

## Chapter 1

The sun blazed directly overhead, and the white clouds floated crisply over the clearest blue sky. Hawks circled and swooped, lazily following air currents and avoiding the screeching blackbirds. The prairie below was a waving sea of vivid green speckled with white and yellow wildflowers. Striped gophers raced through the waving grass, darting into their holes when the shadow of the hawk darkened their path, shooting out again when the going was safe. Rolling grassland gave way to rugged foothills and scrubby pine. The air smelled of plum blossoms and wood smoke laced with the warm, fertile scent of newly-thawed ground.

Behind this idyllic scene, the Black Hills stood like old guards, still and watchful. From a distance, they resembled the strong, arched back of an animal dusted with dark trees, thick as fur. Up close, the trees transformed from black to dark green, and the rock became gray threaded with red veins. The Indians were careful not to cross into the weathered Hills with the whites watching. Since Custer had discovered gold in French Creek, the Paha Sapa had been forbidden to the people who considered it the center of their world.

The truce between the Lakota and the government that herded them into smaller and smaller plots was uneasy, superficial. It was not half a year earlier that the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, the blue-clad Garry Owens, surrounded the Miniconjou and Hunkpapa Lakota, old men, women, children, and warriors together, on the banks of Wounded Knee Creek. The 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry were the regiment famed for losing a shoot-out with Wild Bill Hickok and following Custer to Little Bighorn. They sealed their legacy with 30/40 Krag-Jorganson carbines and Colt revolvers at Wounded Knee at the end of an icy December. Mistaking the confusion of a young and deaf Miniconjou warrior for

insurrection, they opened fire at count-your-buttons range. The resulting chaos left 300 Lakota and 25 Garry Owens dead, the latter felled by their own bullets as often as not. After a screaming blizzard passed, civilians were hired to bury the frozen, contorted Indian corpses in a common grave.

Five months later, the Wiwanyag Wachipi, the sacred Sun Dance, had drawn Oglala Lakota from all over western South Dakota to the base of the Hills. They-Fear-Even-His-Horses' was the biggest and strongest band, but Three Bears', Black Twins', and other bands had gathered as well. Even some tiwahe from Crazy Horse's tiospaye had arrived, though that great leader was many years dead. Hundreds of Lakota were together, cousins and uncles, friends and aunts, greeting each other joyfully. Ululations rippled through the air and a steady drum beat rumbled along the earth.

Office of Indian Affairs agents and army ranks shifted uncomfortably on the outskirts of the massive gathering. "You're going back to your reservation after this, right?" the blue-eyed lieutenant had asked They-Fear-Even-His-Horses on the first day. "It's fine to meet up like this once or twice a year. Hell, my relatives get together like this on Christmas. But afterwards, we all go back to our own homes. You're going back to your own homes after this, right? We don't need no one on the shoot."

They-Fear-Even-His-Horses had nodded. There was much preparation, too much to waste time talking of fear. His band had avoided the Wounded Knee massacre and kept to their assigned reservation area during the year but had not built the claim shanties or become grass farmers as the government demanded. His people were one of the last holdouts, and he would confer with the other Oglala leaders after the ceremony, after they had given thanks.

On the first day of their arrival, the Lakota bands' leaders chose the cottonwood tree at the center of the gathering to be their sun pole. The holy tree had leaves shaped like hearts. When the leaves were twisted, they resembled a tipi, and flat they became the footstep of a moccasin. If an upper branch of the tree were split open, inside would be a perfect, five-pointed star representative of the Great Spirit. They had always used the cottonwood for the ceremony.

Around the upper branches of the cottonwood, the chosen young men tied colored rags to symbolize the four directions—red for north, white for south, black for west, and yellow for east. Lakotas had danced, prayed, sang, and fasted around the tree the first day, eating nothing and drinking only peppery sage tea. The whites watched uneasily, shifting their weight and checking their guns. Their disquietude grew on the second day as a handful of young Lakota men lined up in front of the sun pole, shirtless, their chests sun-darkened and runneled as rock. All songs and prayers stopped when the Holy Man stepped in front of the warriors. The silence echoed off the backbone of the Hills, a surprised rush of air and nature after a day of human song.

When the Holy Man spoke, his voice was fluid, each word rising and falling like the waves on a lake. He offered prayers to the four directions and sang ancient words to the men. While still ululating, he went to each warrior in turn, pinching a thick fold of skin on the man's chest with his forefinger and thumb. He squeezed tightly to numb the flesh before piercing it with a knife that had a specially carved handle. The sun glinted off the bloodied silver of the blade when it flashed out the other side, but the warriors did not flinch.

