

ANOTHER'S
EYES

MIKAELA SALZETTI

© MIKAELA SALZETTI 2011

Prologue: Part One

The pale light of dawn was starting to tint the gray sky. The sun cautiously brought its head above the mountains, a wolf howled in the distance. Overall, it was a beautiful morning on the plains at Little Bighorn. However, beauty hid the fatal dangers the day would bring.

General Custer rode on his horse over the crest of a hill. It was a dramatic moment as he paused on the crown of the rise. The sun came over, and someone looking directly at him would only have been able to make out his silhouette. Then the moment was gone, and Custer was joined by the rest of his troops. He gave a signal, and they all rode down the slope, the hooves of their horses like thunder in storm.

Suddenly, they were ambushed. The hunters had become the hunted. Custer's troops never stood a chance against the Native Americans who attacked. However, there was one man that was holding out against the sea of enemies. His name was Nicholas Anderson, second in command to Custer. He was a handsome man, with wavy, blonde hair and piercing blue eyes.

He was the voice of reason for Custer. Nicholas never supported the murder of innocent women and children, but he had to obey orders. He had seen men who disobeyed, and it was not a pretty sight. But it was not for himself that he fought. Nicholas feared for his son, feared that he might grow up without a father. That was the only reason he obeyed orders.

Anderson sensed someone coming behind him. He spun, pointing his musket towards the person. The point of an arrow was an inch from his face, but his gun was the same distance from his attacker's head. Holding the bow was Eyes of Eagle, one of the Shoshoni braves fighting. He had a typical Native American complexion, but his eyes were a window to his soul. They took in everything, leaving no detail unnoticed. Right then, they showed not fear, but a grim determination.

Anderson knew he could not survive the onslaught. He thought it would be best to leave this world bested by one he saw as an equal. Pulling away his musket, he said, "Tell my son I said goodbye."

Something in Eyes of Eagle softened. He only understood some English, but he understood this. In broken English he whispered, "I too have a son." With that he pulled away his bow, and for the first time, they saw each other as friends. They smiled in the middle of the battle.

"I will not kill you today, my friend," said Anderson as he thrust out his hand. Eyes of Eagle took his hand in his own. This lasted only a moment.

Eyes of Eagle's hand went slack, and his eyes looked surprised. He fell into the arms of Nicholas Anderson. He looked down to see a red stain blooming on Eyes of Eagle's back.

Anderson looked around to face the person who fired on his friend and saw Joe Solomon, third in command, still holding up the murder weapon. He was tall, with greasy black, shoulder length hair and a nose like a hawk. Normally, he had dull gray eyes, but now they had a malicious glint to them.

“That was uncalled for! You murdered him for nothing! He had a son!” Anderson yelled. His voice cracked when he mentioned his son. “I shall have your position filled by another man.”

Solomon smiled the smile of a madman. “That’s going against all that I’ve worked so hard for.”

“What do you mean?” Anderson shouted above the roar of the battle.

Solomon smiled again, “I’ve already killed Custer.”

The gun fired, and Nicholas Anderson fell dead next to his last friend in this world.

Prologue: Part Two

A snowflake drifted down through the cold, clear night air. It tumbled down to cover the fur-lined coat of a traveler. He looked up, and saw that many more snowflakes followed this one brave pioneer. Even though the sky was cloudy, he could see the full moon rising above the Teton Mountains, casting a strange, unearthly light on the snow-covered forest. The traveler shivered; he knew there would be a blizzard.

Marring the beautiful snowy landscape was a thin trail of smoke. Maybe someone would be kind enough to house him for the night. He followed his shadow through the deep snow. Fortunately, he wore snowshoes and the going was slightly easier. Even by his shadow, one could tell that he was a trapper. His huge, bushy beard stuck out in all directions, mirrored by his eyebrows. A classic raccoon cap fit snugly over wild hair that hadn't been combed or washed for weeks. He had a rough, sun tanned face creased with lines from the hardships he had endured. Imposing as he seemed, his eyes were kind. Even in the darkness you could see them sparkle merrily. They were the kind of eyes a child would envision Santa Clause having, eyes that were always laughing.

The trapper reached the cabin. It was a cozy thing, two stories and still a fair size around the base. He knocked on the strong, wooden door and turned up the collar of his coat; the wind was starting to blow, and snow was creeping down his neck onto his back. It was rather uncomfortable. The door opened, and an older woman, maybe in her fifties, turned her round, kind face up towards that of the trapper's. "Can I help you?" she asked, mildly curious.

"Yes," the traveler answered in a deep, gruff voice worthy of a bear. "I was wondering if you could house and feed a weary traveler for the night. I'll be gone in the morning."

The woman sighed and said, "Oh, dear. I suppose we have room, but you're not the first person to ask tonight. If you don't mind sleeping on the floor, then come on in."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said as he ducked his head to get through the doorway. He was greeted by deliciously warm air he hadn't felt since the last time he'd had a bath. Against the back wall was a large fireplace with a large blaze burning cheerily. On the left wall, he saw a wizened old man peering at him from a beautifully carved staircase. The right wall was bare, except for a window showing the increasing number of snowflakes. As the woman went over to talk to the man, who was obviously her husband, the trapper's eyes settled on a round table in the middle of the room. It was only designed for two people and only had two chairs, but a couple of tree stumps had been rolled in from outside in order to seat the quartet who sat around the table. None of them were looking at him. They only sipped from their steaming mugs and stared at the grain in the wood of the table.

"Howdy," said the trapper as he walked over. Everyone looked up at him. Startled, he snatched off his raccoon cap; two of the individuals were ladies. He started to stutter an apology but was cut short by one of the men. He was of average height, not tall, but not short.

Blue eyes, blonde hair, and a sturdy build gave him a handsome look. He had fair skin, but it was tanned by the sun, and his hands were callused. Even though he was beautiful, he was not helpless.

“Have a seat, friend,” said the young man as he leapt off his tree stump. The trapper thanked him and let out a sigh as he settled onto the chair. “My name is William Anderson,” continued the handsome youth, “and this is my wife, Amanda. These two over here are my good friends, Singing Wolf and his wife, Blue Willow. They’re from a small Shoshoni village on the other side of the Tetons.”

The traveler turned and tried to greet him in his native language. The Indian woman, Blue Willow, giggled at his feeble attempts and the man, Singing Wolf, smiled. He looked to be the same age as his companion, but taller. Dark skin, hair, and eyes made the two young men look as different as night and day. His wife had a finely chiseled face, but Blue Willow’s countenance was rounded and pleasant. Both had long black hair that was loosely braided down their backs.

“We speak your language quite well,” said Singing Wolf in flawless English, rescuing the trapper from both ladies, who were still snickering. His pride slightly battered, all the trapper said was a gruff, “Oh.”

Something about these people was nagging him in the back of his brain, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. He might as well introduce himself while he tried to figure it out. “My name is Thor, Thomas Thor. I’m a trapper around these parts, but I also collect stories. If you have any, feel free to share. I don’t go for any ‘My friend’s-cousin’s-wife’s-brother’s-son,’ though.”

A woman called Amanda grinned and said, “You’ve probably heard of us. The question is, are we outlaws or heroes?” This drew a few chuckles from her friends. Amanda was a mix of everything. She had straight hair and brown, almond-shaped eyes of a doe. Elegant, yet athletic, she fit in perfectly with the people surrounding her.

Then it hit Thor. He did know who these people were. Everyone was talking about them wherever he went. Children idolized them, playing a new version of Cowboys and Indians. They were the stuff of legends adults talked about in hushed whispers. Lawmen and military men cursed them fervently.

Thor must have been gaping because Amanda and Blue Willow were laughing again, and even William and Singing Wolf were smiling broadly. “Yes,” he said slowly, after snapping his jaw shut, “I’ve definitely heard of you. There are so many tales out there about you four that I don’t know what to believe. I’d be obliged if you told your stories to me straight.”

“That’s a tall order,” replied William.

The trapper got as comfortable as he could on his tree stump and told him, “I’ve got time.”

All four looked at each other, coming to an unspoken agreement. Then Singing Wolf began.

Chapter 1: Red Coyote

An eerie pre-dawn light shone down on the red coat of a lone coyote. It stopped, sniffed the hard earth, and pawed longingly at it. There must have been a mouse's den, but instead of pursuing its breakfast, the coyote looked directly at me. I met its yellow-eyed gaze evenly, without fear. Then, the canine turned and strode up to a ledge on the mountain. The sun broke the Tetons. In its light, the coyote raised its head to howl, and -.

I woke with a start. THUNK! My head slammed against the wooden beam above my bed. Rubbing the crater in my skull, I climbed out of my bed, composed of a pile of animal skins.

Pulling on my light, comfortable buckskin pants, I looked out the door, a flop of bighorn sheep skin, and saw it was a beautiful summer day. There was no wind (highly unusual for where we were staying) and the sun was shining. After tossing my shirt in a heap on my bed, I walked quietly to my mother.

Sky Fox was once the happiest, most beautiful maiden in the whole village. That's why my father married her. When I was young, he went off with other men in our tribe to battle the child-slaughtering-Custer. Eyes of Eagle was one of the only Indians killed. After she learned of his death, my mother neither slept nor ate for nearly a week. When she emerged from our wicki-up the first time since the new arrived, everyone could see she was not the Sky Fox they knew. In the body of the witty and beautiful woman who was my mother, now existed a thing with no emotions. Happiness is the same as sadness; hot and cold don't exist. Now, I had to take care of my mother.

Gently, I woke up Sky Fox and brought her into a sitting position. As I dribbled water into her mouth, a girl walked in. It was the medicine woman's daughter, Blue Willow. Her flowing black hair shone in the morning sun, and her auburn eyes echoed the spirit of nature. Blue Willow was gorgeous, but not like other girls fellow boys would call pretty. She was as beautiful as the first light blanket of snow that falls in winter, the first flower of spring, the cool breeze of summer, the gold in the falling leaves in autumn. Blue Willow handed me a small pouch and smiled. I must have been staring at her softly cut features because she asked, "Are you ok?" Her voice sounded like a stream flowing over stones, soft and sweet at the same time.

"Yes," I said, trying to compose my scattered thoughts, "I'm fine. Thanks for the medicine." Blue Willow or her mother always brought some kind of concoction for my mother in the mornings. I didn't know what it was, but it certainly helped. The medicine dulled her senses, so she didn't feel the pain of her husband's death as sharply and harmfully as a knife in her back.

Blue Willow smiled uncertainly and said, "See you around." With that, she spun on her heels and glided away.

The rest of the morning was uneventful. After taking care of my mother, I helped the women and children of our village gather roots and berries that naturally grew there. I was not yet a man, and therefore, I could not join the hunt for our main source of food, big horn sheep. About mid-morning, I was able to do some fishing, but only caught one tiny, skinny fish about as long as my palm. Since it would have been given to our dogs, I simply tossed it back to grow more. I fed Sky Fox her mid-day meal, grabbed a piece of jerky and my bow and arrows and set out to practice.

As I walked to the meadow to shoot, I contemplated my dream. The day before the news came that Eyes of Eagle had passed on; I had the dream for the first time. It was always the same partial dream. It left my mind while I was grieving, but when I had it again a few months later, the possibility occurred to me that it might be related to my father passing on, so I talked to the village elders. They could not make any more sense of it than I could. All they could pull from the dream was a name: Red Coyote.

I certainly lived up to the name. When Father died, I was eight, and since then I have been shunned and avoided, like a lone coyote. Nobody wanted to play with the sullen, fatherless boy of eight, and no one wanted to practice with the silent, friendless teenager either. So, I practiced alone.

The only reason I can shoot a bow is because of Blue Willow's father, Running Deer. He's the fastest warrior in our village and sort of my step father. After Eyes of Eagle died and Sky Fox retreated into the depths of her brain, Blue Willow's family became my second parents. Clever Rabbit took care of me when I was younger, and Running Deer taught me skills when I was older.

I was a very good archer. Running Deer told me not only to rely on sight and luck, but to feel inside. With that ability, I never missed.

Suddenly, there was a crashing noise behind me. Spinning, I started to pull back my already loaded bow, ready to defend myself. Then I froze.

"Blue Willow!" I cried in surprise, "What are you doing here? I could have killed you!"

All she did was stand there, panting. She had obviously run very fast to tell me something. After a few seconds, she said, "There are White Men in the village. Come to talk with Chief Swift Feather. They –."

As soon as she said White Men, I welled up with unfathomable hatred. I had never seen a White Man before, but they killed my father. I was sprinting through the forest before Blue Willow finished her explanation.

Bursting from the trees, I stopped. My village had not been overrun with vicious murderers that were slaughtering women and children and burning down our wiki-ups. Instead, there was a group of men sprawled lazily in front of the chief's lodging.

The first thing I noticed was that they looked like humans. I had never really thought about what White Men looked like, but I think I expected some semi-transparent being with fangs and claws. They didn't look like us, but they still looked human.

The next thing that I noticed was that they had facial hair. It looked so out of place there, I almost smiled. The last thing I noticed was that they looked hot and tired. No wonder! The White Men were wearing thick, navy blue suits of stiff, scratchy material. How does one move in those? They also had caps made out of the same stuff, only stiffer. The hats served no purpose at all, only to increase the awkwardness of their attire.

Boldly, I walked straight towards the group. I had to figure out what was going on. If I asked around in the village, all I would get would be rumors of terrified Natives, and by the time I found out what was really going on, the action would be over. As I got closer, a few men jumped up to block the way. I stopped and indicated with simple hand gestures that I needed to go inside. Most of them looked confused, but one of them shook his head. Becoming increasingly frustrated, I tried to push past them. That definitely didn't work. A large portion of the group started jabbering to me in their strange tongue, and a few even dove for their guns. Only the tall, hazel-haired man who first understood me hooked my arm with his strong hands and held me. At first, I tried to wriggle free, but to no avail.

The soldier pulled me in closer. He shook his head again and said a word. I didn't know what he said, but the meaning was clear. He wanted to help me, but he couldn't let me proceed. Slowly, he let go of me, and I just stood there. I hadn't made up my mind, yet, if I still wanted to go in or leave. The man pointed to the others, who were still scrabbling about, imitated firing a gun, then pointed to me. I understood, so I nodded and walked away. That didn't mean I had given up, though.

As soon as I was out of sight, I broke into a trot. Quickly and silently I ran around to the back of the chief's wiki-up. There, I paused. It was simple enough to get into a wiki-up. All they were was rounded poles with animal skins draped over them. The difficulty was that it was enormously disrespectful to sneak into one's wiki-up, let alone Chief Swift Feather's wiki-up. I said a quick prayer to our gods for luck, lifted the sheep skin, and slipped inside.

"Red Coyote, what are you doing?" Chief Swift Feather asked sharply, have noticed me right away.

I swallowed and said, "I had to know what these White Men were telling you, sir. I simply could not wait for it to become public knowledge."

Chief Swift Feather was silent for a few seconds. I looked at the two other men in the wiki-up. One was an old, decrepit man with wispy white hair on his balding head. I could hardly believe he made it to our remote village he looked so frail. The old man smiled at me when he noticed me staring; the other man scowled. Shoulder-length, greasy black hair streaked with gray framed a gaunt face. As he stared down his hawk-like nose at me, his dull,

cloudy eyes flickered, almost evilly. Needless to say, I didn't trust him. This was the type of White Man I envisioned murdering Eyes of Eagle, my father.

"Very well," relented Chief Swift Feather, "since you are here you might as well stay. These men are offering to take the children of the village to a place of teaching called a school. There, you would learn the ways of the White Men. It would be extremely beneficial for the people if there were a whole generation of Shoshoni people who understood the ways and language of White Men. Since you will be going, what do you think?"

While he was speaking, I tore my eyes from the glaring general to stare, open-mouthed, at the chief of my village. Considered one of the greatest leaders of all times, Chief Swift Feather took over in a time of trouble. When his father took ill and died, the chief was merely in his twenties. However, he showed wisdom beyond his years and allied with other Indian Nations. United as one, the tribes attacked Custer. Very few Natives died; my father was among them. When the allegiance fell apart, most tribes were crushed under the White Men. Not ours. Chief Swift Feather had managed to keep our village free from the clutches of White Men. So, what in the world was he doing now? And how was I included in this?

The elderly man spoke in a wheezy voice, almost on the verge of a coughing fit. "It would only be for a year. If the results are productive, you and your fellow youths may stay longer." I was slightly taken aback by his Shoshoni. I didn't know he could speak our language, but now it seemed obvious. The only reason he came must have been to interpret. "I would be one of the instructors there," continued the man, "and myself and other teachers would make it as pleasant as possible."

Turning to Chief Swift Feather, I spoke in hurried, hushed tones so the scholar could not understand. "What is wrong with you? You are the greatest chief our village has ever seen, and you have enough wisdom to see this is a foolish choice." Since I was already going to receive a severe punishment for sneaking into a wiki-up, I figured I could do no more to worsen my situation.

Chief Swift Feather softened a bit. "I know, Red Coyote. I don't want to send away the children of our village either. But that is what the White Men want. We could not possibly withstand them – not know. We can only play along until it is to our advantage to act otherwise. Please understand this."

I did understand, but that didn't mean I agreed. Angrily, I said, "Don't trust these people. They murdered my father, and I won't go with them."

"I need someone to look after my people there. You will be one of the oldest ones there, someone the younger children will look up to. Please," he said quickly, seeing that I was about to speak, "it's what your father would have done." I snapped my mouth shut. Nobody would know better what Eyes of Eagle would do. He and Chief Swift Feather had grown up together, and I had heard stories of how the two braves worked, not as two individuals, but as one being. If the chief said that my father would go, then my father would have gone.

“I will go,” I relented after a few moments. Chief Swift Feather looked relieved. He told the aged interpreter that he agreed, who then confirmed it with the sullen man. Both stood up and went outside.

The leader of my village gracefully rose to his feet and whispered, “Thank you. You shall go and gather your belongings.” With that, he strode out and left me to my thoughts. What are you doing? I asked myself.

I returned to my own wiki-up, packed up the few items I would bring, fed my mother and tucked her into her animal furs...Then, I lay awake in my bed, waiting for morning to come.

* * * * *

“Red Coyote!” called Blue Willow as I stepped out of the wiki-up the next morning. Desperately, she asked, “You’re not going too, are you?”

“I have to,” I said, “aren’t you going?”

“Mother needs me to help her with the duties of being the Medicine Woman.”

This was probably the worst and the best news I had heard in the last twenty-four hours. At least she could keep clear of the influence of White Men even if she wouldn’t be with me. I gripped her arms, and she clung to mine.

“Take Care of Sky Fox while I’m gone.” I whispered to her.

She nodded and answered, “She will be taken care of by me; don’t worry about her.”

I smiled and said, “She will be with the best.” With that, I turned away and headed towards my doom.

Chapter 2: William Anderson

Sunlight shone through my eyelids, and reluctantly, I woke. As I climbed out of bed, I grabbed the pocket knife sitting on the dresser next to my window. Still groggy with sleep, I brought out the blade and stuck it in the wall. Another day without Dad, I thought as I wiggled the knife around, trying to get it out of the wall. This is how it was every morning since the news came.

