like an older female, but no one that Mary remembered ever talking to before on Janet's line. In fact, now that she thought about it, no one but Janet had ever answered the phone before. Little fingers of dread began to creep down Mary's back.

"Yes. This is Mary Two Dogs. Is my aunt there?"

Mary heard a stifled sob. Repeating her question, Mary heard her voice get very loud in her ears. "What's going on?" she demanded.

"Mary, I'm afraid"—another gulping noise—"I'm afraid your aunt is in the hospital. There's been an accident." There was a rustle on the line.

"An accident?" Mary was shouting now. "What happened? What kind of an accident?!"

"I have to go," the voice whispered. "It would be best if you didn't call back." There was a click and the call ended.

Mary stared at the phone. An accident? Suddenly her mind started working, moving around the puzzle pieces. Frank showing up. Grandmother leaving with him. Grandmother must know that something has happened to Janet. Why wouldn't she tell me?

Mary put the phone down and ran into the living room and flung open the door.

Then she stopped. Where exactly did she think she was going to go? She had no idea where Frank had taken her grandmother. She didn't even know how to get back to the airstrip. Leaving the door open, Mary stumbled back to the bedroom and lay across the bed. Tears prickled her eyelids, and her nose tickled with the desire to cry. She plunged her face into the mattress. Behind her eyes, she saw Steve's face.

Mary sat back up suddenly. She could call Steve! Janet had keyed his number into the phone's memory. Steve could tell her what was going on.

Feverishly, Mary grabbed the phone and started pressing buttons, cursing herself for never learning how to use one before now. Any nitwit at school used the things all the time, yet here she was, needing to call someone—

Steve's name appeared on the tiny screen. Quickly, before the name disappeared, she pushed send. The phone was picked up almost right away.

"Hello? This is Timmy."

Mary forced herself to take a deep breath, to calm down before answering the little boy. "Hi, Timmy," she said, her voice and her hand shaking. "This is Mary. Do you remember me? I met you outside with your brother Steve ... you were riding your bike?" Her voice sounded awful, even to her. Mary didn't want to scare the little kid.

Timmy was holding the receiver very close to his mouth. Mary could almost feel his damp-sounding breath on her cheek, every inhalation magnified by the phone. "Yes," he finally answered. "I 'member you. You had a hurt on your hand."

"Right." Mary let out a slow breath. "Is your brother home?" There was a rustling sound, and Mary heard a new voice. It was an older male. "This is Mr. Shields. Can I help you?"

Mary didn't think she'd ever met the man, but plowed on anyway. "Uh, Mr. Shields, this is Mary ... Mary Two Dogs. I live next door to you with my aunt?"

There was a pause, and the man answered, sounding different, almost disappointed. "The little Indian girl?"

Her skin crawled at the use of the term, but she answered civilly. "Right. The Indian girl."

"What can I do for you, Mary?"

“Can I speak to Steve?”

Another pause. “I’m sorry. Steve isn’t here.”

“Do you know when he’ll be back? It’s important that I speak to him.”

The silence this time was so long, Mary was sure that the man had hung up. When he finally he spoke again, his voice was weary. “Mary, I was hoping this was Steve. We haven’t seen or heard from him since the day before yesterday.” Mapiya looked at the huge wooden structure before her. It was like nothing she’d ever seen before, sprawling gracelessly over the landscape like a wounded buffalo. And the smell! Phew! Like something dead. She turned to look at Kohana and made a face.

“Faugh!” he whispered. “What is that stink?”

But Mapiya moved her head minutely. Two soldiers on horseback were riding up. Kohana followed her gaze, and, at once, his face became impassive.

The soldiers looked strange to Mapiya’s eyes. Not only did they have faces covered in hair, like animals, but they rode on big bulky things that covered the backs of their horses. To her eye, it added unnecessary weight. And the poor horses had leather strips covering their faces instead of a simple rope loop. They looked very uncomfortable. A flash of sunlight glared as the horse in front tossed its head. Mapiya realized with a stab of horror that the wasin oyade had actually stuffed a piece of metal in the animal’s mouth.

From beside her, she heard Kohana draw his breath in sharply, and knew he’d seen the same thing. To the Assiniboin, horses were a sacred thing, an extension of the rider. To treat a horse in such a demeaning fashion spoke volumes about the man, or rather his inabilities. Assiniboin would never dream of treating horses so ... so disrespectfully. A real man worked with his horse, learned to talk to it with his hands, with his legs, and with his knees.

Chayton spoke in a cautioning tone, “Their ways are not ours,” he said, looking around the group, avoiding Mapiya’s eyes. “We will trade and go.”

There was a murmur of assent from the other men.

As the soldiers neared, one of them called out in barely understandable Nakota, “Hello, friends. You trade?”

Kangee stepped forward. He answered in Nakota, speaking slowly, as one might to a very young child. Using the fewest words possible to convey his meaning, he said, “Yes. We wish to trade.”

One of the soldiers—one with remarkable red hair—leaned over to the other. Their heads together, they conferred for a moment. Then the red-haired one motioned to the Assiniboin. “Come inside, friends!” His arm moved expansively. He looked foolish, and Mapiya lowered her head to hide her smile.

Once inside the fort, Mapiya felt like a trapped bird must feel. She looked around, her heart thumping loudly in her chest. There were small children shrieking and chasing one another. Groups of women clustered together, whispering as they stared. All of the wasin oyade, especially the great hairy soldiers, smelled terrible to Mapiya. They seemed to her to be weighed down by too many clothes, especially by their heavy leather boots.

“How can they walk with those things on their feet?” she whispered to Kohana, but the boy ignored the question, too busy craning his neck in an effort to see the soldiers standing high on a shelf above them.

He whispered, “Do you see those shiny sticks they carry?”

Mapiya squinted upward, and then nodded.

“They are an evil magic and have a terrible bite. They can kill from far away, farther than an arrow shot by the strongest man. They roar loudly, so loudly it makes your ears ring for a long time after.” His voice was solemn. “I have heard the men speaking of these sticks. They wish to try and trade for some. That is why we are here.”

A shudder went through the girl. She felt that it would not be a good thing for the men to have these sticks with their horrible magic, but who would listen to her? She was just a woman, and a very new woman at

that. "I just want to get some needles for my mother and maybe some of the wasin oyade sweets for Chumani," she whispered.

Mapiya heard giggling and turned to see a group of wasin oyade females about her age coming toward her. Seeing her look, they paused, whispering with one another.

As the girls whispered, Mapiya studied them, her question about whether or not the females had hair on their faces answered, though the hair on their heads was many different colors. They too, wore heavy clothes, so bulky looking that Mapiya wondered how they managed to move. As she watched, one of the girls covered her mouth, laughing while another looked sour.

Something about the girls bothered Mapiya and she frowned, trying to figure out what it was. Then she realized what it was.

They are like us! The thought was astounding. These strange creatures with their different colored eyes and hair and heavy dresses were like the girls of her village. The one covering her mouth with her hand: Dances-like-Flowers did that too, when she laughed. And the sour faced one could be Morning Dove's twin, except for her coloring.

One of the wasin oyade girls, bolder than the others, stepped away from the group and held her hand out toward Mapiya. She is like me, Mapiya realized, and smiled to herself. The girl opened her palm to reveal several things, including two straight thin slivers of metal which flashed in the morning sun.

The needles for sewing! Mapiya thought.

Quickly, she glanced at her brother, but Kangee was showing his own goods to the soldiers and paying no attention to her at all.

Mapiya slung the pack off of her back, rubbing her forehead where the leather-carrying strap had bitten into it. The bold wasin oyade girl touched the flesh of Mapiya's forehead carefully, saying something—an inquisitive sound to her voice.

She must be asking me if it hurts, Mapiya thought. She smiled shyly in return, touching where the bold one's fingers had rested, then shaking her head. The clustered girls exclaimed, clapping their hands. They seemed excited that she actually understood them.

Mapiya frowned inside, though her face reflected nothing but pleasant thoughts. Do they think we are stupid? Assiniboin have talked the trade-handtalk since before my Grandfather walked the earth.