Twisting the knife to widen the hole, he inserted a skewer of bone as thick as a child's finger, his movements quick and practiced. The bone was attached on the other end to the sun pole. He sewed the men to the cottonwood tree one by one. Women began to keen, imagining their son's pain. Once all the men were connected to the pole by their flesh, they stretched out

their arms and leaned back, crying out in agony and gratitude. They did this for their people, as they always had.

The singing and dancing and drumming resumed, feverishly, expectantly.

For four days these men remained tied to the pole, dancing and shivering in their bloody circle, suffering for those they loved, taking the pain of others onto themselves, singing their gratitude for their families. Some passed out for a spell but struggled to their feet when their senses returned. They kept dancing, even as the sweetish smell of infection set into their chest wounds, urinating and defecating on themselves. A steady drum rhythm pushed them to constant movement as the sun beat down on their festering wounds during the day and the insects feasted on them at nightfall. They sang thanks for their people, and their spirits never wavered. Every movement ripped into their skin and rubbed the skewer into their raw muscle, and they prayed as blood ran down their chests, crusted, and ran anew.

The OIA agents had seen it all before. Eleven of the twelve assigned cavalry members, however, had been recently stationed to this part of the country and were unfamiliar with the Sun Dance. The ceremony was savage and strange, and the men muttered among themselves, nervous. It didn't take a smart man to understand that Indians who'd crucify themselves like that might not stop at personal violence. They had orders, though. They were to do nothing at the Sun Dance.

The powerful dancing and wailing continued until the fifth day, when the sun slunk low on the horizon. The hawks and striped gophers were gone, and the white clouds had blown east. The young warriors were past exhausted, halfway between this world and the next, their faces etched in pain from their sacrifice and their prayers. When the medicine man walked around and whispered to each of them, though, he spoke of Wakan Tanka, the Great Mystery. It replenished

their spirits, and they felt stronger, cleaner, than they ever had before despite the days of deprivation and pain. The keening around them grew louder because the people knew what was about to happen. As one, the braves roared to the sky and ran backward from the sun pole, tearing their raw and wounded skin and leaving their flesh offering. The Lakota people cheered, their voices hoarse from days of singing and praying.

Each cavalry man tightened his grip on his rifle when he witnessed the warriors rend their skin like a fish ripping off a hook. At this point, the soldiers were watching each other as much as they attended the Indians. Any emotion, any twitch of a trigger finger by one would sweep like a fever over them all, so they were careful to hide their unease. Here, they were outnumbered, and caution was the order.

I was proud to be Oglala, and never more so than in this moment, with our Sun warriors trembling on the ground, hot red blood cracking through the dried crust covering their wounds.

Unable to sit any longer, I ran toward my cousin. It was not proper to elbow past the elders, but I couldn't tolerate waiting. I had watched Cetanwakuwa, Attacking Hawk, shiver with pain over the course of the Dance, proud tears warming my eyes when he continued his dance without faltering. He needed to be tended to. He deserved praise.

"Keya!" I stopped at the sound of my name, chin dipping to my chest. "Ohitika Keya! U we!"

"Sorry, grandmother." The straight and tiny figure of my mother's mother stood like a rock in the river of Lakota streaming past her to honor the warriors. I could tell by the way she pressed her hand into her hip that her back was bothering her. My guilt grew. I backtracked to stand beside Waken-Mani.

Her eyes sparkled. I loved the lines on her face, the deep rock crevices that spoke of her strength and her years. Her tone was kind even as words reproached me. “It is time to tend to our men. I need your help.”

“Yes, grandma.” The quiet strength of the wizened woman radiated like heat from the sun. I absorbed it from her as I had done since I was three, when my parents had died of the coughing sickness. I didn’t remember them, but my sisters sometimes spoke of our mother, hair black and glossy like a crow, and our father with a nose like a bear claw. He had been a legendary hunter, and our mother a fine cook. People missed them, but many had died when the sickness passed through the band. Even Waken-Mani, who knew so much about herbs and healing, couldn’t help them all.

As the oldest and most skilled healer at the Sun Dance, she was allowed to visit each wounded warrior before they were taken to the inipi for purification. She knelt by Attacking Hawk first and caressed the sleek black hair of her second daughter’s oldest son. “You make us proud, Cetanwakuwa. The spirits smile at us all because of the great strength of our Sun Dancers.”

He nodded weakly at his grandmother but found an exhausted grin for me when I sidled closer. “Well, Iktomi, do you think I brought honor to the band?”