I was only eight then. This is how I woke that morning, I had heard my mother crying downstairs. Upon reaching the living room, I saw men wearing the same uniform as Dad, but not Dad. When they told me he was dead, killed by some heathen Native, I went into a rage. I ran back up to my room, grabbed the pocket knife my father had given me before he left, and slammed it into the wall, over and over again. From that day forth, I did it every morning, counting each day without Dad.

“William!” called my mother from downstairs. “Breakfast is ready!”

As I hopped ungracefully into my pants, I shouted back, “Be right down!” After dressing, I climbed down to the kitchen, and the smell of bacon drowned my nose with deliciousness. I love bacon, by the way. It’s such an amazing food. The person cooking said bacon, was my mother.

She has brown, slightly wavy hair that was now tucked up in a bun. You couldn’t tell she was a widow unless you caught her off guard. She’s very strong, but when she thinks nobody’s looking, she gives way to grief. She’s not very attractive, but she’s smart. That’s where half of my genes come from, definitely. I’ve got my mom’s brains, and my father’s good looks. I don’t remember very well what he looked like, but I can guess. Average height, blonde hair and blue eyes, just like me, and everyone always say that I look just like my father.

Walking over to the stove, I grabbed the plate Mom had served bacon onto and headed over to the table. Plopping down in my chair, I dug in. I was an only child, so luckily I didn’t have to share my bacon.

“What’s going on in school today, Willy?” Mom asked. She was the **only** one who was allowed to call me “Willy”.

“Not...much,” I said between bites.

She went on innocently. “I heard that one of the Native boys was coming over to your part of the school.”

I choked on my bacon. After a severe coughing spell, I gasped, “What? There’s no way one of those savages could ever be smart enough. Ever.” And if one did come over, I would make it so miserable, it would beg to crawl back from where it came, I added silently.

“Now William,” my mother scolded, “just because your father fought Indians,” she left out being killed by an Indian, “doesn’t mean you can’t be at least civil to him.”

There was an awkward silence when neither of us spoke. Loudly, I pushed back my chair and said, “I think I’ll get some more bacon.”

After a little while, I finished my bacon and set off for school.

* * * * *

The first thing I noticed as soon as I got to the school house was that there was another desk. Perhaps Mom hadn't been joking. Right then, however, I was distracted from my thoughts by an angel walking into the room. Her name was Lilly Nelson, and I'd had my eye on her for quite some time. Red hair caught and trapped the sunlight, and emerald eyes sparkled. I had slowly by surely closed the distance between us, and she was close to falling for me. I started to get out of my seat but stopped cold.

There standing warily in the doorway, was an Indian boy about my age. Someone was next to him, directing him to his seat in the back of the class. The person showing him around was Amanda Smith. I've always known there was something wrong with her, besides her dare-devil attitude. I started to get up, but then the teacher, Mr. Brown, walked in.

"Attention!" snapped the balding man. He was plenty young, but the top part of his head was still as bare as an egg. "We have a new student joining us today. Cole Jason, will you please come forward?" It was clear Mr. Brown didn't like this Cole either, because nobody was called to the front of the class unless they were about to be publicly humiliated. I smiled; maybe I would enjoy this.

The only problem was nobody came forward.

Mr. Brown said, a little louder this time, "Please come forward."

The Redskin got up and walked forward this time.

"Please," went on the instructor, "tell us something about yourself, Cole."

"My name is not Cole," said the Indian with surprisingly good English. "I don't know anybody named Cole. My name is Red Coyote."

Mr. Brown snorted and corrected him. "Red Coyote is not a name. Red is a color used to describe the color of the coyote's fur, and you are certainly not a coyote."

"There's no reason colors can't be included in a name, is there, Mr. Brown?"

Mr. Brown's head could have been a beet. The shades matched exactly. "Please take a seat, Cole," said the teacher with barely controlled rage. Red Coyote or whatever his name was, didn't move. "Sit down now!" The boy shrugged and walked back to his seat. As he passed my desk, I stuck out my leg. He stepped over it with ease, then turned to glare at me. If looks could kill, then both of us would have been dead.

The rest of the day was torture. Mr. Brown could not stand to be proven wrong, so he tried to find the Red's limit. After finding he was fairly sharp, the instructor turned to his brightest student to put this cocky kid back in his place: me. Red Coyote was invincible in mathematics, and I have no idea how he learned it so well. It came down to a showdown, and it ended when neither of us could solve it.

He was terrible at language arts, but then again, so was I. I just didn't get why you had to know the different parts of a sentence. In my opinion, if you could speak in sentences, you'd

get through life just fine. Neither of us could spell worth beans, but as long as you knew what it was, nothing else mattered, right? The problem came in when you couldn't even understand what you were trying to spell, which happened to me a bunch.

Science seemed to be second nature to Red Coyote, though. No surprise there. What I was surprised to learn was how well he knew history, from an Indian's view. I guess that shouldn't have come as a shock, but how did a tribe of natives in the Tetons know exactly what happened to another tribe on the other side of the continent? This really annoyed Mr. Brown. He would be going along, glossing over the unsavory things the victors did, and Red Coyote would raise his hand and ask if they tortured their captives. Most of the time, the teacher tried to ignore his questions.

Finally school ended. I always hung out afterwards to play a game of ball with my friends. It was pretty cool, how we did it. One person threw a ball to another person with a stick. If they missed, then they threw. If they hit the ball, they had to run around a fairly large circle and get back to their original spot before the thrower got the ball and brought it back to the same spot. If the runner got there first, the thrower stayed in. If the thrower reached it first, then the runner became the thrower.

This particular afternoon, I volunteered to be the first one up to bat. The thrower was one of the biggest, meanest kids in school, and I had to show everyone that I was better.

Naturally, I hit the ball. This was no ordinary hit, though. The ball soared into the highest part of a tree.

"Go get it," grunted the goliath.

"You're supposed to get the ball after I hit it," I replied.

He pointed at himself and said, "I can't climb."

Sighing, I jogged over. As I reached the base of the tree, I looked up. It seemed a bit higher from this angle. I grabbed the lowest branch and started to swing up onto it when I heard a crashing sound above me. Startled, I looked up but was smashed to the ground and the wind knocked out of me. As if that wasn't enough, the ball hurtled out of the tree and smacked me right between the eyes. Everything went black.

Chapter 3: Red Coyote

White Men are some of the strangest creatures that walk this earth. When we reached their village (if you can call it that), they took us to a structure they called their school. They broke us up into age and gender groups and took us to dormitories. This was where we were to sleep. There were hard boxy things on stilts they called beds with cold, scratchy blankets called sheets. The next thing they did with us was cut our hair, our pride and honor, all gone. What's worse, is they only cut the boys' hair. That is something I will never comprehend. I and a few others wouldn't let them cut our hair and they ended up holding us down while someone else clipped our hair.

After that, they gave us clothes like theirs and told us to wear them. Some relented; after all, their hair was gone. What else did they have to lose? Others, like me fought back. We refused to put on those things they called clothes, and the result was similar to how they cut our hair. That's when I decided to play along for a bit. It would do us no good to struggle. It only meant they would watch us closer in the future to make sure we behaved. A few kids, who pulled the clothes off after they were dressed, would be under surveillance for at least a week.

The most cruel and unusual punishment was that we could only keep one object we had brought from home. I acted along with everybody else. I decided to keep my bow. It was the last present from my father. Then, I stole some of my neighbor's possessions that they were giving away and handed these over when some white men collected what we couldn't keep. When nobody was looking, I stuffed the rest of my things under the mattress of my bed, included a change of clothes (the real kind), arrows for my bow and a few trinkets for luck or ceremonial purposes.

The food at the school was terrible. There were so many things in it, it didn't taste like food anymore. Even their meat was canned and nasty, and there was so much fat on it that it sizzled and oozed when it was hot, that it made my stomach churn.

That night, the scratchy sheets kept me awake. I thought about how everything was unnatural. How could I live in such an environment for a whole year? Then I thought about Blue Willow, and my heart ached. How could things get any worse. I was about to find out just how bad.

* * * * *

"All right, boys and girls," said the old man who came to our village. His name was Collin McTavish, but we had to call him Mr. McTavish. "Today is an exciting day. You all get to choose new names." He spoke like we were toddlers learning to skin an animal, except skinning a living thing was deeply ceremonial and actually interesting.

"Why must we choose a new name?" asked a younger girl in the front.

“Well,” began the teacher, “we can’t go around calling for colored animals and things now, can we?” I think he expected us to laugh, but the White Man’s sense of humor eluded us. Mr. McTavish frowned when we failed to find the funny. “Come up here, young one.” The girl who asked hesitantly got to her feet and walked forward. “Choose a name from this side of the chalkboard.” He indicated a green slab of wall with white scribbles all over it.

“That’s not how we choose a name,” protested the girl. “We have a dream or are given a sign; we don’t just pick one that sounds nice.”

Mr. McTavish was starting to get frustrated. “Point to one anyway.”

The girl shrugged and pointed randomly.

“Very nice. Please take a seat, Susan.”

“My name is not Sun Sand, it’s Bold Raven.”

The man smiled and said, “Not anymore, Susan.”

Mr. McTavish ordered us to line up and then pick a scribble on the wall. Since it wasn’t advantageous to do otherwise, I did as he said. After that, we did it again to pick a last name. I ended up with something like Cold Jay’s Son, or something. I wasn’t going to answer to anything other than Red Coyote.

Next, he began to teach us how to read and write. That was simple enough. Each symbol stood for a sound. All one had to do was memorize which symbols go to which sounds. Some people found it difficult, but I don’t know why. Maybe they thought that each sound had a symbol.

We had a disgusting lunch, and then he tried to teach us history. None of it made any sense, about suns and stars, evolution, whatever. That was a failed attempt, since we Shoshoni know how the world began, and we don’t have to guess about anything.

What he taught us next was the only thing I will ever praise the White Man for. Mr. McTavish started teaching us numbers. The memorization was easy, but what really clicked was math. Adding and subtracting was like I was born doing it, so Mr. McTavish challenged me with multiplication and division, negative integers, exponents and square roots. I understood it all. It was natural, logical. One could solve any equation if only they reasoned it out.

That’s how the next few months progressed in the same pattern, slowly but surely learning English, becoming utterly lost in History, and doing any math I could get my hands on. Nights were spent dreaming about home and Blue Willow, counting down each day. One night, I lay awake in my bed. For the first time, I thought that just maybe I could make it through a year.

My hopes were shattered in the morning.

* * * * *

“Will you go over to the American boys’ school?” asked Mr. McTavish. He was already walking with me towards the new school, so I didn’t think I had much say in what I wanted to do. I let him know anyway.

“You mean go over to the White boys’ school? No way. I’m not going. I’m learning perfectly fine here.”

Mr. McTavish shook his head. “There are smarter people over there who can challenge you. Besides, I already enrolled you.” Typical Mr. McTavish. “You will still sleep in your own dorm, of course.” By now, we had reached the gate way to the school. Mr. McTavish stopped and said, “Have fun!”

His words carried the same message as a man call out to a hunted beast, “Don’t worry, I won’t hurt you. I just want to eat you.”

Chapter 4: Amanda Smith

“Amanda! Time to get up!” I rolled over in my bed and planted my pillow firmly over my head. The alarm clock tried to grab the pillow, but jumped on top of me when the pillow jerking had no effect.

I threw my pillow at the thing squishing my guts and yelled, “Get off me John!” My littlest brother hopped off and stood there smiling impishly.

“Ma said to get you out of bed,” he said smiling.

“Yeah,” I replied as I stretched my limbs, “did she say something about gently?”

John took on the most hurt expression a ten-year-old can have. “That was gently,” he replied.

I sighed and got up. After shooing John from my room, I got dressed, washed my face, and headed out to the kitchen. As always, my mother was there, cooking breakfast for all of us. She was an exact duplicate of myself, simply older. Her mouse-brown hair was streaked with silver, braided down her back. Her command was never questioned, even by Pa. I guess that’s what happens when you give birth to seven children.

After grabbing a plate of eggs and a glass of milk, I went over to the over-crowded table. I squeezed in next to John and my older brother Matthew.

“You’re up later than usual,” said my father. He had jet black hair, and he was starting to grow a beard. He was strongly build, even for a farmer.

My tall, lanky brother commented, “She’s always up later than usual.” He was seventeen, one year older than I, although he thought he knew everything.

“Shut it, Matt,” I said through my eggs. After swallowing, I told Pa, “I can still do my chores before school.”

“No,” said Pa, I’ve heard you’ve been late to school lately. Try to get there on time today.”

I glared at my 12 year old brother, who made mountains out of mole hills, especially where I was concerned. Only a dozen years old and needs a dozen clonks on the head, he rattles so much. “Yes, Pa,” I said.

That day, I was the first one out the door, so I actually got some peace and quiet while walking to school. I thought about my brothers. Not the annoying three I had to live with, but the other three. They were all enlisted in the military and didn’t live with us anymore. Mike and Paul were the twins. They were 19 years old and the funniest pair you’d ever meet. There was also Arthur. He was favorite brother. For some reason, he’s the only one who understands me. I wish they were here now. I missed them.

Without knowing it, I had walked all the way to school. I was still thinking about my brothers when I ran head-on into another student. Books and papers went flying.

“I’m sorry,” I said as I bent down to gather them up. “I wasn’t watching where I was going, and I...,” I broke off when I stood back up. The boy standing before me was an Indian. His face was expressionless, but his eyes looked at me with a mixture of fear and anger.

After a few seconds, I said, “Hi, I’m Amanda. What’s your name? You look lost. Can I help?” He now seemed entirely confused, but he answered my questions one at a time. His name was Red Coyote, and he had no idea where to go or what to do. I showed him to his desk, and then sat down at mine.

I would never have guessed that Red Coyote was a mathematician. He was absolutely amazing! I have no idea how he learned it so well, but the Native was rivaling William Anderson, who was undoubtedly the smartest kid in the class. At least, he was. Now he might have to share the title with Red Coyote.

School passed by in a whirl. It was much the same as any other day, except for Red Coyote. He sat with me during lunch, and he was my partner whenever one was needed. Both of us were lonely. Red Coyote’s reasons were obvious. Nobody liked me because I acted differently. All the girls hated me because I was smart enough to wear shorts under my stupid skirt. All the girls were too precocious, anyway. Fainting and fluttering eyelids seemed more like a weakness than a strong attractiveness. None of the boys were fond of me because I was better than they were. I could run faster, throw farther, and fight better than any boy here. Having six brothers did that to a girl.

After the school day was over, I decided to stay and talk with Red Coyote. He had a rather intriguing story, but before I could ask more about it, a ball sailed over our heads. It lodged itself in a tree, close to the very top.

At the other end of the field, I saw a beautiful blonde-haired, blue-eyed wonder jogging after the ball. It was William Anderson. I secretly had a crush on him, and it started from the first time I saw him. Nobody knew about it except my brother, Arthur.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Red Coyote as I sprinted for the trees. Maybe I could get the ball down and give it to William. I don’t know if he even knows I exist, but this would be a good way to find out. After all, climbing trees was second nature for me.

As I climbed higher and higher, the branches became thinner and thinner. I was about ready to turn back when I saw it. The ball was only a few branches higher. I stretched, but couldn’t reach it, so I took one more step up. My hand closed around the ball, and then I heard a snap. The branch must have broken, I thought as I started falling. Falling... By now I was in panic mode, but I could do nothing. I slammed into branches, which sort-of slowed my fall, but then I landed on something soft that broke my fall. Looking down, I saw bewildered blue eyes under wavy, blonde hair. I had fallen on top of William! Then the ball came down and bounced off his forehead, and his eyes closed. For a few seconds, I thought he was dead.

William’s eyes snapped open and he said in a slightly winded voice, “Get off me, Amanda!” I was so thrilled he knew my name that I almost forgot to get off.

“I am so sorry, William, I was trying to get the ball, and I fell, and are you OK?” I asked. He stood up and snatched the ball. “I don’t need a Red lover to do anything for me.” William started to walk away.

“What did you call me?” I asked, my temper rising.

“I called you a Red lover. They are the enemy, not something you befriend.” He turned around again.

What I said next wasn’t my thinking. I just blurted it out. “If you think they’re such a dumb group, how come your father was killed by one?”

William rounded on me. He dropped the ball and grabbed my shoulders. “Say that to my face,” he said with frightening calm.

“William, I’m sorry, I didn’t -,” I tried to pull away. He grabbed one arm and held it fast.

“Tell me what you said, he asked again.

“Let go!” I felt like crying, but I didn’t.

“At least my Dad did something about the Red problem instead of sitting back and letting fellow countrymen be slaughtered,” sneered William. He still had my arm, and whether he knew it or not he was squeezing it so tight that it hurt.

I stared right into his blue eyes. All I felt now was anger. Nobody insults my father. I pulled back the hand William wasn’t holding and swung. It connected squarely with his nose. Blood gushed, and he cried out and let go, I ran, never looking back. I didn’t stop until I reached the woods. There I slumped to the ground and cried.

Chapter 5: William Anderson

My nose burned like it was on fire. Blood spurted everywhere. A girl had broken my nose! I sat down heavily; the blood loss was making me dizzy. Actually, I sort of fell down. All I did was sit there. Nothing could be done until the bleeding stopped.

Eventually, it slowed. I got to my feet and staggered in the direction Amanda had gone. I don't know what I planned to do, but no boy has ever hit me that hard before. I always ducked or blocked. Now, a girl broke my nose, and there were twenty plus witnesses. After regaining my balance, I started jogging more confidently.

Suddenly, my feet flew out from under me and all I saw was sky. For the third time in as many minutes, I was flat on my back. My nose had started oozing again, and it throbbed painfully when my head hit the ground. Slowly I stood up. Calmly staring at me was that Indian, Red Coyote. First a girl, now a Red, I wondered how it could get any worse.

"If I'm a mindless Red, and I trip you, what does that make you?" asked the cocky Indian.

I snapped back, "Didn't your parents ever teach you any manners? I guess Indians don't have any manners."

"Actually," replied Red Coyote, his eyes flashing, "my father was shot in the back by one of you barbaric Whites fighting for Custer. How's that for manners?"

"Strange, because my dad was killed in the same battle by a savage like you."

The implications hit us at the same time. His father could have murdered mine and vice versa. Red Coyote's face twisted with rage, and I felt a fire roaring inside of me. Each of us stepped towards the other. We would have started swinging punches, but Mr. Brown and another teacher intervened. Mr. Brown told me I should go home and get my nose fixed up. I shrugged his hand off my shoulder, grabbed my bag, and walked to my house.

"William!" cried Mom when I walked into the house. "What happened?"

I stormed upstairs to my room and jerked open the door. "Nothing. I had a bad day." With that, I tried to stalk into my room, but the black eye I had must have swollen, because I couldn't see straight. I slammed into the door jam, nose first. Yelling curses, I thought, this just isn't my day.

* * * * *

I didn't see much of the renegade Red the next few days. He was in class and as smart as ever, but we were never together when there wasn't supervision. It had the results the adults desired. The fire in me iced over, but it turned into a cold determination. Red Coyote had to suffer, but the normal ways wouldn't work. He was too clever for that. So, I schemed up ways I could humiliate him. It wasn't easy, but it was sort of fun. The hardest part was putting my plans into play.

One afternoon, I was playing a game of ball when it hit me. Not the ball, but the perfect way to get back at Red Coyote. I walked up to him and asked him if he wanted to join us.

“Why?” he demanded suspiciously.