She carefully laid out the furs her father had given her. The girls wrinkled their noses, shaking their heads. Mapiya could clearly read their expressions: What use have we for furs? Eyeing the colorful cloth they wore, Mapiya was inclined to agree.

Sinking back on her heels, Mapiya bit her lip. Then she exclaimed loudly, realizing she did have something else to trade. Happy she'd followed her last minute hunch, she dug in her pack, coming out with the dolls, laying them beside the hides.

Oohing and ahing, the girls swooped down on the tiny figures, cuddling them as though they were real children. Mapiya realized they were little more than girls themselves, for all that they had the shapes of women.

The girls did not quibble over price—they were happy to part with whatever was necessary in order to obtain the little dolls. She even got sweets for Chumani.

Mapiya was well pleased with her trades, especially after one of the soldiers sauntered over and began dickering for the furs her father had given her. Kangee had finished his own trading by this time and came over to make sure she got fair value. She ended up with a metal ax for her father and a large metal cooking pot for her mother. Easier to use than buffalo stomach, thought Mapiya.

Dusk was falling, now. The Assiniboin decided to camp outside the fort walls and start their trip home in the morning after a night's sleep. Some of the soldiers' women brought them bowls of unfamiliar food to eat, but no one complained. Chayton was one of the men who had traded for one of the metal sticks that killed from a distance. He stayed up very late, keeping everyone awake as he filled their ears with his

bragging and showing off.

Mapiya wrapped herself into her blanket, and stared into her small fire, thinking again of how similar the wasin oyade girls were to her own People.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE PHONE DROPPED FROM MARY'S FINGERS. She stared at the plain paneled walls, thoughts of Steve and her aunt ricocheting around her mind. She felt numb, as though she were wrapped in a cocoon. From outside came the sound of Frank's pickup rattling into the yard. The truck door slammed, and then Mary heard the truck's wheeze fade into the distance.

Dumbly, Mary moved from the bedroom into the living room where she perched on the vinyl sofa. Silently, she watched as Grandmother climbed up the steps into the trailer. Her mikusi looked as though she had aged twenty years since leaving earlier. She did not look at Mary, just moved to the stove, giving the stew a cursory glance before disappearing into her room.

Everything was silent as Mary sat, waiting for Grandmother to come back out of her bedroom. Finally, the old woman emerged, lowering herself painfully into one of the kitchen chairs.

Mary moved to the table, seating herself across from Grandmother, who ignored her. The old woman fumbled the pipe from her pocket and attempted to fill it, but her fingers didn't seem to be working right. Tobacco spilled across the table. Mary reached over, gently removed the pipe from her hand, and picked up the pouch.

She filled the pipe, and then lit a match, puffing on the pipe to get it going, and then handed it to Grandmother when blue smoke wreathed upwards. Standing, Mary went to the stove and filled the kettle with water, turning the burner on under it. While waiting for the water to boil, she got the container of herb tea from the cupboard over the stove and sprinkled a small amount into the bottom of the mug. After a moment's consideration, she got another mug down. When the kettle whistled, she poured the water, and then carried both mugs to the table.

"Janet—"

"I know," Mary said simply, and then stared out the window at the darkening sky. It was beautiful—almost heartbreakingly so—bands of indigo and mauve laid one upon another, echoing into twilight and darkness. A coyote yipped somewhere, and one part of Mary's mind registered the noise even as she wondered how she knew what it was.

Finally Grandmother heaved a great sigh. "She was beaten." A sip of tea. "She was dragged from her car on a road where no one went, and beaten." A shake of the old head, the white braids twisting gently. "She is in a coma. The doctors, they do not know when she will wake up, if she will wake up." Grandmother's face twisted, and Mary reached over, taking her hand, holding it gently. Holding back her own tears, Mary whispered, "She is a warrior, mikusi."

The next day dawned bright and chilly, an exception to the summer rule. Mary rolled out of bed, staring blearily at the sun rising over the horizon, its ruddy rays painting the mountains pink. But she wasn't seeing the picture before her, thinking instead of the night before; of helping grandmother to bed after coaxing her to eat.

She decided that she would begin this new day with a bath in the river. Like Mapiya. Mary frowned, wondering at the strange thought. She shook her head, and the unbidden memory fell away, leaving behind only the desire to swim. She poked in the bathroom, coming out with an almost clean towel and, donning some sandals, left the trailer.

Mary trotted down to the river, shucking off her clothes once she reached the bank and jumping in without a second thought. She struck out for the center of the river where the water was the deepest, then flipped over, staring up at the sky, watching as the deep red color of dawn changed first to pewter blue

then to the deeper blue it would remain until noon. Turning again, she dove under the water, holding her breath with her eyes closed until she thought her lungs would burst, and then exploded onto the surface with a splash, frightening away several lowflying birds looking for breakfast. She watched without fear as a snake swam downstream close to her, its reptilian eyes unblinking, intent only upon the journey it had embarked upon. After a time, she climbed out of the water and began to towel herself dry, closing her eyes, inhaling the clean, sweet air. It was good to be alive.

When she got back to the trailer, Grandmother had still not come out of her room. Mary silently heated some of the stew from the night before, eating it mechanically. From outside came the sound of hooves. Mary calmly finished her breakfast, rinsed out her bowl, placing it carefully in the drain board to dry before going outside. Her short hair was still damp and she ruffled it with her fingers. "Hau, Sue." "Hau, Mary."

Sue remained silent, watching Mary stare dreamily at the trees, and then asked, "How about you come to my house for awhile?"

Without a word, Mary climbed up behind Sue and they set off. The jog of the fat pony was comforting, lulling in a sense, and Mary could feel her eyes begin to close. Strange images chased each other behind her lids: buffalo, seemingly without number, running, chased by a huge dust cloud; a pair of hands painstakingly thrusting a porcupine quill into an animal hide that had been cured, forming an intricate design; a small girl with braids reaching only to her shoulders, laughing as she ran to Mary. A sudden jolt caused the images to fade, and Mary opened her eyes. The pony had stopped and was cropping some grass.

Sue nudged Mary with her elbow. "Get off now, Mary." Her usually loud voice was subdued.

Mary threw her leg over the pony and jumped down. As easy as a bike, she thought dimly.

She followed Sue into a small, one-story house. Several children sat on the floor playing with toys while a woman stood in front of the white stove, cooking. There was a man at the table, drinking coffee from a heavy, earthenware mug. "Hau, Mary." He had a deep voice.

Mary stared at him. Half his face was deeply scarred, as was what she could see of his left arm. His hand on his left side was missing the last two fingers. Sue smiled, then went over and kissed her father on his scarred cheek. Gently, she eased something out of his shirt, holding it up for Mary to see. It was a necklace made from claws.

"Cougar," Sue said briefly, then let the necklace fall back inside her father's shirt. "He was a warrior, but my father was even more fierce."

"I know Janet," rumbled Sue's father. "She too, is a fierce warrior." He placed a hand over one of Mary's where it lay curled on the table. "She is a strong woman. Have faith, Mary."

Mary felt a dam inside of her she hadn't known existed break, and she sat down at the table. Placing her head on her folded arms, she began to cry.

CHAPTER TWENTY

LATER, MARY REFLECTED THAT SUE WAS VERY LUCKY TO HAVE SUCH A LARGE,

accepting family. They had let her cry herself out, seeming to realize that it was what she needed to do. When the tears finally came to an end, she felt some tissue thrust into her hand. She looked up to see Joseph's solemn little face staring at her.

"Do you want a nap now? I always sleep after I cry."

Mary stared at him for a minute, then burst into laughter and the world righted itself. She felt the layers of numbness shatter and disappear. Accepting a cup of coffee from Mrs. White Hat, she sipped the scalding liquid, stealing glances at Sue's father. Sue wasn't around.

The man noticed her looks. "Have you found your True name, Mary Two Dogs?" The question came

out of nowhere.

Mary shook her head.

“I see you are looking at me. You might be thinking, ‘Oh, the poor man. He looks bad.’”

Mary flushed crimson. She had been thinking that.