I couldn’t hide my grin. I’d earned the nickname of the mythical trickster at a young age. Sometimes it made me cross when I was called that, but the attention of the Sun Dance warrior made me puff up. “Everybody saw it, Cetan. You were the bravest dancer there.”

He chuckled and it turned into a dry cough. Reaching out to me from the ground where he kneeled, he said, “You can hold my brave hand now, girl. I fear our grandmother’s wound cleansing and sage salve is going to be more painful than a thousand Sun Dances.”

Waken-Mani clucked in the back of her throat. “Your wound tore cleanly. It only needs balm and a bandage. Keya can tend to you while I check on the others.”

My eyes widened. A twelve-year-old girl tending to a Sun Dance warrior was unheard of. Walks Sacred Woman was bestowing on me a great honor. “Yes, Waken-Mani.” I reached for the pot of green, spicy-scented salve and knelt next to my cousin, biting my bottom lip. I’d helped to mix herbs for medicines and set bones, but had to concentrate to still the trembling in my hands as I reached toward Attacking Hawk’s bloodied chest. Even in the noisy mix of Lakota congratulating their warriors, I felt the eyes of the tribe on me.

“Did it hurt very much, Cetanwakuwa, to pull away from the pole?”

He drew in a sharp breath when the salve touched his muscled, ravaged chest. I dabbed it on thick, too thick. Grandmother would scold me for wasting the precious balm, but I couldn’t bear to apply more pressure than necessary. Even with the fat layer of salve, the raw heat of his wounds reached toward my fingers.

“The spirit dances elsewhere while the body suffers. It’s only now that the pain comes back, but the people bear it with me. Look around you.” He gestured at the tribe members kneeling beside the sun pole, clapping warriors on their backs, laughing even as tears streamed down their cheeks and their eyes glittered somberly at the sacrifice they had witnessed. “We share the pain so that we all grow stronger.”

“I’m going to be a Sun Dancer someday.”

He smiled ruefully. “I don’t think so, Iktomi. Your spirit has landed in a girl’s body. Your path is as a healer, and a gifted one at that.” He indicated his chest, which glistened with salve.

I drew myself up. “But I have my own bow and arrow, if someone would teach me to use it. And I can track an animal in the dark, over water and up trees.”

“This is true,” he said seriously. “And the tribe is lucky for the skills you have. But you’re in a band. We’re like one animal. Everyone cannot be the arms, even though they get to reach the farthest. Not everyone can be the eyes, though they get to know the future before the ears. We must fulfill the part we are born to.”

I pouted but did not speak as I wrapped a bandage around my cousin’s chest, allowing enough room for air to breathe on the wound but not so much that dirt could enter. He was right. I’d heard it from others, and from the circle of elders that I’d eavesdropped on the first night of the ceremony. The Lakota were under attack, a quiet but constant invasion that crept in like the fog, and we must work together to survive. Thousands had died since the whites had arrived, through slaughter and famine, and still the Lakota were being herded into smaller and smaller areas, like hunted deer, or the buffalo that the whites had killed to extinction a handful of years earlier.

We could no longer roam the prairies, following our food sources as our people had for as long we’d walked the earth. We couldn’t enter our most sacred place, the Paha Sapa, to commune with our ancestors. Now, the whites even watched our Sun Dances, their presence like the cold eye of a buzzard on the perimeter of our holy ceremony.

Even so, I loved the spring gathering that brought me closer to the Paha Sapa. Last night I had snuck into the forbidden Hills, heart racing, to leave a prayer bag tucked in a tree, as I had been doing at least once a season since I was old enough to be out of grandmother’s sight. At first, it had been the taboo of the Hills that had called to me, but once I was in the full embrace of the Paha Sapa, bright threads travelled from my hands through my torso to my feet, into the ground, anchoring me to the warm earth. I’d never told anyone about my hanco’kan adventures

because I was worried it would silence the song of the Hills begging me to come back. I never wanted to be deaf to that. My heart only danced when it was in the Hills.

“You’ll be what you were born to, won’t you Iktomi?” Cetanwakuwa pulled me back into the moment with his hoarse words.

“I’ll bring honor to my family, Cetan.” A blush warmed my cheeks as I thought to the trick I’d played on Jumping Fish. He was a sweet-tempered boy from my band, which made him a perfect target. After two days I had grown bored sitting still at the Sun Dance and had leaned over to whisper in Brown Elk Standing’s ear. “Bet I can get Jumping Fish to rub the earth with his head.”