I answered innocently, “I just want to see how you do, and if my reputation in this game is in the same position as my math.”

Either he’s not susceptible to flattery, or he could detect the sarcasm in my voice, because he said no.

“Come on,” I urged, “you’ve got nothing to lose.”

“As long as Amanda coaches me,” he replied.

I snorted, “Amanda doesn’t ...”

“Yes I do,” snapped the person in question. She always seemed cross whenever I was around, which was ironic, because who broke whose nose?

“Fine,” I said. The three of us walked over to the field. “I’m pitching,” I called as I grabbed the ball and jogged over to the designated thrower’s place. After a moment, when Amanda explained the game to Red Coyote, he walked up and stood in the batter’s position.

Carefully, I took aim. The goal was the Indian’s knees. I wound up and pitched. He instantly realized what I was doing and moved around the ball with cat-like agility.

“You missed! My turn!” I hollered.

Red Coyote glared at me and said, “You were trying to hit me!”

“Actually,” I replied smiling, “that was hittable. You could have got it.”

“Give me one more try.”

“Why? You ran from the ball once; you’ll just do it again.”

His eyes drilled holes through my skull. “You beat me once, you can do it again.”

He had a point there. I shrugged and walked back to the thrower’s spot. This time, as I wound up, I aimed for Red Coyote’s nose. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a nose for a nose, I thought grimly. He would have to move so the ball wouldn’t crack his nose, but then he would look like a coward. If he stayed put, he would prove that I was trying to hit him, but his nose would be broken. Grinning, I threw the ball.

In that whole time, the possibility that he might actually hit the ball never entered my mind. That’s what he did. He automatically stepped to the side, then deftly swing the wood. It connected with the ball with a sharp crack! I stared at it for a second, then started running.

The ball few over my head and landed a distance away. I reached the ball and spun around to see Red Coyote reaching the half-way point in our circle. I sprinted for the base. We were both closing in fast. In the same millisecond, we touched it.

Amanda rushed over and said breathlessly, “That was amazing. You two tied! I don’t think that’s ever happened before.”

I looked at Red Coyote and almost smiled, but then I caught myself. That was actually pretty fun. Even the Red had a slight sparkle to his eyes. Then I thought of my father, and all happy feelings evaporated.

"I still came in first," I muttered as I walked away.

* * * * *

That night, I lay awake in my bed. I thought about the day's events, especially the ball game. An odd thought struck me. Did Red Coyote and I have to be enemies? We worked so well together, one move, then one perfect countermove. Don't be stupid, I told myself. The thought was banished from my mind. Our fathers could have killed each other, but even if they didn't, Red Coyote belonged to the same race as the murderers. That was the last time a thought like that entered my mind. For a time being, at least.

Chapter 6: Red Coyote

The months I spent with white men at their school were some of the longest months I've been through. School itself was OK. Math was amazing. Even though I've never really learned it, I can reason it out marvelously. I'm even as smart as that jerk, William Anderson. He seems to be the smartest person in class. I've no idea how he got that title, his head is too swollen with pride to leave any room for brains.

Language Arts is highly confusing. Why must you be able to identify parts of a sentence when you can speak it? Whatever the reason, it escaped me.

White men have no concept of science. Biology is like some foreign language. It is not something to be laughed at. They only study the organism. They don't respect it as another form of life as precious as their own. The only kind of science I enjoyed them teaching was physics. It's all just a huge mathematical equation, and it fits perfectly with nature. I could calculate the angle I should fire my bow, how far to pull it back, and get a deer for food.

One thing I don't understand is History. White men made it sound glorious, even fun. In our village, we would have a traveler come every so often. They would tell it straight, seeing from both sides of a war. Our elders remember and tell it to us. White men believe history is written by the winners. That is true only if you let it become true.

I'm not sure what the White Man's policy is for ties. If William and I were waging a war, that's what it would be. We worked together flawlessly anticipating each other's moves. At first, William always moved on the offensive. He had the home field advantage, after all. The ball game incident was just the beginning. When snow started falling, I was starting to feel accustomed to my surroundings. I decided to stop playing defensively and make some aggressive moves of my own.

The opportunity came after the first big snowstorm. There was at least a foot of soft, packable snow on the ground. It was after school, and William and his girlfriend were strolling along the tree line. Silently, I crept to the trees in front of them. The couple stopped, and William was talking softly to her. He drew her in and kissed her. The girl, I think her name was Lilly, was surprised at first, but then threw her arms around him and kissed him back. It was the perfect placement for my prank.

I balled up some snow and there it as high as I could into the tree above them. It knocked some snow off, which then tumbled down to the next branch and upset that snow load. Soon, half of the pine was dumping its cold contents onto the unsuspecting couple. Lilly screamed, William roared in surprise and rage, and I began laughing. In fact, I was laughing so hard I fell over and rolled out of my cover. I was still chuckling uncontrollably when William picked up a snowball and hurled it into the tree right next to me. I realized too late what had happened, and received a face full of snow.

Sputtering, I staggered to my feet. I'm positive we would have started fighting, but Lilly's continuous wail had drawn a crowd of spectators, some of them teachers. They pulled us away and sent us home. William caught my eye once. He smiled the smile of a wolf hunting a sheep. Except this sheep was also a wolf in disguise.

* * * * *

White men have holy days as we do. I was surprised to learn that they also have a god who teaches of love and compassion. If he was anything like our gods, he was slacking. Only a few white men heeded his instructions. The Smith's were some of these people.

One day, Amanda asked me if I wanted to spend the holidays with her family. There would be no school during that time. I agreed; after all, where else would I go?

At first, I was worried that her parents wouldn't like an Indian staying with them, like Mr. Brown or William. The Smiths were as different as night and day.

Immediately after I entered their house, I was welcomed warmly by a woman who looked like an older version of Amanda cooking on a stove. Mr. Smith gripped my hand in a crushing embrace and shook it vigorously. Amanda's older brother, Matt, welcomed me like he would any boy of my age. John, the youngest one, snatched my hand and dragged me off farther into the house, begging me to play. All the while, Amanda stood by smiling.

I had the best time I've since Eyes of Eagle died, eight years ago. Often, I found myself wondering if this is what it meant to have a family. I have no siblings, but was welcomed like a brother. My mother had never been the same, yet there was a woman taking care of me here. I have not had a father since I was eight, and there was a father willing to act as mine for a little while. They weren't my true family, and would never be, but they were a pretty good substitute.

One day, Amanda was showing me some family pictures. Peering out at me from one of the photos was a familiar face. I couldn't place it.

"Who is that?" I asked her.

Amanda's happy countenance fell. "That's my oldest brother, Arthur. He's in the military, and I'm worried for him. My other two brothers, Mike and Paul, are twins. They're also in the army."

I gazed in wonder at the picture. It was the soldier who had been at my village, the hazel-haired man that understood me. He was Amanda's brother.

"Are you OK?" Amanda questioned. "You're still staring at Arthur's picture with your jaw hanging down."

I explained to her, and she smiled. "That would definitely be Arthur. Do you have any idea where he was stationed after that? He's sent us letters, but he can't reveal the name of the fort." I told her no, and thought that maybe all men in the U.S. military weren't murderers after all.

* * * * *

After Christmas (in which I was given an amazing weapon called a “sling shot”) and New Year’s with the Smiths, I returned to my normal torturous life. School was, as always, a competition. It was in my sleeping quarters where I discovered the worst change.

I had eaten dinner and was heading back to the dorms. I rounded a corner and ran head-on into the young girl who had been the first to pick her name. “I’m sorry, Bold Raven,” I apologized.

She picked herself up off the floor and walked away as though she hadn’t heard me.

“Bold Raven!” I called again.

This time, she turned and looked puzzled at me. “My name is Susan. My old name was Bold Raven, but I prefer Susan.”

It was like somebody threw a bucket of ice over my head. This brave girl, who had defied the White Man ways as I had, barely lasted six months before giving in. She walked away without noticing anything out of the ordinary.

In my bed that night, I pondered what to do. It was clear I couldn’t stay at the school (if one can call it that). I could not go back to the village in January, when the snow was heaviest. That was the only place I could escape to. Briefly, I thought about the Smiths. I quickly banished the thought. There was no way I could impose such a large task upon them. The only thing I could do was wait until the snow melted. That meant waiting until late March.

Something wrenched painfully in my heart. The months would give me time to plan, but I longed to see my friends and mother. Above all, I wished to be with Blue Willow.

As I thought about the friends I had made at the school, I realized that none of them could stay my friends once I left. Just for a mili-second, I thought I might miss William Anderson. Of course, that was impossible. Our fathers had been enemies, and we could be nothing less.

Then I began planning.

Chapter 7: Blue Willow

I awoke to the smell of fire. Smiling, I curled up tighter in my animal skins. Then, I opened my eyes and climbed out of bed. Sky Fox needed tending to.

My father looked up when I stood up. "It snowed again last night," Running Deer said. "You should bundle up and put on your snowshoes."

I did as he suggested. We already had at least two feet of snow, and it was only mid-December. The snow was soft and powdery, and even with the snowshoes, I sank halfway up my calves. Thankfully, it was a short trek. Our wiki-ups were built fairly close together.

On my way to the door, I grabbed a few logs to throw on the coals of the fire in Sky Fox's wiki-up. Inside, it was dark, but not cold. Some large pieces of wood had been put on the fire for the night. Bringing the coals back to life, I spoke quietly to Red Coyote's mother to let her know I was there, so I didn't startle her. The branches I had placed in the coals quickly caught fire and soon a suitable fire was blazing. I turned to Sky Fox.

Her face was covered with a sheen of sweat. I cried out and rushed over to her. Placing my palm on her forehead, I was shocked to find a high fever. I ran outside, grabbed a handful of snow, and placed it around her head. Then, I sprinted to my wiki-up, without bothering to strap on my snowshoes.

"Mother!" I cried. She looked up sharply from the poultice she was mixing. Her beautiful black hair hung down over her head, free and unbraided. Her name was Clever Rabbit, partly for her deftness with herbs and healing, partly for all her uses for rabbit. I spoke quickly. Time could be of the essence. "Sky Fox is ill. She has a high fever. Please help."

Her countenance paled considerably, which is not a good sign. "No," she said. Clever Rabbit gathered a menagerie of herbs, some potent concoctions, and a variety of ceremonial devices.

"I have heard from other villages about this illness," explained my mother in her low, alto voice. "They call it White Death. It is brought by the White Men, but it only strikes in the winter, when everything is white. There is no cure, only ways to postpone the demise, and only then for a few weeks. One can live through the sickness, but normally those strong physically and mentally. I'm afraid Sky Fox will not live."

Up until this point, I had been pushing back that fear, telling myself that it couldn't happen. I did not break down and start crying, but I felt overwhelmed with a deep despair. I had promised Red Coyote I would take care of his mother, but now she would die under my so-called "care".

Mother must have seen my frustration with myself. We stepped outside the door, and she grabbed my arm. Mother looked me in the eyes and said, "It will all be OK." In that moment, I believed it.

We rushed inside the Wiki-up. Clever Rabbit started giving orders, and they flowed like a river from her mouth. I was to put more wood on the fire in case Sky Fox suffered next from chills, the deadly counter part of a fever. Snow was needed for brewing herbs, and also to keep the fever under control. I obeyed then with silent haste.

My mother was pouring a mixture of willow bark and juniper berry tea into Sky Fox when the flap of the wiki-up burst open. A tall, under-dressed brave stood there. Straight Arrow had obviously come to see us.

“Please,” he said, still panting, “my wife has a high fever, and my son is starting to heat up, also. Please help us.”

Mother looked at me. “Finish feeding Sky Fox this, and then add another log to the fire. After that, come and assist me.” With that, she gathered up the medicines and followed Straight Arrow. I did as she commanded. When I reached the lodging of the distressed brave, another villager showed up. She was hysterical, and all that could be discerned were the words “husband” and “fever”. We left her to her tears and rushed to her dwelling. This was how the whole day went. No family went unscathed by this plague, not even ours.

* * * * *

“Little Turtle!” I cried as I walked into our wiki-up. My little seven year old brother lay on his furs, sweating like crazy. My father was kneeling next to him, feeding him the concoction of willow bark and juniper berries. Quiet Sparrow, the small six year old girl who was my sister, huddled in the corner, staring at the whole thing through huge eyes. Clever Rabbit and I had just returned to our wiki-up. It was evening and the whole day had been spent treating victims of the White Death. Twenty villagers already had it, how many more would be stricken? More importantly, how many people would die?

“You should have come and gotten me,” scolded Mother. She hustled over to her son and started rifling through her severely depleted medicines.

Running Deer replied, “You had a trying day. I didn’t want to stress you any farther than necessary. I’ve already applied the medicine he needs.”

My mother stopped and stood up. She walked to Father and collapsed into his arms, letting the grief and exhaustion catch up with her. I felt like doing that too, but who would catch me? Red Coyote would, if he were here. No, I thought, he wouldn’t. I have failed him. That’s when I staggered over to my pile of sleeping furs and fell into a sobbing heap.

* * * * *

The next month passed quickly. It was evident after the first week who would recover and who would succumb to the illness. More people fell ill, but not in such massive proportions as on the first day. All kinds of people caught it. Elders were just as likely to get the White Death as healthy braves.

Some of the people were pulling through. Far too many were getting worse. Mother feared another outbreak. She said it was contagious, but not so contagious that breathing the

same air would transfer the disease. The White Death had to be consumed somehow. We had no idea how it had reached our secluded village. If an individual was responsible, they would surely be punished.

Little Turtle was recovering. That was some of the greatest news that reached Clever Rabbit and me. Despite his youth, he had broken the fever the night before, and Quite Sparrow had come running playfully through the deep snow to bring us the news that he was eating, drinking and talking of his own accord. Nobody else in our family suffered from the illness.

Another bit of joy was that Chief Swift Feather never became sick. His only relatives, two elders who were his parents, also did not catch the White Death. However, he felt every loss in our village as though it were his own son, wife or parent.

The worst news, for me, concerned Red Coyote's mother. She was not getting better, despite all Mother and I did for her. We were treating her one night after things had quieted down in the village. It had been a month since we discovered the White Death in our village. Sky Fox's fever was higher than ever, and she was having difficulty breathing. I decided I would sleep with her that night to provide assistance when needed.

I was sleeping when I heard a beautiful, clear voice ring through the wicki-up. Waking, I looked around to see who it was. The only person my eyes could find was Sky Fox, lying in her bed. I saw her lips move, and the same voice flowed out. Sky Fox had not spoken since the demise of her husband when I was just eight years old. I did not remember her voice.

Again, she spoke. This time, I caught the words. "At last, my beloved Eyes of Eagle, we meet again." It brought tears to my eyes to hear her dreaming like this. I stood up and stretched, then went over to Sky Fox's bed. She lay on it, smiling contentedly. Her chest no longer rose and fell with labored breathing. In fact, she was not breathing at all. Sky Fox was dead.

I did not attempt to slow the river of tears. Perhaps she had truly seen Eyes of Eagle. She was with him once again.

Chapter 8: William Anderson

I stood upon a battle field. There was no movement anywhere. Dead bodies were strewn as far as the eye could see, both Red and White. I started walking to who knows where? The eyes of each soldier I saw followed me, pleading for help. Reds glared at me from the ground, thirsting for my blood. I didn't stop until I came to the body of one person in particular. He had blonde hair and blue eyes, staring helplessly at me. His build was impossible to tell, for he was twisted and contorted in sickening ways. He could have been a native, for the color of his skin was stained so darkly with blood. I could tell from his face that he was my father. Vainly, I knelt down to try and help.

A thump was heard, and I felt fire entering my back, going through vital organs, and coming out through my chest. I looked down and saw the tip of an arrow protruding from my skin, and a red stain was rapidly spreading down my shirt. As I collapsed, I somehow landed on my back, facing my attacker. The savage had the face of Red Coyote. He laughed demonically and pulled back his loaded bow. He saw the fear I felt and smiled as the heartless Indian released the string.

"Noooooo!" I cried. It was a word of fear, anger, pleading, and rage.

THUNK!

I hit the floor of my bedroom hard, and the breath was driven from my lungs. The door to my room was thrown open, and Mom was right next to me. I felt hot tears escape, tears of relief and hate. Not wishing Mom to see those tears, and still trying to intake air, I curled into the tightest ball I could.

"Willy," asked my mom, "are you OK?" I heard you yell, and then hit the floor, and I came running. Did you have a bad dream?"

I reassured her that I was fine, and when she left, considered the dream. I've had bad dreams like this before, but never so intense or as real as this one. Of course, dreams have no bearing on everyday life, so I shook it off as much as possible and dressed to go to school.

Perhaps if I had known otherwise, I would have stayed home that day.

* * * * *

"Attention!" Mr. Brown called to the class. "We have a visitor, and he needs to make some announcements."

The stranger came forward. He was taller, and his salt and pepper hair was greased back so it didn't cover dull gray eyes. I immediately disliked this man.

He spoke, and his voice was smooth, but the edges were rough, grating. This man could have been a lawyer. "I am Joe Solomon. General Solomon to all of you. I command the army out of Fort Jackson. If you are seventeen by April first, then you will receive a commission to join my army. There are no exceptions. Come forward and take this commission if you are eligible."

All the boys in my class were so surprised that all who were seventeen automatically stood up. Except for me, of course. They realized their mistake too late. Now, they could not turn back. Solomon gave each of the boys a commission. He must have had a list, because he turned down the few sixteen year olds that tried to join. The guard handed them all out, and then he looked around. He still had one left.

“William Anderson, come forward,” he said. There was a slight change in his voice when he said my name, almost like he sounded angry and surprised. I stood and went forward. There was no point in hiding when he knew my name.

He handed me the paper and snarled, “Disobedience is severely punished where I come from. I suggest you fix it before you come to training.” I kept a straight face, but I was surprised. It was like this guy already hated me. I was pretty sure I’d never met him before.

Solomon glared at me for a few more seconds with eyes that now shone with something other than the bored gray they had been before. I met his gaze steadily, and he walked away.

The rest of the day passed as normal, but I found no joy in it. Even when I beat Red Coyote by one problem in our daily Math competition, I felt no better.

When I got home, Mom tried to ask me how my day went. I was in no mood to talk, so I gave her my commission and stormed upstairs. After slamming the door, I flung myself onto my bed. Below me, in the living room, I could hear my mother’s sobs.

How could this happen, I asked myself angrily. Or maybe it was fear. I couldn’t understand how I felt. Why was I not happy? Most boys, at one time or another, want to be in the military, and I was no exception. Then again, that was before Dad died.

Frustrated, I tried to put my feelings into words. I did not want to join because I was too smart. One had to follow orders in the military. No matter how high up you get, you always had somebody telling you what to do. There was no space for individual ingenuity. I had to do things my way. This was the reason I told to anybody who asked.

The real reason, I revealed only to myself. I was afraid. My dad had died in the military. I didn’t want to end up like him. Going to train would mean leaving Mom. We only had each other. The closest family we had was in Philadelphia. You can call it cowardice. That may even be what I called it. But it was the truth.

Then, I had an idea. What if I ran away? The more I thought about it, the better it seemed. I was sure I could pull it off. When would I do it, though? Right before I left for training, near the end of March. That way, preparations could be made and nobody would be suspicious. Where the heck would I go? I had absolutely no idea.