Mr. White Hat pushed himself up from the table. He was a big man, at least 6’4”, and wide to go with it, but moved easily. He refilled his cup from the pot simmering on the stove. Slipping his arm around his wife, he gave her waist a quick squeeze before returning to the table. “I was a few years older than you are now when I decided to go on a vision quest. I felt the time was right—right for me to find my True name. I went into the mountains. I took nothing with me but some water and my knife. For five days, I prayed and fasted. I was beginning to think that I would never get my vision or my True name.”

Mary sipped at her coffee, fascinated by what he was saying.

“Then, on the fifth night, I heard growling. I was not frightened, but very happy. Finally, I thought, my vision! But instead of a vision, what came out of the darkness was a cougar.”

He touched the necklace. “It jumped on me and its claws marked me, here,” a touch to his face, “and here.” His hand moved across his chest, covered by the shirt he wore, all the way down to his hand. He grinned. “He must have been a hungry cougar, because he ate two of my fingers.” He held the disfigured hand up. “I do not think there was enough meat on them to fill his stomach.”

From behind Mary came a snort of laughter. Mr. White Hat ignored his wife. “I was very angry. I hit the cougar on the nose, hard. ‘You are supposed to be my vision!’ I yelled. ‘You are not supposed to have me for dinner!’”

“Suddenly I heard the sound of wings and a loud war cry. It was the cry of an eagle. As I watched in the darkness, the eagle came down and attacked the cougar, driving it away. I could not see what happened next, but they made the sound of a great battle. Finally the eagle flew back to me, landing on my chest. He looked down at me ‘Joseph White Hat,’ he said, ‘You are a great fool. That cougar was not your vision. I am.’ The eagle turned his head and looked away, then looked back down at me. ‘Your True name should be “Great Fool,” but I am feeling generous. I will call you “Little Eagle” because I have saved you from death, as I would one of my own children.’”

“Then the eagle flew away. In the morning, I saw the cougar lying close to me. Next to him was an eagle feather.”

“The eagle actually killed the cougar?” Mary was leaning forward now, her coffee forgotten.

Joseph White Hat shrugged, grinning. “It looked that way to me. I was not going to question the eagle if I saw him again. He might get angry and call me by the name he first wanted to. I took my knife, skinned the cougar, and took his claws.”

He leaned forward and, with his good hand, took Mary’s, holding it. “Like I said, I know your aunt. She was always very brave. I am thinking maybe this is her vision quest. They do things differently in the land of the wasin oyade. When she wakes up, maybe she will have her True name as well.”

Mary stared at the man. “Does finding your True name always involve pain?”

The big man leaned back in his chair. His eyes gentled as he watched her. “Any journey is painful, Mary. There are many different types of pain. Some is of the flesh,” he held up his hand, “and some is of the heart.”

Mary mulled over his words, and then pushed herself up. “I better go,” she said, “Grandmother will need me.”

Sue’s father nodded his approval. Just then, Joseph came up to Mary and gave her a hug. Returning the embrace, Mary smoothed back the boy’s hair. “You feel a little hot, anunkpesto.”

“Not a punkin,” mumbled Joseph. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes seemed a little glassy. His mother came over to where he stood with his arms wrapped around Mary and scooped him up.

“What’s the matter, little one?”

Joseph twisted in her arms. "Not a punkin."

Mary stared in concern, but Mrs. White Hat patted her arm reassuringly. "Probably just the flu, nothing to worry about."

Addressing the boy, she said soothingly, "All right, you are not a pumpkin."

"Tatenga." muttered Joseph as his mother carried into the back of the house. Mary heard, "Yes, yes, my little buffalo," as she slipped out to find Sue.

Sue was waiting right outside. Mary suspected the girl had deliberately given her some time alone with her father after the girl eyed her closely before smiling in relief. "You feel better." It was a statement.

Mary smiled back, nodding. They mounted the pony and headed back to grandmother's.

Mapiya smelled the wood smoke before she opened her eyes. Tossing the blanket aside, she saw Kangee crouching next to the small fire, waiting for her to wake up. "What is it, older brother?" she asked.

Kangee glanced uneasily at the fort. "I heard an evil spirit, howling before the sun rose." He nodded toward the open fort doors. "It came from inside there."

Mapiya turned to look. "I don't hear anything," she said cautiously.

"It stopped when the sun came up."

The girl shivered. Who knew what kind of spirits the wasin oyade harbored?

"We will be leaving soon," she told her brother.

"Not soon enough for me." Kangee stood and walked over to where the men were rising. He knelt and conferred with them in low tones.

Mapiya shook her blanket out, then folded it neatly, stowing it in her pack, made bulky by the addition of the gifts for her family. She looked up at the sound of a young girl's voice calling out. One of the girls from yesterday, the bold one, stood just inside the fort walls, motioning for Mapiya to come to where she waited. Mapiya looked over at Kangee for guidance, but he was still talking to the other men and didn't see the girl.

Mapiya stood, fear of the evil spirit tickling her stomach. Stop being silly! she scolded herself. If the wasin oyade girl is not afraid, the evil spirit must be gone. And perhaps there was no evil spirit; perhaps Kangee just had a dream. Swallowing hard, Mapiya walked over to the waiting girl.

Drawing closer, Mapiya could see the tear stains on the girl's face and her fears vanished as her heart was touched. She reached out, wanting to help but not knowing how to offer it.

The girl was holding the doll she had traded a pair of needles for, pointing from it to Mapiya's pack, saying something and raising her eyebrows.

Mapiya shook her head bewildered. Then the girl held up one finger, pointing it at the doll. She raised another finger, and pointed it at the pack again.

Suddenly Mapiya understood. She wants to know if there is another doll! Mapiya nodded and held up her own palm to say 'wait.' Hurrying back to where she had slept, she dug into the bottom of the pack. As she was packing the gifts for her family the night before, she had discovered one last doll, overlooked in her haste to trade. She pulled it out, and then went back to where the girl waited. The girl placed one palm on her chest saying something. "Sa-rah." She paused then repeated the word. "Sa-rah."

Ah! That must be her name. Mapiya smiled then pointed at herself. "Mapiya."

Sa-rah stumbled over her name, but, after a few tries, it was comprehensible when she said it. Sa-rah said, "Mapiya, Sa-rah—" then she pointed at one of the small houses inside the fort. A shiver of unease crept down the back of Mapiya's neck. Was this a trap of some kind? She took an involuntary step back and immediately, Sa-rah's eyes filled with tears. She said something, reaching for Mapiya's hand, obviously wanting her to accompany her to the house.

Mapiya closed her eyes and breathed a small prayer. "White Buffalo Woman, guide my steps. Keep me safe from whatever evil spirits might be hiding in this strange place." Then she allowed the girl to lead

her off.

The inside of the house was dark and smelled worse than anything Mapiya had ever smelled. There was a small fire in the hearth, but the ventilation wasn't very good and smoke hung in the air. A woman was seated on a small bed next to the fire. On the bed lay a small girl about Chumani's age. She was covered in oozing sores, and Mapiya cried out involuntarily at the sight.

The child's eyes were closed, and Sa-rah snatched the doll from Mapiya's hand as a slightly older child ran up, grabbing the other doll from Sa-rah.

Ah, thought Mapiya, two sisters, and the youngest so ill.

Sa-rah knelt by the girl's side, talking in a low, soothing tone.

Trying to get her to wake up, Mapiya thought. Poor Sa-rah! How would I feel if that were Chumani? She walked over to where the child lay, looking so hot under the seeping spots. Mapiya reached out to touch the sick girl's forehead and found her arm held in a grip of steel. The girl's mother was staring at her, fear in her eyes. Sa-rah reached out and gently removed her mother's hand, speaking volubly. Reluctantly, the woman subsided, releasing Mapiya's arm.

Mapiya gazed at the woman, wishing she had the words to assure her she meant the child no harm. Turning her attention back to the sick child, she reached down, gently touching the girl's head. She was hot—too hot.

Biting her lip, Mapiya thought for a moment, then raced from the house, heading back to where she had left her pack. She heard Sa-rah call out her name, but ignored the plea.