Brown Elk Standing had scoffed at me, as I knew he would, but I persisted. He had a beautiful eagle feather woven in his hair, and I wanted it almost as much as I wanted to tease him. “Bet you your feather I can get Jumping Fish to do it. Or are you scared to lose it?”

That was too much, the suggestion that he would be scared of a girl, and he made the deal. I lured Jumping Fish away from the main gathering, careful to avoid the eyes of the elders. I needn’t have worried. Their focus on the Dance was absolute. Once I was a safe distance from the circle but still within eyeshot of Brown Elk, I put my ear to the ground and told Jumping Fish the Sun Dance had infused me with power, and I could now hear the footsteps of the last surviving buffalo, and these sounds would lead me to the herd. The most difficult part of the trick was keeping the bubbling laughter inside. “Can you hear them, Jumping Fish? Can you hear the rumble of the buffalo?”

He glanced over his shoulder at the Sun Dance and back at me, his fingers playing with the fringes at the edge of his shirt. It had taken so much coaxing to pull the trusting child from the ceremony. I was not going to quit until I’d reached my goal.

“You can’t hear buffalo that way,” he said. His voice sounded like it was arguing with itself. “Anyhow, there aren’t even any buffalo left. My father told me.”

I stood and shrugged, hiding my smile behind a cough. He had swallowed the bait. “It is good to believe your father.”

I brushed pine needles and tree dust from the worn knees of my best dress. One of the four beaded ornaments dangling from the yoke was missing. Grandmother would pinch my ear for that, if she saw it. I moved over my necklace, constructed from the bottom plate of a turtle shell and painted the shape and color of the four directions, to cover the bedraggled area. Pretending I was reminiscing, I spoke to the air. “Probably about 30, 40 by the sound of it. For sure a granddaddy in the bunch.”

He looked at me, a pained expression in his eyes. “You can’t hear that. Not from the ground.”

“All right.” I nodded as if he’d spoken wise words. “I’m going back to the Dance. We’ve been away too long. The white men are watching us. You coming?”

“Naw.” He drew the word out, darting a glance to the woods. “I have to pee.”

“I will look for you when you are done.”

I skipped off toward the Dance, not risking a glance back even though I was itching to. A wide-eyed Brown Elk Standing stared intently over my shoulder, though, and knew his feather would soon be mine. I laughed aloud. Lakota children were taught at a young age to value people above possessions, but where would be the fun in him simply handing me the feather?

“How do you do it?” Brown Elk Standing hissed when I reached the outer perimeter of the Sun Dance Circle. “How’d you get him to scratch the earth with his head?”

I turned, finally, to see gullible young Jumping Fish with his ear to the ground, straining to hear the music of buffalo. Still laughing, I accepted the feather from Brown Elk. It now shone brightly in my hair, and felt like the softest leather against my face as I leaned forward to help a groaning Centanwakuwa to rise. It was time for the warriors to enter the inipi, and they did so with straight backs, even though their knees creaked and standing tall brought fresh blood blossoming through their bandages. I watched the men go into the ceremonial tipi, my heart swollen with pride. My expression was reflected on the faces of all my people

Because of the success of the Sun Dance, all the bands would eat to their limit tonight, and much strength would be given to the nation. The warriors had done well, and they would be purified in the inipi lodge. When they emerged, the night's celebration would be loud and long to acknowledge the pain and deprivation of the previous year.

Any leftover meat the next day would be parceled out equally among each family to be turned into wasna. The women in each band would dry their venison steaks and pound them into powder. The powder would be mixed with melted fat and wild berries, probably the tart strawberries the women and children harvested during the Moon of Green Leaves, then poured into hide bags with melted fat drizzled on top to seal it.

But that was tomorrow. Tonight was for celebrating. The white men relaxed as the filthy, limping, bloodied warriors disappeared into the largest of the tents and we returned to our whooping and hollering. The blood must have made them nervous.

The breeze from the rolling prairie blew through the rocks, bringing the scent of roasting meat with it. My mouth grew wet at the thought of the venison stew with onions and turnips, rich and dark to fill every crack in my belly. I had been playing hehaka since the warriors had entered the inipi, trying to catch the tossed ring on one of its seven points. But when the wife of They-

Fear-Even-His-Horses made the cry announcing the meal, we all scattered to our tents as fast as prairie dogs.

“Ohitika Keya!” Waken-Mani smiled at me, not angry even though my hair had been teased loose from my braids by the warm summer air. “You help Sings in the Morning carry food to the men in the sacred tipi. Make sure there are enough bowls.”