Chapter 9: Red Coyote

I awoke feeling fresh and alert, despite sleeping on the rough mattress White Men call a bed. Today was the day I was escaping the confines of these walls. I was going home.

The planning couldn't have been more perfect. Tonight was a new moon, and I could use the cloak of darkness to cover myself. The kitchens had just received a new shipment of food, and they were getting rid of the old food, even though it had not yet gone bad. They surely wouldn't miss a few apples here, some jerky there. The hard part would be the bread. I would have to steal some tonight. Water would be simple. I could bring along a canteen or two, and I could fill them up at the Snake River.

For the most part, I would be following the Snake River. It leads through the Tetons and goes by the base of the mountain where our village resides during the winter months. Then I would follow a small tributary up to its source and I would be home. The trip could take as little as one week, or possibly as long as three.

But now, I was stuck in school. It was an interesting day. Most of the older boys were leaving to train in the military, so Mr. Brown didn't give us any homework. We simply played games. William and I took it one step farther.

I set my books down on my desk and sat in my seat. Immediately, I cried out and leaped up, slamming my legs on the desk. All eyes in the room had turned to stare curiously at me. I looked down at my seat to find a pinecone. Quietly, I cursed in Shoshoni. Walking to the trash can, William bumped my shoulder, hard, and smiled his wolfish smile. I smiled back the smile of a coyote.

It was after lunch, and everyone was seated. William stood up and walked back to me. There he conveniently stopped to tie his shoe. He slowly stood up, and proceeded to "trip" into me. Something wet and slimy slipped down the back of my shirt, which promptly began to wriggle around. I shoved William off of me and jumped up, wildly trying to reach into my shirt. By this point half the class was laughing uncontrollably, and the other half was staring confusedly at me. I shouted every Shoshoni obscenity I could think of at practically every person in the room.

Of course, by the time Mr. Brown looked up from his work, William, the jerk, had brought his continence into a perfect mixture of surprise and innocence. If Mr. Brown had looked up three seconds prior to that, he would have seen William laughing hardest of all.

"What - ?" he started. Then he saw me dancing around and yelled to be heard, "Red Coy - er, Cole, sit down!" He was still trying to call me Cold Jay's Son, or whatever. I still couldn't do as he asked even if I had wanted to.

Amanda sprang up and came to help me. First she made me hold still, which was incredibly hard. Then, she untucked my shirt and stuck hands that were as cold as ice into it.

She brought them back out clutching a terrified frog in them. Swiftly, she opened the window and flung it to safety.

By now most of the laughter has subsided. Mr. Brown smoothed the nonexistent hair on his head down and asked calmly, "What happened, Mr. Jason?" When he repeated the question without the Jay's Son part in it, I explained.

"William was walking by and he put a frog down my shirt."

His innocence mask didn't even crack once as he answered, "Mr. Brown, I simply tripped and he pushed me to the floor and started hopping around and shouting. I don't know what he's going on about."

Amanda came to my defense. "I saw William doing it, sir." She was doing everything in her power to help me humiliate William. I could tell she liked him (no idea why) but he really hurt her my first day here.

The teacher sighed and said, "All of you, stay out of trouble. I don't want to hand out detentions, but I will if necessary."

That would be William's best trick. He would have to pay, of course.

* * * * *

Since it was William's last day before he went off to military training, I thought it would be a sage bet he would want to say goodbye to his friends who weren't going, in particular, Lilly.

Rumor had it that she hadn't kissed William since that particular day in the forest when an avalanche of snow from a tree interrupted them. I had a feeling he would want to change that. My window of opportunity was there.

After school, I immediately started digging through rich soil. Naturally, Amanda was curious, so I let her in on my plan. She was delighted to be of service, and we were twice as fast together.

I tucked by little box of surprises into a pocket and went looking for William and Lilly. It wasn't hard. All I had to do was think of the closest, most romantic, and relatively secluded place. They were by the school's pond. Actually, it looked more like a giant mud puddle. Yet again, they were near some thick shrubbery.

Silently, I crawled into the bushes and waited. They talked a bit, during which William must have hit upon just the right words. Lilly flung herself upon him, and he caught her in a tight embrace. Now was the time to strike.

I crept forward until I was directly behind William. In one fluid motion, I pulled out his pants and dumped the contents of the box into them. Then I cleared out fast.

His eyes flew open, and he tore his lips from Lilly's. She started to say something, but it turned into a scream when William unceremoniously dropped her. This brought people running from all directions.

An Irishman doing his best and fastest jig would have been sadly shamed by this display of fancy footwork. With onlookers, William simply couldn't pull down his drawers and let out all of my lovely little surprises, so he dance more. Lilly got to her feet and shrieked, "It's over, William!" With a slap to the face that didn't even turn red, she stomped away.

William had had it. He dove into the murky pond, where I assumed he finally pulled off his pants. "Worms!" he yelled when he brought a handful to the surface of the water. By then, a large majority of the students on shore had begun laughing for all they were worth.

Mr. Brown came running. Sweat glistened off his bald head. He reached the edge of the pond, surveyed the scene, and shook his head sadly. Then, he turned and walked back to the school house.

William climbed out of the pond. He had managed somehow to get his pants off, then back on again, all underwater. His eyes combed the crowd for a face that wasn't there. "Red Coyote!" he bellowed in rage.

I, of course, was nowhere to be seen.

* * * * *

That night, I encountered no trouble whatsoever. It was a matter of five minutes to pack the stuff I stashed under my bed and "borrow" a few loaves of bread from the kitchen. I had made sure to befriend all the dogs at the houses I would pass, so they would not alert people of my presence.

As a matter of fact, the first bit of trouble I had came when I was clear of the town and headed for the river. A bush rustled behind me. I sensed movement and spun around to see the last person I expected.

"What are you doing out so late?" asked William Anderson.

I said nothing, only shifted my weight to run.

He went on. "Thanks for the worms today."

"That," I replied, "is for the frog. I have yet to repay you for the pinecone."

We stared at each other for a minute. William broke the silence and said, "Look, I know you're running away to your village. I want to go, too."

I raised my eyebrows and answered, "You have everything. Why not go to your fancy training camp and have even more? I would be honored to follow in my father's footsteps."

"I -," he started to say one thing, but changed his mind. "You and I both have too many brains to be wasted following orders. In the army, there is no improvising, no individual thinking. I can't waste my life doing that."

I considered that, but still told him he couldn't come with me. He smiled his wolf-smile again. "Since I know where you're going, you have to take me, or I'll tell."

I ground my teeth. He had a very good point. "Fine," I said, "but you have to play by my rules."

“Great,” agreed William, “let’s get going.” He took off in the opposite direction of the Snake River.

I sighed and called after him, “Hey, Davy Crocket! River’s this way!”

He marched past, and I could hear him muttering under his breath, “I knew that.”

As I followed him, I thought to myself, what have you done?

Chapter 10: William Anderson

We walked for the rest of the night. And all the next day. Red Coyote figured that since we were fresh and not in need of rest, then we could go in long lengths like that before sleeping. As far as I was concerned, he could speak for himself.

I had ample opportunity to mull over my choice in my head throughout that day and a half. When I saw Red Coyote sneaking away along approximately the same path I planned to take, an idea began to formulate. I might be able to get out of military training if I had some leverage, like Red Coyote's village. I'm sure they already knew where it was, but if I could get them to trust me, I could glean valuable inside knowledge. Plus, even if Red Coyote's dad didn't kill mine, I was exacting revenge on the race that did. Besides, I had nowhere else to go.

Then I came across one flaw in my plan. The villagers probably couldn't speak English, and I sure couldn't speak Shoshoni. So, the first night we camped out under the stars, I asked Red Coyote to teach me.

He seemed not to understand me at first. "What?" he asked.

"I said I want -."

"Yes," he said, "I know what you said, but what do you plan to do with my language?"

I rolled my eyes and answered. "Well, I want to be able to communicate with the people in your village when we get there. I obviously don't want to need an interpreter."

Red Coyote shrugged. He didn't even give me a warning. Words and phrases came flying out of his mouth. Then he translated and started quizzing me rapid-fire on what the words meant. I was caught off guard, but soon had some simple words down and a few phrases fairly fluently. It was an expressive language. In English, our words have no meaning behind them. They only come alive when we try. Shoshoni words carry meaning whenever you speak them. Nehwe-ta means Snake River. It sounds slightly grand, beautiful, and dangerous, just like the river. Why can't English capture feeling and sensations in words?

We had just set up camp on the fourth day. Red Coyote went out hunting with his bow and came back with two rabbits. He greeted me in his native language. I replied likewise. Within the next minute, I got lost and returned back to my dialect. Red Coyote taught me how to say "slow down" and "I don't understand." After that, we cooked the rabbits over the fire and ate them along with the last of the bread.

Both of us were staring into the flames when Red Coyote abruptly asked, "Do you truly love that girl Lilly?"

I was caught off guard at this. "Well, yeah, sure. She's beautiful, and pretty, and her eyes -."

"What about her attitude?" pried the native.

"I ..." to tell the truth, I really had no idea what her attitude was like. She was always with me and my friends. I was never with her friends. She wasn't exactly bright, and she

always wanted my help on homework. Thinking about it now, she more like copied it. Now that our relationship was terminated, I could think critically about it. "I really don't know," I said.

"You know, Amanda's got a great disposition, no matter what you think."

I felt slightly panicked by this statement. It was strange; I couldn't explain it. I asked hotly, "Do you and she have something going on?" Thankfully, he missed my tone of voice.

"What?" he exclaimed. Red Coyote seemed truly taken aback. "No, Amanda and I are just friends. There's a girl in my village, her name's Blue Willow. She's amazing. I just can't explain it."

He went on and on about this dreamy girl of his, and I felt strangely relieved.

* * * * *

For some weird reason or other, I had a dream about Amanda. It was when we had that huge argument. I saw myself, speaking ill of her dad. She retorted with the remark about my dad. I grabbed her, and in her eyes I saw that she was really sorry, but I hadn't seen it before. She broke my nose and ran off. In my dream, I followed her. I saw Amanda slump down next to a tree and cry. Her tears fell on my cheeks, and I thought, "Wow, Will, you were really a jerk."

Then I was shaking. I woke up and Red Coyote was holding on to both shoulders, shaking hard. When he realized I was awake, he said, "Get up, it's raining! A storm is coming and we need to get to higher ground." With that he raced away to pack our few belongings.

Within five minutes, we were on our way. The rain had intensified, and I could hear Red Coyote up ahead muttering about early rainstorms. Soon, wind was howling and lightning lit up the dark sky. Thunder nearly deafened us, and the Snake River flowed faster and stronger than ever.

Since the rising sun was obscured by clouds and visibility was non-existent with the rain, we had a hard time finding our footings. Eventually, we ended up a dozen feet up from the raging river on an animal trail.

Suddenly, the ground gave way beneath my feet and I was falling. I hit the water among a cascade of mud and pebbles. The eddies pushed me out farther into the river, where the current was faster. My head went under, and I fought to the surface. I looked desperately around, for a rock or a tree. There was movement on the bank, and I saw Red Coyote springing along the trail. He had dropped everything and was trying to go faster than I.

I went under again, and when I came up this time I was facing downstream. The river narrowed there, and it began a series of rapids. Red Coyote and I had looked down on them from the bank. It would certainly be the last thing I ever did if I went through the rapids.

Then I noticed something that wasn't there before. A dead tree spanned the distance between the shores where the river narrowed. If I could grab onto that, I might be able to pull myself out.

I hit the branches, and they slapped across my face. The hard taste of iron entered my mouth. All the limbs kept snapping when I grabbed them. I had about given up when I felt a soft something hit the back of my head. Wildly, I grabbed for it. I heard a grunt, and I went under yet again. When I came back up, I saw I was holding onto a moccasined foot. Red Coyote clung doggedly to the dead tree. He slipped; I went down.

We were still with the tree when I reached the surface. "Climb up!" shouted Red Coyote to be heard over the water. He grabbed a branch, but it was slowly, inevitably giving way to our combined weight, dragged relentlessly by the Snake River.

I pulled myself up, along the Indian's leg. Reaching the log, I spun around to help him up and almost fell off again. I regained my balance, and a creak sounded above the roar. The branch was about to snap. My hand shot down and out. Red Coyote grabbed it and the limb fell into the churning water. This time, I did slip with the sudden added weight. The trunk of the tree slammed squarely into my chest, knocking the little air my water-logged lungs still held out into the storm.

We were slipping slowly off the log. Somehow, I found the strength to hold us in place while Red Coyote clambered up to join me. Air flowed to my lungs again, and the Native helped me up. We stood gripping each other, gasping. The wind threatened to tear us from our haven and plunge us into the cold water below. We looked into each other's eyes, and we smiled.

The tree shuddered and plunged. Red Coyote and I dropped to hold the trunk with all four limbs. It lurched to a stop, and my chin smacked the hard wood. The tip of the tree had snapped, fallen and lodged itself on the steep, muddy incline that served as a bank. Even from the middle, I could see it slipping.

"Run!" we shouted together. The tree sank perceptively lower with each footfall. Red Coyote reached the shore first. He jumped off and stumbles. I felt the tree finally succumb to the current, so I leaped as far as I could. For one, sickening moment, I thought I wouldn't make it. Then, the ground came rushing up to meet me. I splatted into it and ate a mouthful of mud. Still, I didn't care. We had made it!

Red Coyote helped me up, grimly. Why was he not smiling? I asked him, and his answer definitely depressed me.

"We lost all our supplies. Yours were swept downstream, and mine were too, when I dropped them to help you. They fell into the Snake River. I only have my bow, which I had on my back. The arrows were lost to the river, also."

I felt so stupid, like a child. Since I slipped, our situation had become infinitely worse. So, I did the most meaningful thing possible.

"Aishe," I whispered. Thank you.

Red Coyote's eyes widened in surprise.

"No, thank you," he replied in English. I could tell he meant it.

Chapter 11: Red Coyote

William and I walked back upstream. There were some caves we thought we saw when we went by them. Wherever we were going, we had to get there fast. Since it was only April, the temperatures had not warmed to their peak yet. There was a danger, with the wind, that we could get hypothermia, and I lost my flint to the river. Unless William had an idea, we couldn't start a fire.

The only tool I had was my bow. It was the last gift from Eyes of Eagle, and there was no way I was going to lose it. The bow was virtually useless, as tools go, for I had lost the arrows.

I thought about what I had done as we struggled through the mud. When William joined me, I figured I could abandon him in the wilderness, where he would get lost and probably die. Instead, I had become attached to him. Why? I had no idea.

Survival would have been certain if I had simply let William drown. For some reason, I was compelled to save him. We would not starve, but without proper nutrients, traveling would slow down to a crawl.

Mercifully, the alcove was right ahead. We went in, and it smelled dank and musty. I went straight to the back to check for bears or other such animals. There were no traces of any current inhabitants. It wasn't particularly warm, but it was dry and out of the wind.

William miraculously still had his hunting knife on his belt. Things might not be as bad as they seemed. Making a fire would still be possible, but there was no wood to burn. It was all too wet. There was some brush at the entrance that was dry, but it was too green to burn.

I volunteered to go out into the rain to look for anything dry. As soon as I left, the wind pushed me this way and that, the rain limiting visibility. Stumbling blindly up the incline next to the cave mouth, I realized I was in a large grove of trees. They lessened the harshness of the elements, but it was by no means dry. Looking around wouldn't hurt, so I did. No surprise, there was no burnable wood.

Suddenly, a mark on one of the trees caught my eye. It was obviously man made. It was ornately carved, standing as a marker of some sort. I stepped up to it, and the ground sounded hollow under my feet. Curious, I knelt down and felt around with my hands. My fingers found an edge, a handle. Upon lifting, the trap door revealed a dry stash of perfectly cut wood.

I was suspicious. How could the thing we need most just appear out of nowhere? An idea formulated itself in my mind. Perhaps the nearest tribe of natives sent out raiding parties to patrol the borders. They would be out in all weather, so maybe they hid dry wood for themselves and mark the tree with a symbol from their alphabet.

The only issue was that I had no clue which tribe it was. I remember studying all the different territories near the Tetons, and I thought this was unclaimed land. Evidently, things had changed while I was in school. The tribe could be friendly or hostile, but the chance of it

being the latter was pretty slim. I decided we could take our chances with the Natives versus hypothermia.

“Where did you get that?” asked William when I got back.

I explained, but left out the part about not knowing who’s land this was. He probably realized this, but was too wet and cold to care.

* * * * *

I lay awake next to the smoldering fire. It was only about noon, but the two of us were trying to sleep. Let me rephrase that. William was succeeding, I was still trying.

Something was nagging at the back of my brain. I knew it had to do with whoever left the wood. I simply couldn’t put my finger on it.

A loud squawk startled me from my thoughts. My gaze swung from the roof of the cave to a bird standing in the cave entrance. I relaxed somewhat. It was a raven, and although they were known to be tricksters, they are always helpful to our people in some way or another.

“Do you know who put that wood there?” I asked it gently.

It hopped closer and croaked, “Crow.”

I sighed. Crows never gave straight answers, and I should have known better than to try and ask one directly.

“Crow, crow, CROW!” it screamed in its hoarse voice. By now, it was jumping up and down with frustration at not being able to communicate his point. Then the crow froze, cocked his head as though listening for something, and then flew away, cawing after me as he flapped across the Snake River.

I slumped from my elbows to my back and thought. I knew it was something outrageously obvious. Crow...?

Then, a piece of information clicked in my mind. The Crow Indians were being pushed westward, and they were claiming all unclaimed territory they could get their hands on, including raided land. We were in what was now Crow territory, and we had taken their wood. A raiding party that may have been passing by, relying on logs that weren’t there, would be hungry for revenge. With any luck, there wouldn’t be a patrol group out, but our luck hadn’t been too good as of late.

“William! Get up!” I cried as I leaped to my feet.

He shot up on his hands, his blonde waves an unruly mess on his head. “Wha-? Who? Never mind.” He fell back down, as though to sleep, but the pillow he anticipated wasn’t there. “Ouch!” he shouted. Rubbing his head gingerly, he stood up and said, “Now that I’m awake, what is it you need to tell me?”

I grabbed my bow and his arm, saying, “We need to go. Now. Fast. Go.” Still dragging my groggy companion behind me, I ran outside and stopped dead. Half a dozen Crow warriors mounted on horseback were in a semi-circle around us. All of them had notched arrows in their bows, and were pointing them towards William and me.

“Well, well, well. Who do we have here?” mused the brave that appeared to be the leader. He spoke in English because that was the one language that all of us present could understand. “Are these the two runaways the White Men have such a reward for?”

I knew I was in no position to talk. If I could have spoken with the chief, I may have been able to finagle some deal or other to get us free. William, on the other hand, had something to say.

“Whatever my people are offering you, they won’t hold up their end of the bargain. I have connections that could –.”

While my partner was rambling on, the leader got off his horse and strode over to us. He brought his hand up and backhanded William mid-sentence. He never even saw it coming.

The look of shock and pain on William’s countenance drew a smile of satisfaction from his assaulter. “Shut up!” he commanded his victim. To his followers, he yelled, “Tie them up, and bring them to the village.”

I had to hold William back. “No,” I whispered frantically, “just do as they say and let me handle it!”

They tied our hands together and ran a rope to their horses. These people were not going to make it easy on us. At least they let us see where we were going.