Reaching the pack, she dropped to her knees and rummaged around until she found what she was looking for: her medicine bag. Her mother had pressed it into her hand as she was packing, saying it might come in handy with all those men to look after. Opening the bag, she chose some fresh willow branches. Taking the coiled branches, she hurried back to where the child lay.

“Sa-rah.” She pointed to the fire, then at the water bucket that sat next to the hearth. Peeling back the tough outer bark, she scraped a sizable amount of the inner bark into the palm of her hand. Mapiya pantomimed a cup. Sa-rah stared at her for a moment, and then her face lit up. She snatched a wooden cup down off the ledge above the fireplace and gave it to Mapiya.

Mapiya pointed to the water again, wishing that the other girl could understand her, but to her relief, Sa-rah nodded, walking around the bed and using a stick to lever the kettle from where it hung over the fire and setting it onto the floor, where she used the hem of her skirt as a shield for her hands as she poured some of the hot water from the kettle into the wooden cup Mapiya held.

Mapiya smiled and nodded, then poured the willow bark into the cup. She stirred the mixture gently with her fingertip, waiting for the mixture to steep before handing it to Sa-rah.

The girl's mother spoke sharply, but Sa-rah ignored her, looking instead at Mapiya, her eyes holding a question, one that Mapiya understood. Is this safe? Can I trust you?

Mapiya put her heart into her own eyes and nodded.

Sa-rah inhaled deeply, and then firmed her lips, nodding once. She knelt again by her sister, and lifted the little head up, trying to coax the liquid down the child's throat. Most of the tea simply drained out of the child's mouth, dampening the covers, but Mapiya saw the tiny throat move convulsively. Good. She had gotten some of the fever-reducer into her.

She stood and handed the remains of the willow to Sa-rah. The little doll had fallen onto the floor. Mapiya picked it up and tucked it in the bed next to the sick girl before leaving the hut.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WHEN MARY REACHED THE TRAILER, SHE FOUND GRANDMOTHER SITTING ON

the couch. There was a suitcase on the floor next to her.

“What’s going on?” Mary asked.

“We go to Georgia.” Grandmother replied.

“Now?”

Grandmother shook her head. “Tomorrow. Frank will take us to the airport.” She heaved herself to her feet, seeming much more like her old self than she

had last night. Mary felt some small relief about that. “I will not spend tonight here, in the trailer.”

“What?” Mary was bewildered. “Where are we going?”

“Not we, cinja. Me.”

“What are you talking about?”

Grandmother sighed. “I need to spend some time walking and thinking before we go to Georgia.”

“But won’t you be tired on the trip then?”

With a laugh, Grandmother waved one hand, dismissing the notion. “Soon I will be sleeping forever. One night without sleep is no hardship for an old woman like me.”

“Don’t talk like that!” Mary placed one hand on the old woman’s arm. “I need you.”

“Don’t worry. I will not leave you before you can take care of yourself.” Grandmother gazed at Mary from hooded eyes. Mary was not comforted. She had the chilling feeling there was a double meaning to the old woman’s words. Picking up her stick from where it rested against the wall, Grandmother left the trailer.

“Mary!”

“Yes?” Mary came to the open door, thinking perhaps the old woman had changed her mind and wanted Mary’s company.

“The stew—it was very good.”

Mary watched the old woman stomp away. She shook her head. The movement made her realize that her head ached. It must be from all that crying—maybe I need a nap like Joseph said. Thinking of the boy made her wonder how he was doing.

I hope it was only the flu, she thought. Kids were somewhat of a mystery to her, along with whatever assorted illnesses they were prone to catch. With a shrug, Mary went into her room and, even though it was only noon, lay across her bed and fell fast asleep.

The last day of their travel home, Mapiya’s head ached. She regretted the fact that she had not kept a small amount of the willow for herself. Even chewing on one of the peeled sticks helped with headaches. But then, she remembered the look in Sa-rah’s eyes and how much the little girl had reminded her of Chumani. I can certainly stand a little headache.

The night before, when they’d camped, everyone was restless. The men were anxious to get home, and everyone ate jerked meat instead of hunting and waiting for hot food. Mapiya thought of how her mother’s face would light up when she saw the precious metal cookware and the needles. Her father would not show he was pleased, since men rarely showed strong emotion but she knew he would be nonetheless. And her baby sister, Chumani, how she would gobble the sweets!

Mapiya smiled, thinking about her sister, and how much she would miss her when she married. Not for the first time, she thought, if her husband was a good provider, she might ask him to take Chumani as a second wife after the girl had her woman-making ceremony. Then they could always live together. The thought made her heart light and Mapiya adjusted her pack, lowered her aching head, and kept walking.

Several hours later, the tipis finally came into sight. One of the little boys yelled, and a crowd of children came racing toward them, dancing around them and peppering the travelers with questions.

Mapiya kept her head down. It was really aching now, and she suspected she had a fever. For the first time, she wondered if an evil spirit had possessed the little sick girl back at the fort. Maybe when I touched her, the evil spirit climbed into me! Remembering the oozing sores, she shuddered.

Her mother was standing outside of their tipi, one hand shielding her eyes from the sun as she watched

the group approach. Chumani squealed in delight and ran over to Mapiya, jumping into the air, confident her older sister's arms would catch her. Mapiya held her, cuddling with the child.

"I missed you, cinja, when I was gone," she told the child.

"Mapiya, you feel hot!" Chumani pulled back from the embrace, staring up at her sister. "And what is this?" She touched a small red dot on Mapiya's lip.

Quickly, Mapiya set her sister on the ground and pulled up the half-sleeve of her dress, frantically examining her arm, where more dots had sprouted.

Mapiya's parents came over, concern written on both of their faces. Takchawee grasped her daughter's hands. "My child, what is wrong? What are these things on you? And how hot you are!"

The evil spirit had come to the village.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MARY TOSSED AND TURNED IN HER SLEEP. Terribly hot, she dreamed incessantly of water—tall glasses of water, moisture beading on them, filled to the brim with ice floated toward her, only to disappear when she reached for them. She cried with frustration and in her more lucid moments, tried to force herself off the bed.

If I could even get as far as the bathroom, I could drink straight from the tap, she thought muzzily. The way I feel, I could drink right from the toilet!

She saw herself, head stuck in the toilet like a dog, lapping water, and giggled helplessly, watching as the dog turned its head to look at her and began to change, its snout lengthening and becoming wider, ears going from floppy to upright. The body changed as well, growing taller, the dog's shaggy fur becoming a smooth coat.

The dog that was now a horse swished his tail. "The People call me God-Dog. Did you know that? Before I came to them, there were no such things as horses. I changed life for the People." Then the horse lowered his head and began to crop the grass from the huge field he stood in.

Mary heard a noise behind her and turned. A young Assiniboin girl was walking toward her.

"I know you!" Mary exclaimed.

"I know you too," said Mapiya. She looked critically at Mary's hair. "Are you in mourning?"

"No." She was puzzled. "Why?"

"Your hair is so short! If you do not mourn a loved one, why have you cut your hair?"

Mary reached up and fingered the short strands. "It's the fashion."

"Hmm." said Mapiya. "It isn't very flattering."

The two girls joined hands and began to walk along the river that appeared beside them.

"I think we are dying." Mapiya said. "I wonder if it is as they say, death is where no one gets old, or ill, and there is no pain. Game is always plentiful, and no one goes hungry."

Mary realized without shock that Mapiya was right. They were dying.

"A land of milk and honey," she murmured. The other girl looked at her and frowned, but said nothing.

"I have dreamed of you," Mary said as they stopped to gather some flowers. Mapiya twined some of the flowers into a crown and placed them on Mary's head.

"I know. I have dreamed of you, as well. The time and place you live in is very strange. I do not see many of the People there."

Mary could feel the other girl's sadness as if it were her own. "This is true. The People are not great in number anymore. There are many different people in the land now."

She made a picture in her mind of the cities she had visited while growing up, the cities her parents had played in.

Mapiya gasped. "How awful! How can you feel Wankan Tanka with all that noise and stink around you always?"