I nodded and was about to run off when grandmother stopped me. “You did well with Cetanwakuwa. His bandages were even and not too tight.”

“Thank you.” I turned to hide my pleased smile. Too much pride was a bad thing. I counted the hollowed-out gourds. There were plenty. She played her hands over the cool, smooth interior of each, making sure no dirt had found its way in. The murmur and laughter of two hundred people sharing work and stories hummed like a song around me. Bustling and laughing women stirred their pots of stew perched over pungent pine fires. The air was fat with the scent of boiled meat and juicy spring vegetables dug from the ground. My stomach growled, louder than before. Waken-Mani patted my shoulder.

“Ai, Keya, you’ve grown like a pigweed!” Sings in the Morning strode over and yanked me by my long, disheveled braids and chuckled good-naturedly. She was a round, moon-cheeked woman, chubby from all the fry bread she liked to eat. Shell earrings hung from the beaded belt at her waist and clicked as she walked. “And look at your festival dress. You’ve lost half the beads, and it’s as dirty as a root! What will your grandma say?”

I pulled away, my chest tight. She was treating me as though I was much younger. “She doesn’t care.”

“Not when her granddaughter is such a good healer, following in her moccasins, eh?” Sings in the Morning smiled over my shoulder at grandmother. “I suppose none of us care today.

The Sun Dance has gone well. Here, scoop the stew into these bowls, and I will carry it over to the inipi. The dancers will be starving. We are blessed that they all survived the Dance.”

I ladled the meat and its juices into the gourds and balanced them on Sings in the Morning’s arms, wishing I could sneak a taste. It would be bad to fill my belly before the dancers, who had given so much to the people, but just a lick couldn’t hurt. When Sings in the Morning turned toward the inipi, I dipped my finger into the stew pot and immediately burnt the tip. I dared a glance over my shoulder. Sure enough, grandmother was staring at me, her eyes pinning me in place. Why did she always see my mistakes? I looked away, pretending to be distracted by the horses stomping their hooves at the outskirts of camp.

Sings in the Morning returned, rescuing me from too much guilt. “The men have their food. Find your sisters. We’ll all eat together.”

I whooped and skipped through the families enjoying their feast. The tipis had been placed in a wide circle around the cottonwood tree, leaving room for a gathering area in the middle. Friendly hands pinched my calves as I passed, offering me gentle smiles and asking about Grandmother, or my sister Moon in the Water and less so my other sister Unfortunate Smile, or they asked of my beading and quilling skills. I said all the right words and didn’t run toward the food like I wanted to, but hunger burned like itchweed inside of me.

“Ai!” said a woman from Little Hawk’s band, the one Cetanwakuwa’s wife had come from. “Can’t you see the girl is hungry? Let her go eat. Ohitika Keya, don’t stop for any more talking. It’s no good to be hungry with so much food around. You come back later and listen to our stories when the moon is up and your belly is full.”

I leaned over to kiss her cheek. She pushed me away, laughing, and I dashed off, trying to ignore the white men shuffling near the tipis like unhealthy ghosts. They made me nervous, but I

would not let them see that. Grandmother had told me many times not to be afraid of white men. She had seen her first one many seasons ago when she had gone to the trading post with Grandfather, who used to be the head of this band. The men at the post had fascinated her, she'd told Keya, their hide so thin and bright that she could see the blood beating underneath it. The sun did not appreciate these people, these loud, fast people who walked on the world instead of with it, and it let them know by burning their skin off of their faces.

One man at the post had spoken Lakota, and it was he Grandfather had dealt with.

"He is a good man. He only talks out of one side of his mouth," Walks Sacred Woman's husband had told her.

"Ai," Grandmother had told him, "that is because you only hear the Lakota side. The language that comes out the other side might be saying different things." But she respected Grandfather's opinion for he was a good judge of character and often right about the weather, and the time to hunt and the time to gather.

Grandmother had told me that this man who spoke Lakota had greeted them warmly every time they came, and he did not stare at them as if they were a two-headed bird, as so many of the other white men did, with their heavy uniforms and hairy faces. He traded fairly, taking their beautiful quillwork, beading, and furs in exchange for ammunition, metal tools, and dried goods the Lakota had developed a taste for, including flour which we used for the fry bread Sings in the Morning loved to eat. He also distributed our government beef rations.

So I knew from Grandmother's stories that a white man could be kind, but I still didn't trust them. Their eyes were too bright, their skin too thin and sunburnt, their stink like old meat and sour juice.