“Wait,” said the Crow brave I was beginning to despise, “they cannot know where our village is. Blindfold them also.” He grinned and mounted his steed.

I stood still as his cronies tied a filthy rag over my eyes. As I expected, a commotion was heard coming from William’s direction. Somehow, even with restricted movement, he had managed to evade the blindfold thus far. He was cursing more than I’d ever heard before, and an equally colorful string of profanities was coming from the multiple warriors around him.

Swinging my head towards William’s general direction, I called, “Just do it, before they do something else!”

“Why should I?” he yelled. It was evident he was tired; the words came between his heavy breathing. “They could do anything to me and I – oof!”

Not being able to see was driving me crazy. What was happening? I did the only thing I could do. “William?” I shouted.

“I’m...here,” gasped my companion. I could feel myself relax. One of the thugs must have snuck in a blow to his solar plexus, knocking the breath right out of him.

The sounds of horses being mounted reached my ears. I asked, “Can you stand?”

At first, only labored breathing reached me. “No,” came his reply after a few seconds. I started to say something to our captors, but the rope jerked, and I fell. Struggling to get up, I mentally cursed these cruel men.

Even though the horses were merely walking, I tripped often on protruding roots or low branches. After a particularly painful spill, where a limb from a tree was brushed aside by the

horse's flank snapped back across my face, I simply lay face down in the soil, letting the unrelenting Crow drag me forward.

"You know," came William's voice from the side, "if you tuck your knees up in your arms, it keeps the foliage from your face." He had evidently guessed at the position I was in. I did as he suggested, and improvement was noticed immediately.

An hour passed, and our party stopped. They ate and drank, then gave the horses some water. Of course, none was given to us. Far sooner than I would have liked, we were dragged behind the horses yet again.

* * * * *

"Get up!" said a harsh voice from above me in accented English. I carefully unfolded my sore, stiff legs and stood. Similar commands were given to William.

Somebody yanked on my rope, and I stumbled forward, but did not fall. The ground was even here, and I realized that sounds of civilization reached my ears – children laughing, playing, and their mothers scolding them, the soft thrum and then thunk of teens practicing with their bows, grown men giving orders, organizing hunting parties and border patrols. I felt almost at home, besides the fact that my hands were lashed together and a rag was tied around my eyes.

When we came to what seemed to be the center of the village, I was forced to my knees. A sharp object was pressed against my back, and the blindfold was whipped off. The light disoriented me. Even though it had been raining earlier, sunshine was now the main weather.

A large shadow blocked the light. A tall man came into focus. If my assumptions were correct, this was the chief. In a deep, menacing voice, he spoke. "I am Chief Strong Bear. Why are you here?"

At first neither one of us spoke. The warrior behind me pushed the knife a little harder. I explained, "My companion and I were merely trying to reach my village, and we had no knowledge that this was your land."

Chief Strong Bear thought for a moment, and then asked, "What village were you heading to?" I said nothing. Revealing where we were going would put my people in jeopardy. Even when I felt the blade penetrating my skin, I did not speak.

William, on the other hand, did. "The Mountain Shoshoni Clan," he blurted. The pressure on my back lessened, and I turned to glare at William. He pretended not to notice.

"Ha!" cried the chief. "I knew it! You are spies! The Shoshoni people and the White Men are working together against me. A spy has the lowest honor of all, and so you shall be killed with the lowest dignity!"

My stomach turned. That meant a slow and torturous demise. I started to speak, but William beat me to it.

“Yes, we are spies,” he said calmly. What was he doing? “However, we had no other choice. Please, I beg you, let us prove our honor. It is what my father would have wished of me, to die with dignity.”

The chief considered this. “Perhaps we can burn you instead.” He was clearly trying to scare us.

William nodded eagerly. At this point, I was totally lost. Was he trying to save us or condemn us? “That would greatly please me. In fact, any honorable death would. Any way except the...” he shuddered to add to the effect, “Death Run.” He had whispered the words to indicate his fear.

“This ...Death Run, how is it done?” The chief’s eyes glinted evilly.

“Well,” explained William, “the two of us would get one minute’s head start, and we run as fast as we can. Then you send all of your braves out to hunt us down and kill us as they please.” I thought I might have an idea as to what he was getting at, and I didn’t like it.

Chief Strong Bear smiled wickedly, and I realized he was missing teeth. “Braves!” he shouted “Prepare yourselves for some hunting!”

William made a good show of going pale and looking terrified. “Please sir, I beg of you - .” For the second time that day, he was backhanded.

“Silence!” roared the chief. “It was honor you wanted, and honor you shall get!” He swept away, and William cracked a grin.

The two Crows standing behind us came around and cut the ropes binding our hands. I walked over to the still smirking William and whispered, “How are we going to pull this off?”

“No idea,” he said cheerfully, “but we’ll figure something out.”

One of the braves came up and tried to take my bow. “No,” I protested, “I have no arrows, it is no longer useful as a weapon.” He shrugged and walked back to the group of warriors.

Soon, Chief Strong Bear returned. He looked at us and announced, “Your one minute starts now.” William and I looked at each other and ran.

I knew there had to be a stream of some sort close by for this village’s water supply. If we could find it, we might have better luck in terms of survival.

“I hear a stream,” panted my companion. As one, we veered towards it. We found it without trouble, but as we splashed into the shallows, a great battle cry was heard. They were coming.

“Hug the bank on this side of the river, and head upriver,” I told William, who was already doing so. We hid in the branches of an overhanging willow when the mob arrived at the same place we had been standing only a moment beforehand. They all headed downstream, because that’s where it would join with the Snake River, which is the direction we needed to be going.

After a minute of waiting that stretched on like an eternity, we came out of hiding and forded the creek. At its deepest point, it reached up to my hips, but footing wasn't too treacherous, even with the current tugging at my legs. I reached mid-stream and felt a peculiar prickling sensation on the back of my neck. Spinning around, I uttered a curse. Standing on the bank, smiling grimly, was a brave that had branched off from the rest of the pack and was pointing a loaded bow at us.

"William, get down!" I cried suddenly. We ducked just as the hunter fired. It flew harmlessly into the river.

The two of us splashed through the brook and scrambled up the bank. Another arrow thunked into a tree inches from my head. Instinctively, I reached out and pulled the arrow from the trunk as I ran after William.

A third missile flew past me, but this one found a mark. It went through the material of William's shirt and pinned him to a tree. He was a sitting duck.

I spun to face the archer and pulled my own bow off my back. Notching the arrow, I aimed for the center of his chest. Time slowed. I thought about the families in the Crow village, and I pictured a boy. He was young, and his father was dead, killed by an enemy. At far too young of an age, he was exposed to the harsh reality of life. His father was this man. In that boy, I imagined, I saw myself.

Grinding my teeth in frustration, I dropped my aim and released. The arrow embedded itself in the warrior's thigh, and he howled with pain and rage. He turned to glare at me. The brave started shouting at the top of his lungs, "They're here! They're here! THEY'RE HERE!"

I felt a hand on my shoulder. William pulled me forward, saying, "Time to go!" We sprinted out of the trees and onto a grassy plain.

"Now where?" I gasped.

He answered between breaths, "Just keep running!"

Out of the woods behind us burst all the Crow warriors. We ran as fast as we could, but they were still gaining. At the base of the hill, I grabbed William's arm and said, "Let's make our last stand here."

"Listen, even though we got off on the wrong foot, I consider you to be my best friend," he confessed.

I nodded and answered, "Same here."

We said no more, only stood together and watched our death coming closer. Suddenly, when they were 100 feet away, they stopped and turned around, scrambling to get in front of one another.

That's when I noticed a sound like thunder emanating from the hill behind us. William and I turned in time to see horses flying by us, stopping in front of us, and surrounding us in general.

The horses didn't concern me as much as the men riding them. They had stiff, navy suits, and stupid hats, and all dozen were pointing the business ends of their muskets towards William and me. To make things worse, the man leading the troops had shoulder-length salt and pepper hair and was staring down his hawk-like nose at us with maliciously sparkling eyes.

"How nice to see you two again," teased Joe Solomon.

We met his gaze with a glare, and I thought, out of the frying pan and into the oven.

Chapter 12: Amanda Smith

Something was wrong. I sensed that as soon as I entered the school yard. The hard part was figuring out what was wrong. Red Coyote wasn't there, I realized with a start. Perhaps he was sick today. I still had an uneasy feeling about it.

With nobody to talk to, I walked to the schoolhouse. Passing by groups of people, I heard snatches of conversation. Thinking back, I should have stopped to listen.

"...ran away...his mother's worried sick...Red's gone, too...maybe killed each other...abducted by Indians..." I admit, that last part caught my attention, but soon I realized it was meaningless mumbles.

What really caught my attention was the fact that Mr. Brown and Mr. McTavish were standing at the door, and they swooped down on me like a couple of vultures. They made quite a pair, one balding and one fluff ball.

"Miss Smith, can we speak with you?" asked Mr. Brown.

I wanted to say absolutely not, but they had each taken a shoulder and were leading me away to the pond. Instead, I retorted, "Can is a question of ability."

Ignoring my snappy response, Mr. McTavish said, "Do you happen to know the whereabouts of a certain Cole Jason?"

"Who?" I answered with a blank face.

The old man sighed. "Cole Jason, alias Red Coyote."

"I thought he was sick and in your care."

"He was not in his bed this morning, and has not been seen since last night. We thought you might know where he is."

"You mean to say he's a criminal, and I'm his accomplice?" I accused.

His temper was rising, and he started to defend himself, but was cut short by Mr. Brown. "William has also not been seen since last night. Do you know where he is?"

"Of course," I said, exasperatedly, "he's at military training with about twenty other boys."

"On the contrary, he did not report to his assigned group today. We went to his house, and his mother was frantic. She had no clue where he could be."

I snorted. "And you think I would know any more than William's mom would? Lilly would know more than I," I spat contemptuously.

McTavish and Brown shared a look. "We think," Mr. Brown began slowly, "that there may be a connection."

I looked up sharply at the two teachers. "What are you anyway, detectives? Well, not even a detective could interrogate me like you're doing," I cried indignantly. "If you're implying that Red Coyote kidnapped William, then you're dead wrong. They were enemies, but neither

one would go that far. Besides, even if I did know where they were, do you really think I would betray my friends to people like you?"

I spun away from their shocked countenances and marched back to the school. Only then did I realize I foolishly included William in the category of friends.

* * * * *

The whole day was off-kilter for me. It was impossible to focus in school, and Mr. Brown made it worse by constantly calling on me. Pay back, I guess. Everything we did in groups, I ended up by myself. Finally, the day was over. I walked straight home, without meandering. I slammed all the doors I came across, and then flopped face down on my bed.

I heard the door open gently, and then close with just as much care. Somebody sat down on my bed and began stroking my hair.

"Honey, what's wrong?" my mother asked softly.

This was one of those rare moments when she seemed to remember I was her daughter, not just another son. I let everything out, like a dam bursting and the water surging out of it. Starting when I broke William's nose, to his disappearance, and how Red Coyote was the suspect, I told her how I secretly loved William, and everything else that came to mind at that moment.

All my mother did was sit and stroke my hair. When I finished, she said, "It seems to me that you need to talk with Arthur."

Surprised, I looked at her. "We don't know where Arthur is," I pointed out.

"No, but we know where Matt was sent." Like William, Matt had received a commission for the military. In our family, it wasn't really a big deal, since three of my other brothers had done the same thing. "You could get into the fort with family connections, then do some more digging there," Ma went on.

"But," I protested, "Pa wouldn't be able to leave the farm unattended, and you would have to take care of John and Tim."

Ma smiled and replied, "It would just be you, sweetheart."

I gazed at her with wonder. She truly meant all that she said.

"You can leave tomorrow morning." She proclaimed.

All I could do was stare. Quite suddenly, I flung my arms around her neck and whispered, "Thank you." With that, I hopped off my bed and began packing.

My mother left as quietly as she had come, smiling.

* * * * *

The next morning, good-byes were said, and I was on my way with the rising sun. The air was still slightly chilly, but there was a warm breeze that whispered of warmer days. Pa had let me use his best horse, a young chestnut-brown male that was willing and eager.

It was a two day journey, but I planned to ride through the night. After all, both the horse and I were fresh, so we should be able to make it.

Of all the people or things to think about, I thought about William. After the episode last fall, I swore to myself that I wouldn't even look at him. Still, though, those icy blue eyes seemed to draw me in, deeper and deeper. His disappearance worried me more than I cared to admit.

Another thing I couldn't overlook was the coincidence of both William and Red Coyote going missing on the same night. I wouldn't think Red Coyote capable of murder, but I guess it was one possibility. Another possibility was that it truly was a coincidence. Could they possibly have been working together? No, not a chance.

What I found to be absolutely unbelievable was that Red Coyote left without saying anything. I knew where he was going, even though he never told me, and he knew it. Maybe he thought that if I was interrogated, I could honestly say I didn't know. He was right about that.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully as did most of the night. At one point, I almost fell out of the saddle. I stopped the horse, pulled out a rope, and tied myself into the saddle. By dawn, Fort Johnson was visible through the trees.

Naturally, it was built in a wide clearing. Behind it, the Teton Mountains rose majestically, and somewhere at their base was the Snake River. Personally, I thought the fort marred the beauty of the forest, but it was my destination.

"Halt! Who are you, and what is your purpose?" came a nasal voice from a hidden alcove in the fort.

Another, younger voice called out shakily, "If... if you're a...Red, we'll...we'll shoot ya!"

The nasal voice spoke again, "Shut up, Jay!" I heard some scuffling, scrawny boy flew out of hiding.

"Help!" he screamed in a high voice, "He's killin' me! He's killin' me!" His companion limped out after him, mumbling into his fluffy, white beard. Both of them froze when they saw me still coming closer.

"Well, I'll be!" exclaimed the older man, "You're a girl!"

I stopped my horse and said, "Thank you for noticing that. My name is Amanda Smith. I have family connections here."

The younger one squinted and scratched his head. "Ya mean Mike 'n Paul? Or Arthur?"

"Both! Er, all three!" I cried.

The bearded man smiled and announced, "My name is Ned, and this here is Jay. If you'll follow us, Miss 'manda, we'll take you to your brothers."

I was so happy I could have kissed them both. The twosome led me through a side door, which led to the stables. I tethered Pa's horse and emerged into the center of the fort.

My first thought was how bad it smelled. Unwashed, sweating men marched about in sweltering uniforms. Their red faces were lined up in rows and columns, this was obviously their time for practical exercises. Over in one corner, all the greenhorns, my brother

somewhere among them, were trying to learn the basic commands. I'd bet money that if you looked up pain in the dictionary, their pictures would be there.

To my surprise, Ned and Jay led me toward the group of newbies. I protested, saying, "Matthew will be there, but not any of my other brothers." Their only reply was a smile as they kept going.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw them. Of course, they weren't in the group, they were leading it! I didn't know what to do. Thankfully, Jay gave me an entrance.

"Oi! Smithies!" he shouted. "Ya' got some'un 'ere to see ay!"

Arthur turned with his brow furrowed, obviously displeased at being interrupted. His expression turned to amazement and then he grinned with obvious pleasure. The twins wore identical open-mouthed shock on their faces. Not caring one bit if I appeared childish, I ran to them.

"What have you been doing, sister?" murmured my brother as he embraced me.

I looked up at him and answered, "I've been getting lost without you."

"No," he said as he held me at arm's length, "you just didn't know what direction to go."

Mike and Paul came up, and one of them commented, "You're getting tall."

"Perhaps too tall," added the other twin.

At this point, even Matt had been able to make his way over. Our reunion was shattered when we heard a man ask, "Is there some problem, Lieutenant?" We turned to see the general who had given out commissions to the boys at our school, Joe Solomon.

I sensed a change in Arthur, like he was trying to control himself. "Sir, this is our sister, Amanda. Does she have permission to stay?"

"As long as she stays out of the way, then yes," replied Solomon. "This is no place for a lady."

Anger swelled in my chest. "We'll see about that," I snapped.

His only answer was to stalk away.

* * * * *

The days passed quickly. Most of the time, I was doing all the exercises right along with the green horns because Arthur was busy commanding them. When he wasn't commanding, the two of us walked along the parapet of the fort.

On the morning of the third day, it rained. I love the rain. Instead of training, I went up to the highest point in the wall and simply stood, letting the rain pour down by back and allowing the wind to whip my hair around my face.

The land was beautiful. Gusts of wind blew the precipitation diagonally, and the trees bowed and danced, water droplets flying off in every direction. Behind it all rose the Tetons, oblivious to the fury around it. The Snake River wound around by its base, a beautiful ribbon of blue-green around the gift of the world.

“Hey there,” said a voice barely perceptible over the storm. Arthur stood there, and he put his hand on my shoulder. “I don’t want a lightning bolt to come down and hit you up here. Better come on down.” I nodded and followed him down. “You know,” he mused, “you look almost like Mother Nature standing up there.”

“Really?” I asked hopefully.

“Definitely,”

We wandered around the fort. With the heavy rain, it was impossible to train. Around noon, the rain ceased. The practical exercises resumed per normal. I went back up to the parapet, this time just to think. However, I think I fell asleep.

When I awoke, the sun was considerably lower in the sky. A commotion stirred at the gate of the fort. That must have been what awoke me. Still groggy, I stumbled to the rail to have a look at the cause of the noise. Instantly, I was awake. I rushed down the stairs and ran to the entrance. There, I saw the last people I ever expected to see.

Chapter 13: William Anderson

My mind whirred. I had to get us out of here, but I had no idea how. There were far too many variables. The best option would be to play dumb for a bit.

“Good to see you,” I replied icily. “Thanks for helping us out. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we must be going.” I took a step forward, and several guns were cocked around me. Gingerly, I stepped back.

Solomon smiled. It was more like a grimace, actually. “I’m afraid not,” he said. “Mr. Anderson, you have a position in my military you need to fill. This savage isn’t going anywhere, either. We will bring him back to Fort Johnson and...dispatch him.”

“Why?” I demanded.

By now it was obvious he was toying with us, like a cat that’s caught a mouse. “He has kidnapped an active soldier, a crime punishable by death,” he answered.

That was my way out. Why was this cruel man trying to help me? Or was he? Either way, there was no way I would abandon Red Coyote after the multiple times he saved my life. At least I could try to return the favor.

“Who told you I was taken against my will? I went with Red Coyote of my own accord. He has done nothing deserving of your punishment.” Maybe my speech would change his mind.

Solomon’s eyes were dancing like fire. “You mean,” he taunted, “done nothing except be the enemy? He shall die anyway. You just admitted to treason, a crime also punishable by death.”

“No...wait...how...that’s not...!” My shocked protests only made the near-demonic general happier, so I stopped.

“Tie them up and bring them in!” Solomon ordered his men.

I was willing to resist Indians with bows, but not so willing to do the same with soldiers and guns. They bound our wrists and ankles and strapped us onto horses like sacks of potatoes. It was a pleasure, compared to the treatment we had received from the Crow warriors, but the ropes chafed exposed skin and dug into my back.

At one point in the trip, Red Coyote and I ended up facing each other. He was as pale as I’d ever seen him. I probably looked no better. After intense physical labor and multiple death threats, it was understandable.

“Thank you for not abandoning me,” Red Coyote whispered in Shoshoni.