"I don't think I ever have felt him." Mary replied thoughtfully. Now she felt sad. Mapiya hugged her. "Don't be sad, little sister. Let me share my memories with you." Mapiya closed her eyes, concentrating, and sensations rushed over and through Mary. She tasted buffalo meat seared outside over a flame. She heard stories told over a crackling fire in the center of a tipi, warm in her robes as she snuggled with Chumani. She felt true hunger for the first time ever, and the richness of a liver eaten raw her brother had smuggled to her from his first kill. The love for her family was almost overwhelming. And sorrow too, sorrow that now Mapiya would never hear the trill of a love flute played by a suitor outside her tipi, sorrow that she would never bear children, and, most of all, sorrow that the life she had known was no more in Mary's time. "But that's not true!" Mary opened her eyes. "Many of the People are going back to the old ways. They honor and remember the sacrifices made." She grasped Mapiya's hands and thought of Joseph White Hat and his vision quest. Of Sue telling her of the value of life and to kill only to eat. She thought of Grandmother showing her how to trap rabbits. "It is true," breathed Mapiya. She smiled brilliantly. A small child came running up to Mapiya and tugged on her hand. "Come on, Mapiya! It is time to go!" "Chumani!" Mapiya grabbed the child up, hugging her hard. Chumani looked at Mary over her sister's shoulder and giggled. "What about me?" Mary asked, bewildered. "Where are my mother and father? Am I supposed to go with you?" The little girl jumped out of Mapiya's arms. She ran over to Mary and took her hand. "Your time is not yet, elder sister. You must go back now." Then she went and stood next to Mapiya. "Wait!" Mapiya ran back to where Mary stood, alone and bereft. Leaning close, Mapiya whispered in her ear. Then she smiled and went back to where her sister waited. The pair waved. "Remember us!" Mapiya called out to Mary. Then she grasped Chumani's hand tightly, and they turned and began to walk away, getting smaller and smaller as Mary watched until they disappeared completely. Mary could feel herself lifted in a pair of arms. Frank held her up as Grandmother bathed her face. Her skin felt raw. "What happened?" she croaked through a tender throat. "You have the chicken-pox, cinja," said Frank, with a big relieved smile. "It can be dangerous to an older child, but you are through the worst of it now." "I had the strangest dreams," she said, sipping at the water Grandmother held for her to drink. She saw the look the two exchanged, but didn't understand it. Grandmother held out a cup of tea for Mary to sip. It was bitter, and she made a face. "No, no. You must drink it." Grandmother's voice was gentle, but firm. Grimacing, Mary forced herself to sip at the tea until it was gone. "Now sleep." "But what about Georgia?" asked Mary, as the room began to fade. "Georgia isn't going anywhere." But Mary was already asleep and didn't hear the reply.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, MARY WOKE UP AFTER A DREAMLESS SLEEP. She was ravenous and needed to use the bathroom desperately. After she was done, she washed her hands and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. "Oh no!" she whispered. "I look awful!" Her face was a mass of scabbed over sores. And the sores itched terribly. Glancing down at her tee shirt

and shorts clad body, she saw that her entire body was covered in the itchy scabs. She rubbed gingerly at one of them, but it didn't help. Rubbing at it just made the place itch more, not less.

Gritting her teeth, Mary went into the kitchen. Grandmother must have heard her stirring, because a bowl of clear soup was on the table, along with some more tea. Mary made a face at the tea, but Grandmother looked at her sternly.

"You must drink it, cinja, so you will get well enough to travel."

The old woman came over and, picking up one of Mary's arms, looked at it closely.

"It itches, doesn't it?" she asked.

"Yes!" Mary replied fervently.

"Hmm. Well, don't scratch them. Eat." Grandmother turned and rummaged in the cupboard. "I have something that will help."

Mary needed no urging to eat. She sat down and spooned some of the soup into her mouth. Mmm. So good.

The soup was gone quickly, and Mary drank the tea down, trying not to taste it. Grandmother had disappeared.

Mary guessed Mikusi was in the bathroom—she could hear the tub running. When the noise had stopped, Grandmother came out and helped Mary into the small bathroom. Mary was appalled to realize how weak she was.

"How in the world did I get chicken-pox?" she asked as grandmother helped her into the tub. The water was cloudy from whatever had been added to the bath, but Mary felt soothed right away and the itching was now bearable.

"Joseph White Hat, that little scamp. He is up running around with only ten pox on him." Grandmother clucked her tongue. "You have never had them before, eh, cinja?"

Mary pondered the questions as she sunk into the water up to her chin with a sigh of relief. "No, I don't think I have. I must not have, I guess. You can't get them twice, can you?"

Pursing her lips, Grandmother frowned. "Well, not often, but it can happen. Usually, the older a person is, the worse it hits them."

Mary didn't answer; she took a deep breath and sunk all the way under the water so the soothing medicine would work on her face. When she came up for air, Grandmother was gone.

Fifteen minutes later, Mary emerged from the tub and wrapped herself in a towel. She was still tired, but felt better now that the food had done its work. She went into her bedroom and changed into the clean clothes Grandmother had placed on her freshly made bed.

Mary climbed between the clean, sweet smelling sheets and wondered how Janet was doing.

"Grandmother." she called.

A moment later, the old woman stuck her head into the door. "Yes?"

"When are we going to go to Georgia?" Mary asked sleepily.

"Maybe tomorrow. We will see."

"Have you heard anything about how Janet is doing?"

A look of pain spasmed across Grandmother's face. "No," she replied quietly. She pulled the door closed and Mary fell asleep again.

It was actually two more days until Mary was well enough to travel. She was a terrible patient, sneaking off to rub at her sores, more often than not finding her hand slapped away from the bothersome pox by her Grandmother, who would then force her back into the tub with more of the cloudy liquid poured in.

"I'm going to be waterlogged!" Mary shouted through the bathroom door.

"Better to be waterlogged than have holes in your skin for the rest of your life!" Grandmother shouted back.

Now though, they were on the plane as it rumbled down the runway and gained altitude. Mary's ears popped.

Frank grinned at her and handed her a stick of gum. "This will help."

Mary smiled back at him.

Many of the women on the plane were giving him admiring looks, but Frank seemed oblivious. His cowboy hat was balanced on his knees, and he cracked his knuckles. "I'm anxious to see Janet," he replied to her look.

Looking at his work-worn hands, Mary felt a shiver of fear for whoever had hurt Janet if Frank ever got a hold of them. Well, they'll deserve it, a small voice said in her head.

Mary had the window seat. She turned to look out the small plane as the tops of the clouds floated by underneath. It looks like the plains, she thought, wishing that Mapiya could see this.

A silvery laugh sounded somewhere in the back of her mind, and Mary thought maybe she could. She hadn't told her grandmother about the experience she'd had while sick and in the grip of fever, feeling that what she and Mapiya had shared was too special to have anyone try and explain it away or treat rationally.

She turned back to look at the other two. Frank had closed his eyes and seemed to be sleeping, but Grandmother was looking at her, reaching out to pat Mary's hand. Mary had the unsettling feeling that she didn't need to bring it up. The old witch probably already knows anyway, she thought grumpily.

"I hope this hospital is a good one." Grandmother gave Mary's hand a squeeze before frowning and looking down the aisle. "I want something to drink. Where is that girl who gives out drinks?" she grumbled.

Mary craned her neck, looking over the seats in front of her. "She's up there, talking to that man." The attendant was laughing with an attractive, well-dressed man seated in the front of the plane. "I'll see if I can get her attention." Halfstanding, Mary waved, but the woman either didn't see her or was just ignoring her. "She doesn't see me," the girl said, returning to her seat.

Grandmother frowned.

Uh, oh, thought Mary.

"You hope the hospital in Atlanta is a good one?" Mary asked in an effort to distract her grandmother. The hospital in Peachtree wasn't really equipped to deal with long-term comatose patients, so Janet had been sent to Atlanta, where there was a larger, better staffed facility. Unfortunately, Grandmother refused to be distracted. Leaning into the aisle, the old woman waved her cane in the air. That got the attendant's attention and she hurried down the aisle.

"Did you need something?"

"I want something to drink. The air is too dry in here."

"Of course. What would you like?"

"What do you have?"

"Coca-Cola, water, wine or juice."