I kept wide away from them until I found Moon in the Water, my oldest sister, making doe-eyes at the inipi. She was so enchanted by the song of the men inside that she didn't see me sneak up on her. When I tapped her shoulder, she jumped, saw it was me, and sighed before returning to stare at the sweat lodge as if it were emitting birdsong.

"Did you see Neither Deer Nor Buffalo dancing, Keya?" she asked, her attention on the inipi. She was a pretty woman, with her sleek hair and bright eyes. The boys liked to smile at her, and bring her pheasants or rabbits they'd hunted in hopes of praise. "He must be the strongest warrior here!"

I rolled my eyes. "You look like a baby staring at a tit. If any man was the strongest, it was Cetanwakuwa. Now it's time to eat. Find our sister and bring her back to Sings' tipi."

Moon in the Water pushed off the ground reluctantly. "I'm the oldest. You find Unfortunate Smile on your own."

Our middle sister had been named after our great-grandmother, an excellent storyteller and skilled tanner of hides. The old woman also had few teeth toward the end of her life, which made it difficult for her to chew meat. The story went that our great-grandfather joked that she had an unfortunate smile that allowed the wind to blow in and out. Her great-granddaughter had inherited none of her storytelling ability and was a solitary young woman who always looked as if she had eaten a sour cherry. I thought she should have been named Angry Gut, or, when she was particularly mean to me, Face-Enters-the-Tipi-First after her bulbous nose, which everyone said was the spitting image of great-grandfather's.

I located her behind a horse-sized boulder on the edge of the foothills, running a stick through the dirt. Shadows were beginning to fall. Crabbiness rolled off of her like the stink off a skunk. I wanted to tease her but was too hungry.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “Do you even know the Sun Dance has been successful?”

“Isn’t it always?” She didn’t look up.

“We are very lucky.”

Unfortunate Smile glanced at me, her eyes burning with a familiar resentment. “You look ridiculous with that feather in your hair. Doesn’t it belong to a boy?”

I ran my finger over the soft feather, bound to my straggled braid with a piece of elk hide. Studying my sister’s pinched face and unhappy eyes, an idea took shape despite my growling hunger. “It was Cetanwakuwa’s, but he gave it to me. He said that he got it from Neither Deer Nor Buffalo, who wanted to give it to a beautiful girl with a sad smile.” I batted my eyelashes at her, not too much.

“When it came time to hand the feather over to this lovely ray of light, this girl with eyes as dark as the Hills and skin the color of holy pipestone, Neither Deer Nor Buffalo realized he was too shy. He just couldn’t go through with it, for fear the girl would reject him. Neither Deer Nor Buffalo decided that if he wasn’t brave enough to approach this girl, he didn’t deserve to wear the feather of the eagle. That’s how Cetanwakuwa came by the feather.”

Unfortunate Smile leaned in grudgingly. “Who was the girl?”

I paused for effect and leaned forward, my eyes deliberately wide. “You are the beautiful girl, the heartbreaker of warriors. It is you who has compelled Neither Deer Nor Buffalo to give up his prized eagle feather.” Lying, like stealing and hoarding, was unheard of among the Lakota. Storytelling, I had decided, was an entirely different matter.

A vulnerable expression flitted behind Unfortunate Smile's eyes before she snuffed it out. She snorted. "If Neither Deer Nor Buffalo so much as looked at me, I'd tell him to go climb a tree. A tall, sticky pine tree."

I wagged my finger at her, just as Grandmother had done to me many times before. "You're feeling sorry for yourself again. Grandmother said a girl who thinks about herself all the time is stealing from her tribe."

Unfortunate Smile snapped the branch in half, stood, and stomped toward the camp without looking back. "I'm not a girl," she muttered over her shoulder.

It was true. Both of my sisters had gone through the ceremony guiding them from girl to woman, the Ishna Ta Awi Cha Lowan. It hadn't succeeded, as far as I could see. One sister was as much a hunter of boys' attention as ever and the other was perpetually staring into water. Better to be a girl than a woman, though if my sisters' paths were any indication, I would be in the tipi for my own rite of passage before the winter. I hoped not.

The simmering smell of stew called to me, and I raced back to the camp, passing pokey Unfortunate Smile as the tipis came into sight. "Last one to the cooking pot gets the buffalo snot!" I flew around the families eating on the ground, most of them laughing with mouths full, stopping when my tipi was in sight. I threw myself between Grandmother and Sings in the Morning. They had saved a bowl of stew for me, and it tasted like fresh air, a warm bed, and blue sky.