In the same language, I replied, “I’m sorry I couldn’t do more.”

That’s when Solomon realized we were communicating with each other, and he ordered the men riding with us to separate us.

* * * * *

Far too soon, we arrived at Fort Johnson. I'd have sworn every person in the fort came out to gawk at us. As we were unloaded, one young and handsome man came up and spoke urgently with Solomon. He was quickly dismissed.

Some soldiers cut the ropes from our ankles and we were led away none too gently. I thought I saw Amanda, of all people, peering curiously at us through the crowd. Then she was gone, and I received a boot to my butt for stopping.

We came to a series of thick, barred doors in the farthest wall. A guard with a thick ring of keys opened the first cell, and Red Coyote and I were thrown inside. Of course, they slammed the door shut, and it echoed around our cell.

There was one small window at the opposite end of the cell. The bars were built into the wall. No escape that way. Large slabs of stone covered the floor. Definitely no way out there. The door was far too strong for any sort of escape.

I paced back and forth, like a caged tiger. Red Coyote just stood as still as a statue, his eyebrows knitted together. We were both thinking the same thing and coming up with nothing.

Suddenly, the door opened and Amanda Smith walked in. A thousand questions plagued on my mind, but my mouth wasn't functioning. Just as I regained control of my vocal capabilities, she rushed over to Red Coyote and hugged him. My loss of speech this time was attributed to annoyance. How could she totally ignore me? I had never felt jealous before, but I was sure that was the feeling I was experiencing.

"Ahem," I coughed.

Red Coyote and Amanda turned to look at me. "What?" asked Amanda bluntly. I hadn't planned which question I would ask, so yet again I was silent, trying to think of something to say. I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"Hi." What a stupid thing to say.

Amanda strode quickly towards me. "Hi?" she demanded. "You ran away from home, abandon your companion, you're mother's worried sick, and I..." She broke off. With time for a breath, she began again. "In general, you created more problems. And all you can say is, 'hi?'" She glared at me with anger, and another, less dominant expression I didn't care to name.

"Sorry," I tried hopefully. The last thing I wanted was another broken nose.

All she did was shake her head and sigh. "You don't know the half of it," she muttered.

I started to argue, but Red Coyote cut me off. "Amanda, I'm sure you know why we're here. Will you help us get out?" I looked at her, pleadingly.

She pursed her lips and whispered, "No, I can't." Then Amanda did the last thing I expected her to do. She cried.

"Amanda, what...?" I asked.

She continued to sob, but mouthed the word “idiot” at me. Amanda, the actor, pointed behind her to the door and mimed a guard listening in on the conversation. Still bawling, Amanda pulled a slip of paper from her pants pocket and dropped it on the floor. She ran to the door, and raced out when the guard opened it.

Red Coyote and I stood motionless until we heard the door latch. Silently, he reached for the note, grabbed it and read it. A grin slowly spread across his face. He handed the parchment to me, and my jaw dropped. It read:

BE READY AT MIDNIGHT TONIGHT!

AMANDA AND CO.

P.S. I’M COMING, OR NO DEAL!

Chapter 14: Red Coyote

Shink, click.

The quiet sound woke me from a deep sleep. I didn't want to get up; the physical exertion and adrenaline had drained my strength. However, getting up sounded far more pleasant than being publicly shot.

William was already up. No doubt he had been up the whole time worrying about Amanda. I knew him more than he knew himself in that area. He loved her, even if he wouldn't admit it to himself. What was even funnier was that Amanda felt the same way.

The two of us darted out the open door. There, with Amanda were two identical men, with jet black hair and the same almond eyes as all the other Smiths.

"I'm Mike," said one.

"And I'm Paul," added the other.

"We will be your guides for the night," announced Mike.

William asked, "Shouldn't we be worried about the guard?"

"Nope," replied Paul proudly, "we gave him some spiked wine, he'll be out cold for at least another two hours."

"And the sentries?"

Amanda smiled. "Matt's one of them, and the other two always sleep, drugged or not. Their names are Ned and Jay. Nicest people, with an attention span of about thirty seconds."

As we proceeded to the side door, the three Smiths explained their plan. Arthur was at a dinner with the generals. It provided an alibi for him if he were suspected. The twins had gone to a party in one of the barracks and retired, claiming they had had too much to drink. Anybody who noticed their absence would not be the least bit suspicious. When we were clear, in the cover of the trees, Matt would sound the alarm, claiming he had seen us head off in the opposite direction. Since he alerted the fort to our escape, no suspicion would fall on his shoulders. Amanda would take all the blame, but she would be gone anyway.

Another huge advantage was that we would be using the Smith's chestnut stallion. Young, he may be, but he was strong. He would carry all our supplies, and Amanda, William, and I would be able to travel faster.

We came to the stables and went in. Immediately after the five of us crossed the threshold, we heard two voices approaching. We silently scrambled for cover, but I stopped. I knew one of those voices. As I crept closer, my blood ran cold.

"Are you certain of this?" asked a voice I couldn't identify.

Joe Solomon hissed, "Yes, with our combined forces, we will crush the heathen savages' village like a bug."

“I meant,” continued the unknown General, “must we attack? This particular settlement has never caused us problems.”

“If I did not think it worth your time, I would not have suggested it,” snapped Solomon. “The leaders have sent a spy, and he tried to kidnap a soldier and sway his opinion. This village is finally striking against us. We must destroy them before they gain any more. We already have the spy, and he will die in the morning.”

The other man sighed and said, “Whatever you think is fit.” The two generals walked off into the night.

As soon as they were gone, the others moved quickly, finding the horse and loading the supplies onto him as fast as possible. I simply stayed frozen where I was as the full gravity of his words sank in. Solomon was going to attack my village with two armies. They were unprepared, and they would be slaughtered.

“Red Coyote, come on!” whispered Amanda.

William added, “Let’s go! Fast!”

He grabbed the lead line for the chestnut horse and strode swiftly out the side door. I numbly followed, and after saying good-bye to her brothers, Amanda trotted after us.

We headed to the trees and towards the Snake River. A few minutes after the three of us were clear, the alarm bell went off as planned. Soon, we reached the river and advanced towards my village. If all went as planned, we would reach it in just less than a week.

I only hoped we could reach it in time.

Chapter 15: Blue Willow

The slumbering land was waking. After being frozen for many months, it was slowly thawing. Animals ventured out, and rivers flowed. Even the trees were budding. I, and the other hand, was sadder than ever.

Our village was doing well, considering the winter disease. At least most of the children were safe with the White Men. It pained all of us that they weren't here.

The bright side of things was that they would be coming home soon. Now it was April. By late May, they would be back. I just wouldn't be able to wait that long.

In the village, normal spring procedures were underway. Hunting parties were organized, and scouts were sent off to see where plants were growing again. People seemed almost cheerful.

Except for me. Somehow, spring made me think of Red Coyote. I missed him now more than ever. The feeling that he was closer kept entering in the back of my mind. Of course, I knew it couldn't be true, but that didn't seem to stop me from wanting to rush into the woods to find him anyway. However, knowing my navigation abilities, I would get myself lost in the first hundred yards.

As I was sitting quietly beside my mother, mixing poultices, thundering hooves pounded outside. I leapt to my feet. Maybe Red Coyote and the other children were granted an early homecoming. I rushed out into the open.

The men on horseback were neither children nor wore uniforms. They wore war paint, and they definitely weren't smiling. Full of fear, people yelled, even screamed as the warriors fanned out. They swung off their horses and bolted into our wiki-ups. They overturned everything, crashing and ripping.

My mother flew out of our lodging and marched straight up to the one man still mounted on his horse. Since she was a medicine woman, she spoke many Indian dialects, so she could communicate with medicine women from other tribes. Clever Rabbit must have identified these people as Crow, because that's the language she shouted.

I don't know what she said, but she sounded angry, and the chief looked rather taken aback. He quickly recovered his supreme air and snapped back a reply.

Mother turned and cried to the people, "These Crow warriors are looking for Red Coyote," looking straight at me as she announced this, "and a certain Willow Arm. If everybody will stay calm and let them search, they will go quickly." Clever Rabbit headed straight for Chief Swift Feather. The two of them conversed in low tones.

Soon, one warrior after another came up and reported their findings. It was obviously not what he was looking for, because his countenance became increasingly enraged with each report. When the last person came with negative findings, the chief let out a roar. He

gave some swift commands, and the warriors went back to the wiki-ups and grabbed all the food they could find.

Women screamed again, running at the warriors and tried to knock the food out of their arms. Our few braves that weren't out hunting became locked in combat. It was quickly evident who had the upper hand; the Crow were prepared, and they had weapons. All around me, the people of my village bent to the stronger force. Soon, they would be wounded, maybe even killed. I had to do something.

I knew very few words in the Crow language, but I did know "stop." Rushing up to the chief, who was holding both my mother and Chief Swift Feather, I yelled at the top of my lungs, "STOP!" Neither chief even paused, but Mother fell back to me.

She asked urgently, "What is it?"

"Promise me you will translate all that I say?" I demanded.

Mother hesitated and said, "Yes, I trust you." She strode over to the Crow chief and announced to him that I had something to say. Both men looked at me in surprise.

With Clever Rabbit translating, I calmly pleaded, "Do not punish these people. I was the one who saw them, me and only me. They came here a few days ago, and said you were chasing them. I directed them back down the mountains, but I don't know where they went from there." By now most people had stopped fighting and were listening in awe to my story. "Please, if you have a quarrel with anybody, let it be me." I stood gazing humbly at the Crow chief.

With a stern face, the chief spoke. Being the interpreter drove Mother crazy, because she was quivering with barely controlled rage. "You are lucky I am in a merciful mood today, girl," said he. "Otherwise you would be severely punished. However, in reward for informing us about the fugitives, my warriors and I will leave your food and depart immediately."

Thus he commanded his warriors, and they unceremoniously dropped the food on the ground. The Crow men leapt back up onto their horses and rode away without a second glance.

The village's inhabitants stared after them until they were out of sight. Subdued, they numbly began recollecting the food and straightening their overturned belongings.

Chief Swift Feather approached me. Gently, he scolded, "That was very foolish of you. First, you should have come to me when Red Coyote and this...Willow Arm showed up. Second, you could have been killed. However," he continued with a slight sparkle in his eye, "bravery and foolishness are sometimes one in the same."

I blushed with this comment and replied, "If something like that ever did happen, you would be the first to know."

"You mean," he said, frowning, "that they were never really here?"

I grinned sheepishly and answered, "That is correct. I made up the tale on the spot."

Chief Swift Feather gazed at me in wonder. He shook his head, as though he didn't understand, then turned and walked away to assist with the cleanup.

Mother looked at me and smiled. "Will the brave hero go fetch some water for the wounded?"

"Certainly," I called back as I went to the wiki-up for the water skin. I felt absolutely thrilled for saving the village. In fact, I was so wrapped up in my excitement that I didn't hear the voices drifting up from the creek I was going to draw water from. As quickly and silently as possible, I crept behind the nearest tree.

The invaders could be more Crow warriors, sent to spy on us. I was filled with anger, so I picked up a heavy branch from the ground and waited. The voices approached, drawing nearer and nearer. Finally, one of them passed by my tree. Drawing upon all my strength, I swung.

Chapter 16: Red Coyote

The three of us traveled along the Snake River for close to a week. Each morning, we would get up and check the line of snares we set the night before. If we were lucky enough to get something, such as a rabbit, then I would skin it and chop it up for Amanda to throw into the stew. William simply milled about and helped out where needed. He'd never been taught how to clean one's catch, and he definitely couldn't cook.

Breakfast was the largest meal for us. Lunch was merely snacking on the go. When dinner came around, the three of us were too tired to eat, so we would go to sleep.

We made good time. Having a horse definitely helped. While we traveled, I taught them more of my language. By now, they knew all of the basic replies to simple questions and a few useful phrases. I think Amanda and William knew more than they could speak, and that pleased me.

One day, the three of us spotted the little stream that connected with the Snake River and ran right by my village farther up the mountain. My pace quickened. I was almost home.

Farther and farther up we went. The trail became steeper, and the young stallion had a hard time. Within a few hours, I spotted the smoke from their fires.

Suddenly, I heard thundering hooves. Our chestnut steed whinnied nervously. Quickly, we hid behind a rocky outcropping and waited. Soon, a hoard of Crow Indians rode by. My blood ran cold. What had they been doing at my village?

After they passed, we continued on. In five minutes, the three of us were parallel with the was a straight shot to the village.

We forded it with ease and were walking quickly to our destination, when a large, club-like branch came swinging straight for my head. I cried out in surprise and ducked. Reaching up, I grabbed the weapon and jerked it hard. It flew out of my attacker's hands and thudded to the ground.

The person spun around, and tried to run. I caught an arm and whirled my assailant around. After one glance at the face, I pulled her into a crushing embrace.

"Blue Willow, it's me," I murmured into her ear.

She pushed my arms away, looked at me in pure surprise, and threw herself onto me, clinging tighter than I did. Quite suddenly, she was talking so fast that I couldn't understand a thing. Then, she broke off in mid-syllable as she caught sight of William and Amanda, who had been looking quite confused for the whole exchange.

Amanda smiled and said, "Hi. I am called Amanda. You must be called Blue Willow." She was a little choppy in her Shoshoni, but Blue Willow looked delighted. She started chatting like she would to any other Shoshoni girl, and even though Amanda probably only understood half of it, she managed to get the yes's and the no's in the right places.

William cleared his throat and tired conversing as Amanda had, but Blue Willow was speaking even before he had formed the first word.

“Oh!” she cried, “and you must be Willow Arm.”

He shifted uncomfortably, “I am called William, not Willow Arm.”

“That’s what I said, Willow Arm,” Blue Willow replied slowly.

William was about to argue when I broke in, expressing my desire to move forward to the village.

“I’m most anxious to see Mother again,” I added.

Blue Willow’s countenance fell. “Red Coyote,” she softly answered, “Sky Fox is with Eyes of Eagle now. It was my fault, I...”

“Don’t,” I interrupted, choking down the tears. “She’s happy now, in a better place, with Father.” The tears came with full force now. I tried to hide my face, but a touch on my shoulder stopped me.

“There’s no shame in showing that you care,” William stated in English.

In anguish, I cried.

* * * * *

After getting hold of my emotions, we went to the village. I was shocked to see it in shambles. Blue Willow explained about the attempted raid, and I understood why people were throwing glares at me instead of greeting me.

Blue Willow led us straight to the chief, who was assisting in the clean up. He saw us coming, and he greeted us with a totally bewildered face.

“Welcome back, Red Coyote. I believe that all of you owe me an explanation. Come to my wiki-up.”

I could understand his confusion, so I explained everything to him. At times he would nod or furrow his brows. At the end of my narrative, he sighed and said, “Do any of you have any ideas of how to avert this catastrophe?”

Smiling grimly, I replied, “Chief Swift Feather, I not only have an idea, I have a plan.”

Chapter 17: William Anderson

I would call “plan” an overstatement. It was more like a wild hope, an outside chance. And I agreed to do it.

I thought about my task as Amanda’s young stallion trotted underneath me. Amanda sat in the saddle in front of me, and it was strangely comforting.

Red Coyote’s plan surprised me as much as it did the chief. He had come up with the hair-brained scheme all by himself, and didn’t say a word about it until I had no choice but to say yes, under the right circumstances.

Amanda and I were to ride down the mountain and dissuade the army from attacking. It was a slim chance at best. Of course, I didn’t say anything while the chief was listening. When he left, I let Red Coyote have a piece of my mind.

There was no way it would ever work. Joe Solomon was bent on a massacre, and most of the soldiers didn’t know any better. Red Coyote insisted that it would work, that it had to work. There were two armies joining together to slaughter us, and the other general was uncertain, unwilling to needlessly kill. If we could convince him not to attack, then we would only have half the army to deal with. That’s still a lot, in my opinion.

“We” turned out to be just Amanda and me. Red Coyote knew that White Men would trust other White Men more than any Shoshoni, so it was just the two of us against two armies.

The trees gave way to an outcrop overlooking a clearing at the base of the Teton Mountains. Amanda and I gasped at the sight stretched before our eyes.

When you think of two armies, you probably think of a lot of soldiers. One simply can’t comprehend the vastness without actually seeing it. Tents spread out before us at least a half a mile across. I didn’t think it was possible to unite that many people. The tent town was as busy as a bee hive, especially around the center, where a larger tent was staked. That was most likely where Solomon and the other commanders would be.

“So,” began Amanda cheerfully, “how do we get to that big tent in the middle of the camp?”

I rolled my eyes and replied, “We ride down and walk into the tent.”

“You seriously think all these soldiers will just let us pass without a second glance?” she asked.

“I was being sarcastic,” I replied.

“Oh.” Amanda and I thought for a moment, then she said, “Perhaps we could find one of my brothers?”

I shook my head. “There’s no way we’d be able to find them before anyone else found us.”

Suddenly, we heard a rustle behind us and a high pitched voice called out, "If you're a Red, we'll...we'll shoot ya!" The offending person promptly fell out of his perch on a low branch in the nearest tree. A scraggy youth leaped to his feet and vainly tried to brush the twigs out of his hair.

"Oh, now you've spoiled it, Jay!" shouted an older emerging from behind the same tree.

"Ned! Jay!" cried Amanda in evident relief. "Thank goodness we found you. Can you take us to General Solomon and the other general?"

The older one shrugged and said, "Sure thing, Miss 'manda."

"At your service," added Jay with a mock salute.

The two headed off in the general direction we needed, so after Amanda and I exchanged glances, she urged the horse forward.

Everybody we passed looked up at us strangely. Some even whispered to each other. Nobody actually stopped us until we reached the commander's tent.

"Halt!" exclaimed two guards, more surprised than anything. We stopped and watched as the sentries scrambled to their feet. I looked as though they had just woken up from a nap.

One of them demanded, "What is your business here?"

"We're here to speak with the generals," I replied.

They exchanged worried glances, and the other guard said, "We aren't supposed to let anyone in without written consent. We could tell them you wish to speak with them, if it helped you."

"No," Amanda replied hastily, "please don't tell them we're here. We'll find another way."

As if on cue, a man with chestnut hair and almond shaped, deer like eyes came around the tent and froze in shock. "Amanda!" he yelled.

"Arthur!" responded Amanda. She jumped (more like fell) off the horse and rushed over to him. While she hugged him, Amanda whispered something in his ear and he nodded.

I admit, I felt a little jealous. She never hugged me. Then again, this was her brother, and he probably deserved the hug. Still...

"Please," Amanda asked, "we need to see the generals. Can you get us in?"

Arthur nodded. "Sure, but why did you run away?" He must have seen my baffled contenance, because he threw me a wink. Then I got it. He still had to stay clear of any blame, so we were still pretending Amanda had done it by herself.

"Never mind," answered Amanda.

Her brother spoke to the guards, and they quickly stepped aside. We walked in through the gaping hole, more like a mouth than anything.

“Ah, Arthur, glad you could make it,” exclaimed the unknown general. “Who do you have there?” he questioned. Joe Solomon looked up and froze with an expression of utmost hatred on his face. I’m not sure why he despised us so much.

Arthur spoke for us. “General Perkins, this is my sister, Amanda, and her companion, William Anderson.”

“Anderson, you said?” inquired Perkins.

“Yes, sir.”