"Hmm." She glanced at Mary. "I have not had Coca-Cola in a long time, but I think I liked it when I had it." Turning back to the attendant, she nodded. "Yes, I would like some Coca-Cola."

"Right away." The attendant smiled and knelt next to Grandmother's seat. "It might be best not to wave your cane the next time you want something. Just use your hand, if you don't mind."

"My hand?" Grandmother frowned.

"Yes, it might be less disturbing to the other passengers."

The old woman nodded. "I could use my hand, but that doesn't seem to work when you are talking to someone better looking than I am."

The attendant flushed and hurried away to retrieve the drink.

Mumbling something in Nakota, Grandmother adjusted her dress.

Frank answered her without opening his eyes, but whatever he said seemed to settle Grandmother down. The attendant was back. “Would you like anything?” she asked Mary. Mary shook her head. If she had a soda, she’d just have to go to the bathroom, and she’d really rather not have to clamber over both Grandmother and Frank to do so. “No thanks, I’m just going to read.” She pulled out one of the books from the library. It seems like years ago that I got this, but it was just a few weeks! So much had happened to her since then that she felt like she’d lived a lifetime, then realized that in a way, she had lived a lifetime, just not her own. Then she buried her nose in the book, trying to ignore the elbow Grandmother was sticking into her ribs.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

FRANK WAVED AT A CAB, JUGGLING HIS BAGS ALONG WITH ONE OF

Grandmother’s; Mary carried the other, as well as her own suitcase, trying to avoid being jostled by the people that swirled around the three of them. The noise was already making her head ache and her shirt clung damply to her back. Mary found herself longing for the quiet of the rez and shook her head, surprised at the idea that she wanted to return to a place she’d fought so hard to avoid. She glanced at Grandmother, wanting to share the thought but stopped when she saw the look of misery on the old woman’s face.

I grew up in cities—how much worse it must be for her! Mary stepped closer to her grandmother, trying to shield her from the more aggressive passers-by. It was a relief for all of them when they finally climbed into the car.

They had decided on the plane to check in at the hotel, and then go from there to the hospital. Little more than an hour later, the checking in had been accomplished and Mary found herself fighting back tears as they stood before the imposing hospital building. Stop it, she scolded herself. Janet wouldn’t want you sniveling like a big baby. She followed Frank and her Grandmother inside and paused in the lobby, sniffing the air.

Do all hospitals have this same smell? Mary thought back to the last time she’d been in a place that smelled like this. She’d been saying goodbye to her parents.

Thinking about her parents did not hold the pain it once did, Mary realized. Surprised, she probed around the edges of that old wound. It’s because I know now that there’s more—that life goes on and no matter what, I’m going to see them again. Maybe I can finally let them go—for now at least. Comforted, she headed for the Information Desk where Frank and Grandmother were trying to find out how to get to Janet’s room. Evidently, they got what they needed, because they met Mary halfway. Frank pointed to a bank of elevators against one of the walls.

“Fifth floor,” he said briefly. After a silent ride, they exited and went to a desk directly across from the elevator doors.

A nurse took Janet’s name and consulted a chart in front of her. “One visitor at a time. Room 504.” She pointed to a door slightly down from where they stood. There were two men in suits outside of Janet’s door.

“You go first,” Frank said to Grandmother.

One of the men, fair-haired, stepped forward. He pulled a thin, black, case from his inside coat pocket and flipped it open.

“Sawyer, FBI.” He motioned to the other man who hadn’t moved, “That’s Thornberg. Can I safely assume you are relatives of Janet Two Dogs?”

Frank’s jaw clenched, but he spoke pleasantly, “You can safely assume that, yes.”

Grandmother had not stopped her forward motion. She continued walking, right into Janet's room. Thornberg looked at her as she walked by him, moving as if to stop her, but Frank caught his eye and motioned 'no' slightly with his head.

Sawyer followed Frank's gaze and said, "It's okay."

Thornberg subsided.

Frank went to sit on a small sofa close to the nurses' desk.

Mary waited until he was seated before asking the nurse, "Has she woken up at all?"

The woman gave Mary a compassionate look and shook her head. The phone in front of her began shrilling, and she picked it up.

Mary waited for a moment longer, wanting reassurance, but she could see the nurse didn't have the time to talk to her.

And what is she going to say anyway? I know I'll see Janet again if she does die, but I want her here now! Mary gritted her teeth, letting anger take the place of helpless worry. And I want the person who did this to pay!

Guess I'll go sit down too, she thought, walking over to the sofa and flopping down. Something dug into her hipbone and frowning, Mary dug into her pocket, coming out with her cell phone. I forgot about this, she realized. Maybe I should try Steve again. She gnawed on her lip a moment, debating whether or not to call, thinking back to the conversation they'd had the night before she went to the rez. A sharp feeling of dread decided her and she flipped open the phone. Mary was getting somewhat more adept at using the cell, his name flashed up after just a few fumbles. She pressed send and waited for someone to answer the phone.

"Hello?" It was Mr. Shield, his voice sounding taut with worry.

They must not have found him yet.

"Hi, Mr. Shield. It's Mary, Mary Two Dogs? I was just wondering if you'd heard from Steve yet."

Mr. Shields blew out a deep breath of air and when he finally answered, his voice was heavy and slow.

"No ... no, Mary. We still haven't heard from him."

"I'm sorry."

There was an awkward pause after which Mary said goodbye and pressed the end button, cutting off the call. The nurse frowned at her and pointed to a 'no cell phones' sign. Embarrassed, Mary put the phone away.

She glanced back at Janet's room where Grandmother was just emerging. Frank motioned for Mary to go in next. His face was ashen, and she could see he was making a real effort not to cry. For the first time, a suspicion about his feelings for Janet tickled her mind. Then, pushing the thought away as not really important at the moment, she went into the room. There were tubes coming out of Janet's mouth and an IV taped in place on her arm. A compressor was helping her to breath, whooshing in the background of the dim room with the regularity of a heartbeat.

Mary swallowed hard. Her aunt looked diminished somehow, smaller than she had in life. Stop! Mary scolded herself. She's still alive. Stop thinking of her as dead! She amended the thought to 'when awake.' She realized that Janet had a fairly small frame and wasn't much taller than Mary herself. She'd had so much vitality that she seemed larger. Stepping forward, Mary took her aunt's hand, and closed her eyes, squeezing the hand, trying to find Janet—the real Janet inside the shell that lay before her. She didn't feel any spark or answering clasp of the hand.

Mary sighed and gently placed the hand back on top of the thin white cover. "Hurry back, Janet," she whispered. "We all miss you." Then she left, allowing Frank some time with her aunt. She watched through the door for a moment as he knelt beside the bed, but the naked emotion on his face made Mary feel like she was spying and she stepped back.

Grandmother looked down the hall to where the nurse sat, still on the phone. "They were going to get

married once,” she said.

“Who?” Mary asked. “Frank and Janet?” Somehow, she wasn’t surprised.

Grandmother nodded. “Janet wanted to live in the white man’s world, but Frank had done that and only wanted to come home and live with the People.”

“So they decided not to get married?”

“Neither could live in the world the other had chosen.” The old woman shrugged. “What else was there for them to do?”

“But—” Mary could think of no answer to this question, at least no good answer, but it went a long way to explaining the reason Frank had come with them: not out of the kindness of his heart, as Mary had first assumed, but because he was afraid he would lose the woman he loved. Mary wondered, if Janet pulled through this, if either of them would see things differently. Not if—she reminded herself—when! When she pulls out of it.

The nurse finally chivvied them all out, saying that visiting hours were over. “I’m surprised that nice young man that keeps calling hasn’t come to visit,” she remarked as she escorted them to the elevator.

Mary stared at the nurse. Nice young man?

It was Steve, Mary knew it. Steve was okay, but he must be hiding, and if he knew Janet was in the hospital, it could only be because he knew something about who had done this and was afraid the same would happen to him.

His words from that long-ago night echoed in her head, “Mary, if anyone knew I was saying this to you, I’d be as good as dead.”