###

The journey back to each of the tiospaye's camps would take several days. The women and children packed up the tipis and belongings and started ahead of the men, who would follow after they had finished conferring. Many years earlier, the government had told them they

weren't allowed to live as a tribe anymore. They were to take care of only themselves, each isolated family on their 320 acres. Every band except those gathered at the foot of the Black Hills had obeyed. These leaders needed to plan, blessed by the strength the Sun Dance had given them.

The women and children dismantled the camp as the men talked. Their people had been setting up their homes, living in one spot for a time and then packing up to follow the buffalo herds, for hundreds of years. The women and children moved as one, disassembling and packing the tipis and household goods with the same amount of effort they took to breathe. The women of They-Fear-Even-His-Horse's band said goodbye to their men and traveled due east from the ceremony on foot or horseback.

As the dark mountains receded behind them, I thought, as I always did, of the story of the Black Hills which said once you left, you could never return to the same spot. You would turn around, and the Hills would be gone. That story always seemed ridiculous to me when we first rode away. The Hills were as tall as the sun. They couldn't just disappear, but that's exactly what they eventually did two or three days after leaving, and that first glance back after they'd passed out of sight would always momentarily stop my heart. But I found that with practice, I could always hear the Hills, even if I couldn't see them. They hummed in my bones.

Our first night away from the Sun Dance, I could still see the shape of the Hills behind them, reassuring. Grandmother, who was the leader when it was only women and children, stopped the group to make camp. We were in a beautiful spot, the waves of the prairie dotted with orange and gold butterflies and fast-moving animals. Maybe I could sneak away to try out my bow and arrow.

“Keya! Help me to unload this pack.”

I paused the dance I had been practicing alongside Grandmother's horse, a little jig of fluid hops and turns accompanied by the song of the Hills in my head. "Can one of my sisters also help?"

"They are with Talking Crow and her babies, assisting her to prepare their beds. If you want to eat and sleep, you help."

"Yes, grandmother."

As orderly as ants, the women pulled out the supplies they would need for the night. They had packed the necessities on the top, knowing that they would stop seven or eight times before they reached the remote, lush riverside where they had been living since the winter.

I was the first to hear the distant rumble of horses pounding toward us. My pulse quickened. Was it our men, joining us so soon? I stopped what I was doing and turned to the west. Soon, the rest of the women and children did the same. An excited whisper ran through our people.

I judged the horses before the men, and my heart plummeted; they did not belong to our band. Shortly, it was clear that the riders were not even Indians. They were white men. When thinking about this day years later, I would remember the bitter taste of dust in my mouth.

Ten men galloped toward us, two wagons not far behind. They were the soldiers from the Sun Dance. Their faces were tight, expressionless, except those who wore a smirk that chilled my blood. I forced my legs to carry me to Grandmother's side. I stood tall next to her.

I had seen whites up close only at this most recent Sun Dance. Settlers and their wagons had passed through the reservation but we were told to avoid contact, as we avoided the cabins and claim shanties of whites that were springing up on the prairie like bluestem grass. White

soldiers had been raiding Indian camps since the massacre at Wounded Knee, but they had never before bothered They-Fear-Even-His-Horse's people.

Not until now.

A rock settled in my belly and my head felt stuffed with clouds. Our men were not here, only children and women. The rest of the band would not join us for two or three more sunrises. Grandmother stood as straight as her aged back would allow, but I felt her trembling. The other women and children began to gather in a half circle behind us.

The leader on the white horse galloped up to Walks Sacred Woman. He did not dismount. Behind him, the wagons pulled up. One was loaded with cargo but the other was not like anything I had seen before. It was boarded on all four sides and the top with only one opening, a barred window no larger than a fox hide. The wood was black, oily. Looking at the cage on wheels made my throat tighten. I reached for my Grandmother. Her hand stayed limp.

"Hau," the leader on the white horse said. "Children go to us."

My blood iced over. His Lakota was not good, but I could understand it. I shivered looking into his ghostly eyes the color of the sky. He was the leader of the soldiers, the one who had spoken to the Indian elders at the Sun Dance. There, he had acted afraid. Here, he was as cold as gunmetal.

"No. Our children stay with us." Walks Sacred Woman's voice was steady, but her hand quivered near mine.

I had heard stories of the white men stealing children and not returning them for many seasons, if ever. I had even spun some of these tales myself to scare my friends over an evening fire. I'd always repeated what I'd overheard: the Lakota children who came back were ghostwalkers, not fit for this world or the next. The memories of those stories tasted like ash.