The general looked at me and smiled gently. “I knew your father well, lad.”

I choked up a bit. I barely managed to get out a “thank you” without my voice cracking. Somehow, I contained my hurt. I could face it later.

“Sir, we need to talk with you,” started Amanda, but Solomon had recovered from his shock and cut her off.

With his face turning red, he screamed, “Arrest these two criminals!” A couple of his followers standing with him swiftly moved to obey his orders.

“Joe, what is this?” cried Perkins. “Let them speak!” the soldiers grabbed us, and as much as we twisted and struggled, they wouldn’t let go. Arthur stepped in and started throwing punches at the goliath who held Amanda. The two door guards came in, and they looked on with utter confusion. I spun and kicked and punched, but the man was like a human mountain.

Quite a few people now peered in at us. “Help us, subdue those men!” Arthur shouted desperately. Thankfully, most of the soldiers were loyal to Arthur (or disloyal to Solomon) and joined the fray. Within another thirty seconds, Amanda and I were free.

“Alright,” sighed Perkins when the fighting had ceased, “I am completely lost as to why these two children are being placed under arrest. Solomon, explain yourself.”

The addressed general stiffly stood. “These children,” he spat as he jabbed a finger in our direction, “have both committed serious crimes, normally worthy of a death sentence in my system. The boy was, and still is, associating with the enemy, clearly choosing their side instead of ours. The girl is his associate, for she willingly broke them out of a military prison and accompanied them, also treasonous behavior.”

Solomon was going to say more, but I spoke first. “Sir,” I addressed Perkins, “they are not the enemy. I don’t deny any of this charges except for those directed at the Shoshoni people. What have they ever done to Americans to make the military want to wipe them all out?”

He was silent for a moment. Solomon took this hesitation to mean he could talk again. To my surprise, as soon as he opened his mouth, Perkins snapped, “Silence!” Then he turned to us. “The Shoshoni people rose up against Custer, and killed many men.”

“Yes,” agreed Amanda, “and they had a right to!” One could have heard a pin drop. She continued confidently, “What would you do if, say, the British were to attack us again? Would

you stand by and watch your wives and children be slaughtered?” The only reply was shocked silence. “I don’t think you would. That’s just what these Natives are doing. They are a peaceful people, and don’t want to fight, but they will not stand idly and wait to be massacred! If we leave them alone, then they will leave us alone.” Everyone in the tent seemed to be holding their breath.

“They suffered losses, too. My friend’s father was killed in the same battle in which Custer died.

People had begun to murmur around the tent. I didn’t know if they were agreeing with us, or opposing us.

Finally, somebody spoke loud enough to be heard. “I agree with Miss ‘manda and her friend.” The old man who had guided us stepped forward.

“Me too!” exclaimed Jay, hopping up beside his elderly companion.

Arthur, the twins, and Matt, who had joined us in the fray, all stepped forward and nodded solemnly.

Slowly, but with growing confidence, other people agreed. The murmurs were quiet, like ripples on a lake, but then the volume grew, like a stormy sea until it was a deafening roar.

Joe Solomon was flabbergasted. He simply stood there with his mouth hanging slightly open. Amanda and I had caused his plot to backfire.

“All right, then!” dictated General Perkins over the waterfall of noise. “Thanks to you two young heroes, you friends’ village is safe!” Amanda and I grinned broadly at each other.

Perkins turned to Solomon. “Your judgment has been seriously flawed as of late. I believe Mr. Smith would love to take over your position, for I consider you to be emotionally compromised.”

The ex-general was too enraged to speak. His eyes locked on me. “Anderson!” he shrieked as he lurched forward. Solomon’s intent was clear.

Almost the entire room rose to my defense. A handful leaped onto Solomon, and everybody else crowded as tightly as possible between me and the possessed general.

As he was led out, with his arms firmly pinned behind his back, he snarled at me, “This will not be the last you see of me, William Anderson!”

“Oh, yes, it will!” snapped Perkins.

After the madman had been escorted out, the rest of the tent’s occupants slowly filed out. When Amanda and all her brothers joined the crowd, I stepped in behind them through the door.

The bright, spring sunlight blinded me momentarily, enough time for somebody to tackle me. Somehow, I stayed on my feet, even with the added weight around my neck.

“We did it, William!” Amanda whispered in my ear.

I embraced her in return, and over her shoulder I saw the twins exchange knowing glances. Arthur threw me an encouraging wink. I smiled.

Chapter 18: Amanda Smith

That night was one of the best days of my life. Riding back on the horse I'd decided to call Chester, William and I didn't talk much. There was such a happy air about us, and we didn't want to spoil it. The joy wasn't just about saving Red Coyote's village. I had never hugged anybody who wasn't family, and I felt rather ridiculous at first. Then, William hugged me back, and I knew it was the right thing.

When we got back to the village, they knew there was no need for panic when they saw the smiles that adorned our faces. They were all overjoyed. Chief Swift Feather suggested a celebration for the salvation of his people, and the idea was met with wholehearted acceptance. Preparations began immediately.

I helped Blue Willow and the other women prepare food while Red Coyote and William went out with the men to go hunting. I was not sure how that worked out, because William had never used a bow before in his life. When they go back, the two explained that after "learning" how to shoot a bow, he hunted and shot eight trees, a couple of rocks, a stream, and Red Coyote's shirt while he was wearing it. I didn't bother inquiring about the clothes, because I wasn't sure I wanted to know. Both of them busted up laughing when I proclaimed this to them, so it was probably a good choice.

The party (if one can call it that) was amazing. Even though some of the food looked really disgusting to me, almost all of it was actually delicious. There was also singing and dancing, but not the boring waltzes or stuff like that that our people do at dances, nor was the singing anything like I've ever heard before.

I thought the dancing was hilarious. Everybody wanted to dance with William and me. Perhaps they were just curious about us, but it was fun anyway. Finally, I got to dance with William. He failed. My feet were trampled at least a dozen times, but I didn't care. I was too nervous, or maybe excited, that he would try to kiss me. I'm not sure what I would do. He would either have his nose broken again, end up smooching the air where I had been moments before, or possibly get his way.

To my dismay, or perhaps delight, William never tried anything of the sort. Maybe the safety of his nose was present in his mind, also.

Red Coyote, Blue Willow, William and I slept together in Red Coyote's wiki-up, because that was the only unoccupied one. Blue Willow came with us just for fun. She slept in Red Coyote's mother's bed, and I slept in his. The boys got the floor. They were the best accommodations I'd slept in since I left home, almost two weeks ago. The beds at the fort were terrible, and rocks didn't offer much padding. The warm soft animal furs were better than any bedding I'd ever experienced.

I woke up to the worst morning of my life.

* * * * *

“Oy, get up!” a gruff voice said.

It’s Saturday, I thought . Without even opening my eyes, I stuck my head under a pile of furs. The fuzzy pelts were snatched off immediately, accompanied by another command. “I said, get up!”

This time my eyes flew open. The business end of a musket was inches from my face.

“OK,” I replied nervously, “I’m getting up.” Slowly, I brought myself to a sitting position with my hands up in a gesture of peace. Quickly glancing around the wiki-up, I found that the others were receiving similar treatment.

“Now, stand up!” the ugly guy with the rifle by my head dictated. I stood up carefully but then sat down again and reached down by my feet. There was a click, and I froze. My captor had pulled back the hammer. He started to repeat his order, but I cut him off.

“Cool it,” I snapped. I was not in a good mood. “I’m getting my shoes on, OK?” The man was taken aback by this, but he un-cocked his gun.

I was thinking about how to escape, but William caught my eye. He gave me a barely perceptible shake of his head, and I understood. For the time being, I just had to go along with it.

We were marched out of the wiki-up and herded like cattle towards the center of the village. Ahead of me, I saw Red Coyote and William conversing quietly in Shoshoni. They were soon discovered, and quickly separated. William ended up next to me.

In the same whisper he had used moments before, he said, “Create a diversion up here where the path narrows. I love you.” I was so shocked, I almost forgot to think. The path went right next to the woods, and it was a spot near where the horses were hobbled. He must have been planning to go for help.

When our group reached the designated spot, the four of us moved at once. Blue Willow ducked around her guard and leapt onto his broad back. Red Coyote spun and brought his knee up into the gut of his captor. I stopped and let my giant shadow bump into me, then leapt off the ground and slammed my head into his chin. To make sure he wouldn’t follow, I kicked him hard in the back of the knee. The human mountain came down like a house of cards. William darted, and he escaped his guard’s grasping hands by an inch.

“Hey!” I shouted. The man chasing William turned in time to receive a log hurtling through the air. It hit him right between the eyes. He staggered towards me with an oath.

I turned and spotted the first guard getting up. The two had me surrounded. They charged at the same time. Timing it carefully, I waited until the last second then dodged out of the way. While they were occupied with one another, I leapt onto the weak-kneed guy. He tried to grab me, but he wasn’t very flexible and simply batted harmlessly at me. It’s also rather hard to focus when one’s air supply is cut off, for that’s what I was doing. The second soldier came up behind us and grabbed me. With my arms firmly around the first man’s neck, I let go with my legs and rammed my boots into his knees again. He toppled on top of his fellow soldier

and pinned him down. Before he fell, I jumped off and then looked on, satisfied with my work. It was even better than I planned it; with the shortage of oxygen, the first guard had blacked out and was too heavy for the man he trapped underneath him to lift.

The sound of hooves thundered behind me, and I spun to see Joe Solomon riding up with his gun aimed directly at me.

“Are you having any problems, Miss Smith?” he asked as he surveyed his men.

“Yes,” I replied, “and it’s standing right in front of me.”

Solomon smiled. “You would do well to hold your tongue when your life is on the line. My only reply was to grin defiantly back.

“You, there!” he hollered to the soldiers with Red Coyote and Blue Willow. They hadn’t lasted as long as I, and their hands were tightly bound behind their backs. “Come and tie her up!” Solomon commanded. The one holding Blue Willow handed her off to the other guard and came over to me. He jerked my arms behind me and furiously wrapped the rope around my wrists.

There was movement behind the ex-general, by the horses. William came riding out on Chester, charging as fast as he could. Solomon saw him too. He grabbed the reins to his mount and urged him forward. I was already moving. Using the man behind me as a brace, I kicked up both legs and entangled them thoroughly in the steed’s reins. Solomon cursed and tried in vain to disengage the reins. William got away.

The enraged Solomon turned on me. He slapped me, hard, and snarled, “I hope you’re looking forward to death, Miss Smith, for you will meet him soon!”

Through tears of pain, I prayed for William to hurry. Time was running out.

Chapter 19: Red Coyote

My mind worked furiously as we were herded along. After William's escape, we walked with tied hands and rifles in our backs. Solomon had been arrested yesterday, according to Amanda and William, so somebody must have assisted him in breaking free. During the night he probably gathered the men most loyal to him and ambushed us this morning.

As we went along, more and more of my people joined us. All the men were tied, like us. The women were not tied, but there was always someone with a firearm near. The few children who were too young to go to school clung fearfully to their mothers and fathers.

I had to keep them alive until William arrived with help. There was no way to predict what Solomon might do. If he decided to gloat, I just had to keep him talking. If he gathered us all together and just started shooting, then I didn't know what I would do.

Ahead, at the base of a steep hill, people seemed to be congregating. They were trapped on two sides by a rocky incline and they were cut off the other sides by a rough semi-circle of Solomon's men. Amanda, Blue Willow and I joined the group, and the soldiers went off to round up more Shoshoni.

"Blue Willow!" cried two tiny, scared voices from the crowd. Her two younger siblings came running to her and almost knocked her over with their hugs. She tried to hug them back, but it was impossible to do so without the use of her arms.

"Little Turtle, Quiet Sparrow, what are you doing here?"

The misfits looked up at her, holding a bow, and replied, "We came to help."

Blue Willow looked like she was going to say something about going back to their parents, but before she could, I interrupted. "Will you two untie me, and then run around untying everybody?" Blue Willow glared at me, obviously unhappy that I had put her siblings in possible danger. "Don't worry," I told her, "nobody will notice two small, innocent children running around." She still didn't look satisfied, but she didn't stop the children as they rushed over to undo the knots.

Finally, my hands were free. Grabbing the bow, I stepped over to the two girls as they were being untied. "Whatever I do, have everyone ready to clear out when William comes." I dashed off before they could protest.

As I wove through the crowd, I tried to formulate a plan. Honestly, I didn't have one. My goal was to draw the soldiers away from my people. When I came to the base of the steep hill, I had an idea.

I launched myself up the side of the incline. Loose rocks tumbled down behind me. As I expected, Solomon's men started shouting. Scrabbling higher, I heard a clap, like thunder, and a rock exploded by my head, sending shards flying everywhere. This was not part of the plan; I hadn't expected them to start firing so soon. Higher I climbed, but I slid backwards almost as

much as I moved forward. Shale was exploding all around me. I was glad for that, because it meant lots of soldiers were going after me, which is just what I wanted.

Soon, I lost the strength to move up. I couldn't fight gravity. My arms ached and my legs burned. I was a sitting duck, and the bullets were getting closer.

Something whizzed overhead. I looked up, and saw an arrow protruding from the cliff face. Experimentally, I grabbed it. The arrow was sturdy, so I pulled myself up. Another hiss, and an arrow struck farther up. Suddenly, a storm of arrows embedded themselves in a stair-like pattern.

Looking down, I saw almost every family had a bow and was firing to help me. The women must have smuggled in the weapons under their clothes, and with everybody untied, the people were free to use them. The few guards not chasing me had been overcome. Despite my position, I grinned. The ignorance of White Men would be their downfall.

I climbed with renewed vigor. I noticed the bullets came from a different angle. With a start, I realized that they had taken an easier route to the side and planned to cut me off or fire from the top down. I wouldn't stand a chance. I scaled faster than ever.

In my haste, I didn't test the firmness of the arrows. The next one I stepped onto slipped out from under me, and with the sudden added weight, the arrow I gripped began to pull, but didn't let go. Frantically, I swung my legs, looking for any kind of purchase. Pebbles and stones cascaded down the thirty-foot drop. My feet hit something hard and I pushed off. Just as my hand-hold vanished, I grabbed another one. With my heart racing, I resumed climbing.

When I reached the top, the soldiers were still far enough away that the trees blocked any clear shots, but it was only seconds before they had an open view. I reached down and snatched the first arrow I found. Tearing my bow from my back, I loaded the arrow and shouted, "STOP!"

Everybody froze. My voice had been amplified by the incline below and carried to everybody listening. I cried out in English, but my meaning was clear to all.

A few soldiers still moved, so I repeated myself. "Stop, or I shoot Solomon." At this, they ceased moving. I couldn't have chosen a better time to intervene. The soldiers, who the villagers had been battling, had regained their senses and were ready to fire their guns.

Looking at Solomon, I had a mental start. He held a revolver. I pulled my bow back farther. If he shot at me, I could still shoot at him. Then, something in my gut twisted painfully. Solomon wasn't aiming at me. He was aiming at Blue Willow, who was struggling to free herself from the grasp of two strong men.

"You know I can pull this trigger faster than your arrow can fly," yelled the despicable ex-general to me. "Put that bow down, and I will spare her."

I had no choice. Blue Willow couldn't die on my accord. I slowly relaxed my hand and set down my weapon. Everywhere else, guns came up. They were all aimed at the villagers

below me, to ensure they resisted no more. Two soldiers cautiously approached me. Then, with growing confidence, they grabbed me. One of them backhanded me, and the other shoved his knee into my groin. I gave no resistance. By the time I had been dragged down to Solomon, I was no more than a mess of bruised flesh.

As I looked at Solomon through two now black eyes, he smiled. "I expected more from you, Red Coyote," he sneered, then sighed. "Just like your father." He grinned again at my shocked expression. He continued, "I was Custer's third in command, and I wanted more. I convinced him to go out after the Indians that had eluded us. I knew there would be an ambush, and I used the battle's cover to kill Custer, and then your friend's father, Nicolas Anderson. When I shot him, he was shaking hands with the enemy, a bloody savage. I killed him, too. After that, I expected no trouble, and for eight years, I had none. That is, until I found you in this village nine months ago."

Solomon continued, "I spotted the resemblance at once, and knew I had to dispose of you, for I couldn't have the ghost of a dead man plaguing my thoughts. Things got worse for me when I discovered Anderson had a son." He shook his head disgustedly. "When the only two people who could discover the truth about my position teamed together, I knew I had to do something. My plan was to kill you both at the fort, but you escaped. I thought I had William back in the camp, but my own plot turned against me." Again he shook his head.

"Anderson's last words to me were, 'I shall have your position filled by another man.' I thought that promise had died with him, but yesterday, my position was taken, and it was William's fault."

My mind spun. This man had killed my father. "Why are you telling me this?" I asked.

"Because," he answered, the volume of his voice escalating with every word, "I want you to know that you have failed. You have lost a war that has been raging for two generations. And now, you will watch your people die because you did not protect them. It will start with her!" Solomon pulled back the hammer, and an ominous click filled the silence.

Suddenly, something flew out from the crowd and landed on Solomon. He was knocked over, but he threw his attacker off and stood back up. Amanda scrambled to her feet and tried to run, but Solomon fired and she screamed. A red stain spread from her thigh, and when she tried to get up, cringed and collapsed.

"You do seem to be begging to die, Miss Smith," mused the cold-hearted man with the gun. "Never fear. Your time will come soon enough." Amanda's only reply was a look that would have killed faster than any bullet.

Solomon turned back to the still struggling Blue Willow. Again he pulled back the hammer, and again he took aim. Vainly, I strained against the hold of my captors.

There was movement in the crowd. Solomon pulled the trigger. In front of Blue Willow stood Chief Swift Feather. He doubled over, and blood spilled from his side through the fingers of his hand. The chief collapsed, and Blue Willow cried out. Solomon cursed.

“Why is it so #*!?! hard to kill you?” he demanded of Blue Willow. For the final time, he pulled the hammer back and aimed.

“NO!” I yelled.

BANG!

The sound echoed sadly through the land.

Chapter 20: William Anderson

I rode, faster than I'd ever ridden before. Personally, I hated being the one to run. I wasn't a coward, but Red Coyote refused to do it and there was no way I would let the girls risk being shot. There was definitely a lot of shooting. After I got out with Chester, half a dozen mounted men came after me with guns blazing.

The only issue was that Chester was tired. The young horse had been used to haul supplies for at least a week, and yesterday, people. He couldn't keep up this full sprint for long.

I directed Chester to turn behind a rocky outcropping. Out of sight, for the moment, of the soldiers, I stood on Chester's back and grabbed hold of a tree branch. The men rounded the corner as I pulled myself up. As I planned, they saw the chestnut coat of my steed and pursued him. When the last rider passed beneath me, I jumped off the branch and landed on the soldier and his horse. The rider was so surprised, he let go of the reins. I knocked his boots out of the stirrups and elbowed him off the horse. He gave a yelp of shock, which drew the attention of the other soldiers, but by then it was too late. I was already gone.

Most of them realized what happened and turned to pursue me. One particularly dense soldier still chased the rider-less Chester, and that was fine with me.

Soon, the soldiers caught up with me. One of them was right behind me. I glanced back him and found he was aiming a rifle at my back. For a second, I panicked. I was at the point blank range; he couldn't miss. I looked forward again and barely ducked as a low hanging branch flew by. The soldier behind me wasn't so lucky, and with his hands holding the gun, he was knocked off his horse. However, his foot got caught and he was dragged, screaming behind his steed.