It had to be the chief of police! Mary’s mind raced in frantic circles as she tried to figure out what to do, but came up empty. She decided she would talk to Grandmother and Frank about what she suspected later at the hotel.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

GRANDMOTHER AND MARY WERE SHARING A ROOM. Frank had his own room, and they agreed to meet for dinner after they had rested a bit. Mary took a cool shower, grateful that the hotel had air-conditioning.

Grandmother sat at the window staring down at the traffic and puffing at her pipe. Frank knocked at the door, and stuck his head in. “Shall we eat up here, or do you want to go down to the dining room?”

Mary glanced at Grandmother, but she continued looking out the window and didn’t answer. “Uh, I think up here is best.” Mary said.

“Right.”

Coming all the way into the room, Frank dialed for room service. A short time later, a waiter came in and set their meals on the small table. He wrinkled his nose slightly at the smell of grandmother’s pipe, but Mary glared at him, daring him to speak. She realized she was no longer the timid little mouse that had gone to Fort Belknap. She felt much tougher, much stronger. My people are warriors, she reminded herself.

Once they were seated, Mary told Grandmother and Frank what Steve had said to her about overhearing the chief of police’s bragging about cleansing the town. Then she told them about calling Steve’s house and finding out that he had disappeared at the same time that Janet had been attacked. She ended with her suspicions about the young man calling to check on Janet.

They’d both heard the comment, but hadn’t realized the significance of it, though Mary did see Frank’s expression ease slightly after she said it could only be Steve.

He was jealous! she thought, amused for the first time that day. Gently, she covered Frank’s hand with her own. “She never sees anyone, Frank. Janet’s been married to her job for as long as I’ve known her.”

Frank stared at the girl for a moment as a flush crept up his cheeks. Then he ducked his head, mumbling something in Nakota.

Grandmother cackled, causing the man to grow even rosier. He quickly excused himself, saying he needed to get to bed.

Mary's head was nodding when Grandmother finally announced it was time for her to sleep.

"I guess I'm not totally over being sick, yet," Mary smiled ruefully. She climbed into bed and drew the covers up to her chin with a sigh before turning off the bedside lamp.

"Aren't you going to come to bed too?" she asked when Grandmother seated herself in the chair next to the window.

"Not yet, Cinja," the old woman replied absently. "I need to think."

Mary didn't say anything else. She understood. Janet was weighing heavily on her mind as well. If only she weren't so sick from chicken pox! As her heavy eyelids fluttered closed, she wondered again where Steve was.

The next morning, when Mary woke up, she saw the second suitcase that Grandmother had insisted on packing lying open across the old woman's bed.

She sat up, swiping one hand across her face and looking around. Grandmother didn't seem to be in the room.

She must be in the bathroom, Mary thought, hearing the sound of someone moving around. Seconds later, Grandmother appeared, followed by a billow of steam. There was sweat on her face.

Mary gasped. The old woman was dressed in traditional garb. Her white hide dress was covered in small objects that clicked gently as she walked and over her shoulders she wore a fringed hide shawl.

"It's not a lodge," sighed grandmother, "but it's the best I can do here."

Jumping out of bed Mary went to Grandmother as she began rummaging around in her suitcase, taking out different things. One of the things was a small bag on a thong, which Grandmother placed around her neck.

The other was a larger bag. This she set to the side on the bed.

Mary reached out and touched one of the objects on Grandmother's dress. "What are these?" she asked.

"Elk's teeth. This dress belonged to my Grandmother. She was a powerful healer woman."

She looked at Mary and smiled. "When I am gone, it will be yours."

"I told you not to talk about that," Mary frowned.

Grandmother looked at the girl and sighed. "Cinja," she said, taking Mary's hands and drawing her over to the bed. She sat and pulled Mary to sit beside her. "People die. We are born to die. There is no escaping this fact."

Tears filled Mary's eyes. "Then why are we so concerned about Janet?" she yelled. "If she's going to die, what's the big deal? Why did we even bother to come here?"

"Because now is not Janet's time. Did you ever wonder, Cinja, why Janet felt such a burning need to leave the People to walk in the wasin oyade way? Why she was sent here, to the place-that-sweats?"

Mary shrugged.

"There is a great evil in the place where Janet was sent. It is an evil that eats hope and takes away from the future small pieces that could have made it better. Some children were killed, the son and daughters of a very brave man, a man who tried to do good. But this man, who was brave, was also foolish. He did not have the eyes to see behind the mask of Trickster to the evil that lived there."

"Trickster?"

Grandmother nodded. "Yes. Iktome the spider, a very bad creature that likes to visit the earth, pretending to be a person. No one can see the shadow under the mask. "But," she held up a finger, "I think Janet had the eyes to see beneath the mask. It is part of her journey here on earth to help send Trickster away and stop him from harming anyone else."

The anger left Mary as suddenly as it had come. She took a deep breath, and then looked over at

Grandmother. “You are going to bring Janet back, aren’t you?”
Grandmother sounded surprised as she answered. “Of course. Why else would I come all this way?”
Mary had the horrible feeling that bringing Janet back would involve Grandmother leaving. She tried to reconcile herself with the fact, thinking of Mapiya and her parents. She knew she would see them again. She would see Grandmother again. “When do we go to the hospital?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

WHEN THEY WALKED ONTO THE FIFTH FLOOR FROM THE ELEVATOR, THE MEN

from the FBI were there again. They stared at Grandmother as she walked passed them into Janet’s room, her face proud and distant.

After a moment, sounds of singing came from the room. The words were in Nakota, and, while the FBI man, Sawyer, spoke in low tones to Frank, Mary felt her feet carry her forward to stand next to Thornberg.

She watched through the door as Grandmother pulled several items from the bag she carried. There was a bundle of sweet grass that she separated into two pieces, laying one half on Janet’s feet and the other on the pillow by her neck. Then she brought out a pair of rocks, small fist-sized things that she set on either side of Janet. Finally she pulled out a smaller bag and pulled open the hide thong that held it closed.

She held it over Janet’s abdomen and poured a small trickle of earth from the bag. It landed in a small pile that rose and fell with Janet’s breathing.

Beside Mary, Thornberg moved restively. “Hey, she can’t do that; it’s not clean! She’s gonna make Janet sicker!”

Mary didn’t take her eyes off of Grandmother, but said, “Be quiet. How much more sick can she be? Grandmother is a medicine woman. She’s going to bring Janet back.”

She heard the man snort, but thankfully remain otherwise quiet.

Now Grandmother pulled a feather out of the bag—an eagle feather—and waved it over Janet’s body. Her singing increased in pitch and intensity. To Mary’s surprise, a white glow appeared around her grandmother, haloing her.

Mary glanced quickly up at the FBI man, but his expression didn’t change. He must not see it, she realized.

She turned her head back to look. Grandmother had disappeared. In her place stood a huge white buffalo that flickered as Mary watched into the shape of a beautiful young woman. Mary could still hear grandmother singing as she watched the young woman. The woman bent down and seemed to be whispering something in Janet’s ear. There was a brilliant flash of light. The woman stepped back and in her place stood the buffalo again.

White Buffalo Woman, thought Mary in awe.

The light faded as she watched, leaving Grandmother standing, slumped and tired looking. Mary realized the song had ended.

Then Mary shrieked and ran into the room.

Janet was sitting up, trying to pull the tubes from her mouth so she could say something. Alarms were shrilling and the nurse from the day before pushed Mary out of the way, gently extricating the breathing apparatus from Janet’s mouth.

Janet pushed the nurse’s helping hands away and looked down at herself.

“Why do I have dirt on my stomach?” she asked in bewilderment. Her voice sounded raspy from disuse.

Mary looked Grandmother’s direction, tears of joy blurring her vision. It took her a moment to see that the old woman had crumpled to the floor.

The next hour was a blur to Mary. There were people everywhere. Grandmother was placed on a

stretcher and wheeled out of the room, and the two FBI agents were arguing with the doctor who had been summoned. Frank added his own angry words, demanding the right to see Grandmother? Janet? until the mixture of raised voices became just noise to Mary.

Mary wandered into the hall where she found a chair and collapsed into it. She buried her face in her hands. She felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked up. It was Grandmother, looking a bit tired, but definitely okay.