“They come back,” the white man on a white horse said. “You no worry. We make better. We teach.”

Jumping Fish wiggled next to Grandmother, clinging to her skirt, his eyes wide with terror. He knew the stories. Walks Sacred Woman ignored him, her face as still as stone. “No, we raise our children ourselves. They will stay with us. When our leader returns, you can talk to him about any agreement you’ve made.”

The man on the white horse gazed down at her, and then quickly glanced around the partially-erected camp. There were 20 women and twice as many children. A soldier made a grunting comment to his leader, who silenced him with a stare. A sharp gesture to the other riders, and they all dismounted, grabbing at the children nearest them, who were too quick at first. Some darted back into tipis and others hid behind their mothers.

We were screaming.

Walks Sacred Woman grabbed the rope of the white horse, her voice loud. “You have made a mistake. Our children stay with us. Please leave us.” The horse tossed its head and whinnied, but she did not release it.

The leader shouted something in his language, and his men began to rip open the doors of the standing tipis. A wail rose up as the mothers cried and struggled to hold their children but were kicked aside. One of the taller riders, his hair as white as snow, shoved Talking Crow with all his strength. She hit her head when she fell, laying silent and still, her fallen infant screaming next to her. I stood next to Grandmother, paralyzed, oblivious to the warm trickle of urine running down my legs.

The men grabbed any child taller than their waist and thrust them into the back of the first wagon that was really a cage on wheels. One man stayed free of the commotion, manning the door to the wagon-room so that once the children were in, they could not escape.

The scene was chaos, and the leader still on his white horse yelled at Walks Sacred Woman, who had let go of the horse's reins to grasp Jumping Fish. She was pulling on one of his arms as a soldier pulled on the other end. Jumping Fish was screaming. Still, I hadn't moved. I watched it all as if from a great distance, my heartbeat booming in my ears, my skin hot and cold at the same time.

"Tell them no fight. They no fight, they no been hurt," the soldier yelled.

Jumping Fish was ripped, crying in terror, out of Grandmother's hands, and she fell to the ground at my feet. Behind her, Unfortunate Smile and Moon in the Water were each being carried over the shoulder of a man. Moon in the Water cried for help, and Unfortunate Smile fought like a trapped mountain cat. Still, I could not move.

And then, a black-haired soldier lunged toward me.

"No!" Walks Sacred Woman yelled.

I twisted, my paralysis broken. Grandmother stood, shoving herself between me and the man who smelled like sweat and alcohol. She pushed me into the tipi she'd been erecting when the soldiers had arrived.

"No!" Walks Sacred Woman shouted again to the soldier. She spit into the brownish-red soil at her feet. "You cannot go in there!"

She stood fiercely in front of the flap. I lay on the floor behind my grandmother, the eagle feather I had tricked Jumping Fish to win gone from my hair. Everything seemed to be moving

so slowly, and my body no longer felt like my own. I wanted to fight, to run, to scream, but I could only watch in terror.

The leader, still on his horse, yelled something else in his language, and the man nearest Walks Sacred Woman struck her hard enough to draw blood. I screamed. He leaned over and grabbed a fistful of my air, his filthy breath heavy in my face. I kicked and squirmed, landing a solid whack to the soft spot between his legs before he tossed me into the cage.

I scrambled over the bodies of my friends and family toward the single window. My arm shot toward Walks Sacred Woman, who still lay on the ground. Hot tears streamed down my cheeks, and the crying of women and children was so loud and the fear so thick that I couldn't tell if I was still screaming.

The man holding the door of the cage yelled something to the blue-eyed leader, who was staring from the back of his horse into the wrinkled face of Walks Sacred Woman. She lay bleeding on the ground.

“Grandmother!” She didn't move. This time, I heard my own screams.

The leader flicked his hand, and a chunk of wood was shoved through the loop holding the wagon door shut. The soldiers leapt onto the back of their well-trained horses, circling the wagon. The cart took off more slowly than it had arrived, burdened with its new load.

The mothers who could run alongside, reaching up toward the tiny hands dangling through the one barred opening. The soldiers kicked them away, but still they scraped and clawed to get at their children, their fingers pierced by splinters when they reached the wood of the wagon and dug in.

Inside, we wailed for help, our cries the horrible shrieks of rabbits being eaten alive. Another yell from the leader and they picked up the pace. The caravan was soon moving too fast

to follow on foot. Our women, keening and begging for us, continued to run toward us even after the wagon disappeared over a rise.

Overhead, a full moon rose and witnessed it all.