I was getting close to the army's camp. The rim of the incline appeared out of the trees, and I didn't hesitate to urge the gray, dappled mare I was now riding to race down at full speed. I almost fell off on the steep slope. The three horsemen followed. The horse with the biggest rider stumbled and fell. It slid for a few feet and then got up and trotted away. The man did not escape so lightly. He had been trapped under the horse and sat groaning. His leg was bent at an awkward angle. Then I was gone, hurtling with my horse down the hill.

When I reached level ground, canvas tents surrounded us. I heard cursing and yelling, but I didn't care. I spotted the large command tent and headed directly to it. Solomon's men were closing in. soon, they would start shooting.

"Hey, William!" shouted a voice ahead of me, to the right.

"Watch your head!" came a cry to the left.

Then a voice from the center yelled, "Duck!"

I had no idea what was going on, but I got down as low as possible on the mare. A large rope whizzed over my head, but it caught the soldiers behind me full in the chest. Looking

behind, I saw Mike and Paul tying up the criminals while Matt waved to me. I smiled, and they disappeared behind a tent.

When I reached the command tent, I leaped off the panting horse and shoved her into the sentries that approached. While they were occupied, I rushed inside.

Both General Perkins and the newly named General Smith abruptly stood up when I crashed into the tent.

“What’s wrong, William?” demanded Perkins.

Arthur grinned and said, “Do you have anything to do with all the noise outside?”

“No time,” I gasped. “Solomon, at village...guns...prisoners.”

The generals paled and stood up. Without another word, they strode out of the tent and barked order to the startled men. In less than five minutes, both generals and a large legion of men thundered up the mountain on horseback, and I was leading the charge.

When we reached the village, the whole group stayed just out of sight. Orders were given, and everybody split up. The two generals stayed with me, and from our vantage point, we could see how all of our soldiers were progressing to their stations. We were too busy watching them creep around the rim of the steep cliff to designated positions to notice a Shoshoni boy scaling the same cliff. The gunshots totally took us by surprise.

When I recognized Red Coyote as the climber, I almost ran out from my cover. Arthur had to hold me back while Perkins fired twice in a row, straight up. It signaled not to begin the attack yet, and none of Solomon’s men would notice it between the firing of their own guns.

I thought we wouldn’t have to fight when Red Coyote aimed his bow at Solomon. When I realized the tyrant had Blue Willow, I knew what would happen. “Let’s attack now, before people start shooting,” I said.

Perkins shook his head. “We won’t start shooting until they do, so we can take the defensive side. It’s the only way we can legally fire upon our own troops.”

“Don’t worry,” Arthur whispered, “we’ve got it all under control.”

By then Red Coyote was held up by two soldiers next to Solomon. My heart stopped when he started speaking.

He had killed my father. I had spoken to him a dozen times, and he had murdered my father. Only one part of my brain was working, and that part wanted revenge.

“Give me your gun,” I commanded tensely.

Arthur replied, “No, I can’t do that. Solomon hasn’t fired yet, and with your intentions it would be murder.” He took me by the shoulders and looked me in the eye. “The world doesn’t run on revenge. It runs on honor and bravery. Don’t be part of the problem.”

Solomon pulled back on the hammer. “Somebody shoot him!” I cried desperately. “His first shot will kill her, and we’ll have done nothing to stop it!”

Then, Solomon was attacked. I saw Amanda jump up from the ground, she turned to run, but Solomon fired. Amanda screamed and fell to the ground.

Now Perkins was yanking his rifle from his back. Arthur just stood there, staring dumbly at the limp form of his sister.

General Perkins muttered a profanity. "I can't aim without making sure I don't hit one of the Natives." Solomon fired again. This time, the village's chief threw himself in harm's way. He took the full blow, and he collapsed. Somebody somewhere wailed hopelessly.

Seeing that Arthur was in no condition to fire a weapon, I said, "Let me."

"Do you know how to fire a weapon?" asked Perkins.

"No," I replied as I took the rifle.

Arthur surprised me. He quietly advised, "Aim with your heart." And I did.

The sound reverberated through the mountain. At first, I wasn't sure who fired first – me or Solomon. He just stood there. Slowly, inextolerably; he fell. He did not get up.

For a few moments, nobody moved. Then, our men burst from the trees and engaged Solomon's men in battle. The Natives surged forward and overcame the guards. Perkins thumped me on the back and leapt from our cover to assist his men. I simply stood there.

"So," said Arthur, I jumped; I thought I was alone. "why did you shoot?"

I stuttered, "I didn't want...anybody hurt...I wanted to help my friends...didn't know I would kill him."

Arthur nodded and replied, "I've done things I wish I hadn't. However, there is nothing more noble than to do something you didn't want to do to save your friends.

Feeling a little better, I nodded. Arthur took off into the fray. After stabilizing my emotions, I followed.

Most of Solomon's men had been captured, and nobody besides me had fired another gun. At first, I didn't know where to go. Then Red Coyote called me over.

He had Blue Willow in a gentle, comforting embrace, and I felt awkward intruding. I turned to go, but Red Coyote spoke over Blue Willow, "Thank you so much for your help."

"I only wish I could have done more," I replied in Shoshoni, gazing sadly at the chief.

Clever Rabbit was tending to Chief Swift Feather and she answered, "He still breathes. There is hope for him." Red Coyote and Blue Willow rushed over to him. I left so I didn't intrude.

My blood ran cold when I saw all four Smith brothers clustered together around someone. With the shock of killing a man, I had totally forgotten about Amanda. I rushed over, and Mike and Paul parted for me. Amanda was in Arthur's arms and Matt was dumping the water from his canteen onto a bandana.

"Amanda!" I exclaimed. "Don't die! Please don't die!" I knelt beside her and gripped her shoulders.

Suddenly, her eyes fluttered open, and she shoved me away. "I have no intention of dying anytime soon," she assured me with her old spark. "Solomon only shot my leg, and -!" I cut her off with a kiss.

At first, I pulled away, embarrassed. Then Amanda wrapped her arms around me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Smiths exchange grins. I kissed her again.

Chapter 21: Red Coyote

I couldn't believe it. Chief Swift Feather was still alive! However, his breathing was labored and his skin was pale from the blood loss. A feeble hope grew in my mind. Perhaps he would not die after all. The slightest chance was extinguished when I examined our chief closer. At such a close range, the pistol tore a gaping hole in his abdominal area. Even now, blood flowed out freely, despite Clever Rabbit's attempts to staunch the flow. He gasped like a beached fish, but his breaths were shallow.

"It's all my fault!" sobbed Blue Willow. "He will die to save me!"

Her father held her tightly. "No, it's not, daughter," reassured Running Deer. "Any of us would have done it, Chief Swift Feather was just the closest."

I felt that it was my fault he was dying, but I didn't say anything. Instead, I helped carry Chief Swift Feather into his wiki-up. Clever Rabbit shooed all of us out. Soon the Smiths and William came to join us in waiting anxiously. After about an hour, Clever Rabbit emerged from the wiki-up with a grim expression. "He has come to, but he is not doing very well. He wishes to speak to Running Deer and Blue Willow." Both of them hesitantly stepped forward and strode to the door of the chief's lodging and went in.

Five minutes later, they emerged. Blue Willow looked sad, but the guilt she carried was gone. Her father looked dumbfounded. His gaze settled somewhere in the distance. The both walked straight to me, Amanda and William.

"What is it?" worried Amanda as William picked her up.

Running Deer buried his head in his hands and said, "He really is going to die. He named a new chief."

"Who?" wondered William.

"Me," Running Deer whispered. "I can't do it, I'm not a leader - ."

Clever Rabbit came over and interrupted her husband. "You'll be a great chief. Don't ever think of yourself any less than you are," she scolded.

"Chief Swift Feather," began Blue Willow, then caught herself. "Swift Feather wishes to see you three." So, with Amanda in William's arms, we walked into his wiki-up.

The wiki-up looked much the same as when I had first sneaked in to figure out why soldiers were invading our village. I thought about the coincidence that all my problems began in here, and here they should end.

When he saw us, Swift Feather smiled and instinctively tried to get up. He winced, but did not cry out.

"Friends," he rasped. "I wish to thank you for your help in the most meaningful way I know. We gathered closer so he didn't have to strain his hoarse voice. First, he addressed Amanda and William. "Even though you and no connection here, you risked your lives to save my people. I shall now name you."

“Amanda, you fought as fierce as any animal I have ever seen. For that, your name shall be Fighting Lion, after your equally ferocious sister, the mountain lion.” Amanda puffed up with pride, living up to her new name. “And you, Willow Arm,” he said and then frowned. “I’m not sure why you are called that, but never mind. Without your help, the village would have been thrust into darkness. You were our light, and so your name shall be Rising Sun.” William obviously looked pleased with himself.

Swift Feather looked at me. “Lastly, your name will be Singing Wolf. You sang out for us always, remembering our traditions and standing up for us when nobody else would. As only a wolf can do, you put your people’s needs before your own with selfless devotion.”

The dying man looked at all of us admiringly. “I consider you all to possess great bravery. The greatest courage possible it to see through the eyes of your enemy,” at this he looked directly at William and me, “and then to live with another’s eyes.” Swift Feather’s head dropped to his bed. His countenance was pallid in the dim light, and he looked older than the mountains, although he was scarcely over forty. The effort he spent in talking to us must have been more that it appeared.

Silently, William walked away carrying Amanda. I turned to follow, but I was surprised by Swift Feather’s whispery voice. “Singing Wolf, stay for a moment.” I stepped back over to the leader.

“What do you plan to do when your friends leave?”

The question caught me off guard. “I’m not sure. I’ll probably stay to help rebuild the village.

“No,” he replied as he painfully shook his head. “You should go with them. It is your destiny. The gods have told me so.”

“Sir,” I began, “what about Blue Willow?”

Swift Feather stared seriously at me. “It is what both your parents would have done. Perhaps Blue Willow would go with you.”

“I don’t understand why?” I protested.

He smiled. “You will. This, the gods have also told me.” He turned his eyes toward the smoke hole and gazed contentedly. I left the once-great leader to his thoughts.

* * * * *

Swift Feather died that night. The whole village mourned for him, and even the sky wept. The storm’s thunder wailed with us and the water poured down the face of the mountain as tears cascaded down each person’s face. Even the White Men soldiers cried. They knew the passing of a great leader.

Then we danced. Not a rapid, happy jig like when we celebrated the success of Amanda and William. This was a slow dance, necessary during the ceremony of a soul passing on. It continued until the sun’s rays touched the earth again. With the coming of the sun, we started

reconstructing the village. Almost every wiki-up had been destroyed or ransacked between Solomon's ambush and the Crow's raid.

As I worked day after day, I thought about the different choice ahead. I knew I had to stay, for it was my duty, but my heart longed to go with my friends. Swift Feather had said it was my destiny. I guessed it boiled down to destiny or duty, and I didn't know what to choose.

I maintained a feeble hope that Amanda and William would stay, but that was shattered when the army left. They had stayed for a week, and when it seemed our village would be fine without their help, the army left. I heard all the Smith brothers talking to Amanda and William.

"So," began Arthur, "are you going to come with us, back to your homes?"

William shook his head, "No, there are too many people who are loyal to Solomon, and others would view what I did as murder."

"Honestly, I had a great experience. I've also heard that there are tribes all over the U.S. that are in the same predicament as this village. I want to help them," Amanda added.

Her brothers smiled. "Don't forget to come home for Christmas!" reminded Paul.

Mike put in, "And Easter!"

"Just don't forget about your family," concluded Matt. "You, too, William."

Arthur looked both of them in the eye and said, "If you need anything, then feel free to ask."

"Actually," replied William, "could you spare six horses?"

Arthur's eyebrows jumped up his forehead. "Why so many?"

Amanda shrugged. "Just in case," she answered.

The horses were brought before the army departed. One was our faithful Chester, and another was the dappled female that William rode to get help. I knew William and Amanda would leave, and that brought another dimension of reality to my dilemma.

The day after that, they proclaimed their intention to leave the next day. William pulled me aside and asked anxiously, "You are coming with us, aren't you?"

I sadly shook my head. "No, I'm staying."

William sighed. "Ok," he said and walked away.

That night, I dreamed. It was the same dream I always had. There was the same coyote in the same pre-dawn darkness. This time, when it raised its head to howl, I didn't wake up. The song was the most marvelous I'd ever heard. As the music filled my dream, the sun rose and as the rays hit the canine, it changed. The coyote grew, and it lost the reddish tint to its coat. The high, wavering cry dropped in tone to a melodious pitch. Only then did I wake up.

There was something about the dream I couldn't put my finger on. For the moment, I pushed it aside and dressed. I went to the center of the village, where Amanda and William offered their final farewells. As they spoke, my mind wandered back to my dream. Around me, people were yelling, "Goodbye, Fighting Lion! Goodbye, Rising Sun!" And then it clicked. The

canine the coyote in my dream had metamorphed into was a wolf. In the light of the sun, it flourished. William and I were destined to work together.

I had to find Blue Willow, to tell her goodbye. I knew it would be hard, so I prepared myself mentally. For some reason, she wasn't present in the crowd. I ran to her wiki-up and was completely taken off guard. She was calmly packing a saddle bag.

"Hello," she said cheerily.

At first, I was too stunned to speak. Then, I stated, "You knew I would go?"

"Why else would I be packing?" she replied.

I was overcome with emotion. "I'm sorry. I have to go. I love you." I embraced Blue Willow, but she pulled away and grabbed a second saddle bag.

"You do realize I'm coming, too, don't you?" she asked with amused curiosity.

I was shocked. Blue Willow was giving up her family and friends, and a normal life to come with me. "Let's go, then," I replied, "before William and Amanda get too far ahead." Blue Willow smiled, as though she knew something I did not.

We emerged from the wiki-up into the sunlight, and a great cheer met our ears. They wished us good luck and bade us farewell, but mostly urged us on until we were sprinting after our two companions. Soon after we entered the trees, I ran into the side of a very large horse.

"It's about time," chided William as his horse whinnied in annoyance, and I rubbed my head.

"All right, already," I declared, "What is going on here?"

Amanda explained, "Despite what you said about staying, everybody knew that you wanted to go. The whole village wanted what was best for you. That's why they were cheering." I nodded, and she continued. "As for us, we wanted you to come, but instead of pressuring you, we let your heart decide. Thinking that you would come, we got six horses instead of four and Blue Willow packed you a saddle bag. Turns out, we were right." She was beaming, so I smiled back.

Blue Willow and I each climbed on a horse and the four of us took off at a walk.

"Where to?" asked William after a ways.

Amanda, who was very fond of our mounts, suggested, "Let's let the horses decide."

William let go of the reins and leaned back, with his fingers laced behind his head. Stealthily, Amanda reached over and slapped the horse on the rump. It gave a start and trotted forward at a much brisker pace. William yelled, and managed to catch his balance before he fell off. Laughing, the four of us rode off following our horses and our hearts.

Epilogue

Thomas Thor stared at the foursome before him. How had this story never been told straight to the rest of the world? What these young adults had gone through could rewrite history. If the story got around, then perhaps more people would follow their example. The trapper made a mental note to tell this story wherever he went.

“How many tribes have you rescued?” Thor asked in wonder.

They looked at each other and shrugged. William guess, “Perhaps one in every state and territory west of the Mississippi.”

“The east side is too populated, and there aren’t many tribes left over there. Plus, there would be little we could do to help,” added Blue Willow.

Amanda said, “Wherever we go, we seem to get lawmen upset at us. I don’t see why. We’re not breaking any laws, only helping out when people need it.”

Her husband rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “Perhaps they don’t like being bested by a girl when they are accustomed to getting exactly what they want.”

“Hey,” she replied, “when somebody’s about to shoot a gun at somebody else, they deserve to get hit a couple of times.” The rest of her group smiled.

Singing Wolf explained, “We were heading home for Christmas when we were ambushed by a group of angry sheriffs. Actually, they’re now ex-sheriffs because we found replacements for all of them. There was one from New Mexico, a couple from California, one guy from Washington, an Idaho deputy, and one very persistent Colorado sheriff who has chased us all over the country.” The others nodded.

“You forgot the one from North Dakota,” added William.

Amanda grinned and said, “You get the idea.”

“Anyway, continued Singing Wolf, “they chased us through the mountains and we lost them in a storm. We were lucky to find this cabin.”

Blue Willow looked at Thor and said, “If you see them, please don’t - .”

They were interrupted by a pounding at the front door. “Open up!” shouted a nasally voice. “Open up, in the name of the law!”

“Quick, hide under the stairs!” whispered Thor to his youthful friends. When they were safely under the carved staircase, the trapper went to the door and opened it.

“What do you want at this hour?” growled Thor.

The one who had knocked proclaimed, “We are looking for four outlaws. They are hardly more than teenagers. Have you seen them?”

Thor pretended to think about it. “Well now, let me think,” he said slowly, “I passed them a few days ago. They told me they were going down to Utah.”

“Then explain to me,” snapped the man, “why there are six horse tethered out here?”

The trapper replied, "I run a trapping line out here. These horses haul my furs." He thanked his lucky stars that none of them noticed the saddle marks that could be seen on multiple horses.

"Then you surely won't mind if we come in to warm up a bit." It was not a question, but a statement, and before Thor could do anything, he was pushed aside and all the men filed in. he prayed against all odds that the little group was not spotted. The trapper looked to their hiding place, but they weren't there.

Another man, with a heavy Spanish accent asked, "Who is that couple there, and why are there so many logs in your cabin?" The cabin owners, an older looking couple, stood petrified on the stairs, but Thor answered for them.

"This is my brother and his wife, and they partner with me in the trapping business. And the firewood is in here to dry," stated Thor matter-of-factly.

The man wearing a cowboy hat, despite the weather, ordered one man to search the cabin and another to search outside for footprints. Thor knew this was the end. There was no way they could get out of the cabin and leave no marks in this fresh snow. When both men reported back with no clues, Thor was thoroughly confused.

"Well, thanks for your hospitality," sneered the nasal-voiced man. "Boys, we're off to Utah!" With that, they swept out of the cabin and Thor never saw them again.

After the couple went back to bed, Thor ran through the cabin checking everywhere the four could be, but he found as much as the sheriffs did – nothing. Thinking the scout outside must have missed something, the trapper rushed out.

The first thing he noticed was that the horses were gone. Sure enough, there were tracks leading to a deep snow bank. Thor found deep impressions there, but then the tracks just disappeared. A clump of snow landed on his raccoon cap, and he looked up. Some of the snow had been knocked off, and then Thor understood. While his larger frame blocked the door, the hunted group had somehow climbed onto the roof and waited there until their pursuers had gone. While he had vainly searched the house, the foursome made their move by jumping from the roof.

The trapper admired these unsung heroes. They had ingenuity, strength and the young, able bodies needed to execute their plans.

Suddenly, movement caught his eye, and he looked up at a moonlit ridge jutting out from the Tetons, rising above the treetops. Four mounted figures and two packhorses galloped up, then paused as though they sensed Thor watching them. All four reared up in a great farewell and thundered down, out of sight. The trapper smiled. For just a short time, he had seen through another's eyes. Slowly, he turned and walked back to the welcoming warmth of the cabin.