Mary jumped up and grabbed the old woman in a rib-cracking hug. "I thought you were dead!"

Grandmother struggled a bit in the girl's grip before returning the hug. "I might be if you don't let these old lungs get some air!"

Mary released her, and then forced Grandmother to sit in the chair.

"I thought you were going to die!" she said, her voice was accusing.

Grandmother raised one eyebrow. "Now why would you think that, Cinja? I am going to die, yes, as you will too someday, but I do not think our time to walk the earth is done yet. There is still much both of us need to do."

Then she frowned. "I wish I could smoke," she grumbled, sounding so much like herself that Mary laughed for joy.

A nurse came over. "Are you Mary Two Dogs?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes."

"Well, a young man has been calling here everyday, asking for an update on Ms. Two Dogs condition. When I told him she'd woken up, he asked if you were here."

She gestured toward the desk, "Would you like to speak to him?" It had to be Steve! Mary jumped up, glancing at Grandmother as she did so.

The look on the old woman's face made her falter. It was a look of terrible sadness.

"Wh—what's wrong?"

Grandmother just waved her hand. "Answer the phone, Cinja."

Mary hesitated a moment longer, then ran over to the desk, where the receiver rested. She picked it up.

"Steve?"

There was a silence, then an unfamiliar voice replied. "Is this Mary? Janet Two Dogs niece?"

Something icy gripped Mary's throat, making it hard to force the words out. "Yes."

"I have something to tell you. Something about Steve."

"Who is this?"

There was another pause.

"I think it'd be best if we talked in person. Are you going to be at the hospital a while?"

"Yes."

"I'll be down directly."

There was a click as the call was disconnected. Mary stared at the phone in her hand before slowly replacing it. Numbly she walked over to stand next to Grandmother. The old woman got up and gently pushed Mary into the chair.

"Now, Cinja," she murmured, "is when you need to be strong."

It wasn't more than half an hour when a young black man walked onto the fifth floor looking somewhat lost as he stepped out of the elevator. His face cleared as he caught sight of Mary sitting in the chair, Grandmother beside her.

"Mary?"

Mary nodded, unable to speak for the fear that gripped her. Grandmother's hand tightened on her shoulder, as if she were lending her strength.

"My name is John Wilson. My uncle was Reverend Wilson." The teenager lowered his head, breathing deeply before continuing, "He was—"

“The one that was killed in the fire.” Mary finished the sentence for him, her voice flat.

John nodded.

“Right. Steve Wilson was my cousin. He’d brought Steve Shields up here to Atlanta a couple of times when he visited me.” His face twisted. “We got along real well.”

“Where’s Steve?” Mary wanted him to get to the point.

John looked down. “I think he’s dead.”

The world swirled around Mary. Everything went dark as she tipped out of the chair and hit the floor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

WHEN MARY CAME TO, SHE FOUND HERSELF LYING IN A BED. Next to her sat

Grandmother and John. The nurse with the kind face from the day before was there also. She reached down and took Mary’s arm, checking her pulse against the watch on her wrist. “Busy day for you folks. We had your Grandmother in this same bed not too long ago.”

She placed Mary’s arm back on the bed and patted her hand. “I think you’ll be okay. You just fainted. Your grandmother tells me you’re just recovering from a nasty bout with the chicken pox.”

Mary nodded wordlessly, her eyes on John’s face. She wanted the nurse to leave. She needed to hear what John had to say.

“I feel better now,” she said tonelessly. The nurse searched her face for a moment, and then glanced at John and Grandmother.

“Okay.” she said briskly. “Just stay there until you’re sure you’ve got your legs under you.” She left the room.

“I think you need to get Mr. Sawyer.” Mary spoke to Grandmother.

The old woman nodded and left, reappearing a moment later with the FBI agent in tow.

“Go ahead.” Mary nodded to John.

He swallowed hard. “I got a call from Steve awhile back, after my uncle was killed.”

Sawyer’s eyes flickered, then narrowed at the word killed, but he didn’t say anything, just stood next to the bed listening.

“He said he’d overheard the chief of police talking about what he’d done— bragging about it. He was scared, because he thought if he told anyone, he’d be next.”

Mary nodded. “Steve said the same thing to me the night before I left for the rez,” she told the FBI man.

John continued, “Well, the chief must’ve known that Steve’d heard him talking, but he bided his time. After you left,” he angled his head toward Mary, “he called me, telling me how the chief was acting real friendly toward him and how nervous it made him. He didn’t want to tell his folks, because then they might be in danger too.”

He cleared his throat. “The chief of police picked him up one night, when Steve was coming home from playing football with some friends at the park. It was getting dark out. There were other men in the car. They’d all been drinking. Steve didn’t want to get in ... but they made him.

“The chief started talking about loyalty and trust—bull like that. He wanted to know how far he could trust Steve, he said. They took him with them and went to a deserted road.”

He looked at Mary. “They made him watch while they beat her and left her for dead.”

“How do you know this?” Sawyer spoke for the first time, his eyes sharp.

John swallowed hard. He seemed on the verge of tears.

“He ran. He ran into the woods and hid, too afraid to come home. He finally found a pay phone and called me collect. He was scared, really scared. He wanted to know if he could come up and stay with me. He thought the chief wouldn’t think to look for him up here. I told him to stay put, that I would come and pick him up.”

“Where was this?” Sawyer asked.

“A little diner about twenty miles north of Peachtree. I got right in the car and went there, but when I got to the diner, there was a police car sitting there. I didn’t even pull in. They’d found him before I got there.”

“Why in the hell didn’t you call somebody?” Sawyer’s voice was angry.

John looked at the agent and for the first time, Mary saw bitterness on his face instead of sorrow. “Who was I gonna call? Ya’ll didn’t do such a great job of protecting Janet Two Dogs did you? I didn’t know who to turn to anymore.”

Sawyer just looked away.

Mary lay back on the bed, tears streaming down her face. In her mind’s eye, she saw Steve the first day she’d met him, standing next to Timmy, the gentle look on his face. His poor folks, she thought. His poor family. They’ll see him again, but it sure hurts in the now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

JANET GAVE HER EVIDENCE IN A CLEAR VOICE, HER GAZE NEVER LEAVING THE

chief of police’s face where he sat in the defendant’s chair. It had taken nearly a year to get to this point, though the chief had been arrested almost immediately after Janet had awakened.

Grandmother sat on one side of Mary, Frank on the other, their hands tightly gripping hers.

After Janet had been released from the hospital, she had decided to use her leave and finish recuperating at Fort Belknap. Mary had started school that fall at Hays-Lodge Pole School. It was nice to be in the majority for once, though she still found it a little weird that the school actually went from kindergarten to twelfth grade.

For a while, Mary had been afraid that Janet would uproot both of them after she had finished healing, and move them both who knew where, but Janet seemed different. She was quieter, slower to laugh than before, and she would always walk with a limp. But she also seemed content, a fact that wasn’t lost on Mary.

No one was surprised when she and Frank announced they were getting married and that Janet had arranged to work at the Bureau of Indian Affairs office on the rez.

Steve’s body was recovered, buried in the fields not far from where Janet had been attacked. He’d been shot.

His family had moved away, unable to cope with living in a town where their son had been murdered. Mary watched as Mr. Shields led his weeping wife to the car once the furniture movers had gone. She stood, framed in the window, and the man had looked up at her, then sadly away. She understood his sorrow.

The last she saw of them was Timmy waving at her from the back window as the car disappeared down the street.

Mary came back to the present with a jolt as the judge rapped his gavel sharply on the podium. He adjourned court for the day.

She filed out of the courtroom, waving once at John Wilson. He’d been called to testify as well.

She raised her face to the sun, feeling its cleansing rays on her face. Janet joined the trio and hugged Mary.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through this, honey.”

Mary thought about Steve. She hoped he would see Mapiya and her folks. She was sad that he was gone, but she would never forget him.

Turning to Grandmother, she smiled, “I never told you grandmother. I found my True name. Mapiya told me before she left.”

Grandmother linked her arm through Mary's. She didn't ask who Mapiya was. "Tell me, Cinja."
"It is She-Who-Remembers."