

Gary and Woape...

When he kissed her this time, she leaned into him. It felt right to be with him. She wished she could wrap herself in his embrace and stay there forever. She rested her head on his shoulder and held onto him, closing her eyes and listening to his heartbeat.

Finally, he stepped away from her and pointed to the town. "Come."

She nodded and got back on her horse.

He glanced in her direction. Smiling, he shook his head, said something, and hopped on his steed.

Sometimes it frustrated her that she couldn't understand most of what he said, for how could she decide if what he meant was good or not? As he reached for her hand and kissed it, her cheeks grew warm. There were some things they could communicate to each other that didn't require words. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze before he let it go. She could still feel his lips on it. Actually, her lips still tingled from his kiss.

No one had ever kissed her like he did. His actions were tender. They were a great relief from what she went through with-- She closed her mind to the memory. No. She wouldn't think of it. As horrible as it was, she wouldn't let it tarnish the memory of this moment.

Restoring Hope

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Ruth Ann Nordin

Ruth Ann Nordin's Books
Springfield, Nebraska

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Dedicated to Bonnie Steffens who has brightened up my life.
May God bless you and your family as you have blessed me.

And thank you for making the cover!

Other books written by Ruth Ann Nordin

The Nebraska Romances (chronological order)

A Bride for Tom/A Husband for Margaret (two novellas in one book)
Eye of the Beholder
The Wrong Husband
His Redeeming Bride
Loving Eliza

Other Historical Romances

Falling In Love With Her Husband
Romancing Adrienne
A Chance In Time (novella inspired by Meant To Be)

Contemporary Romantic Comedies

With This Ring, I Thee Dread
What Nathan Wants (coming late-summer 2010)

Time Travel Romantic Comedy

Meant To Be

The Virginia Trilogy

An Unlikely Place for Love
The Cold Wife
An Inconvenient Marriage

Quick Author's Note:

In United States' history, Native Americans were referred to as Indians. (I realize some of my readers are from India, and I do not wish for there to be any confusion. When I refer to Indians in this story, it is for North American Indians.)

Regarding the Okipe Ceremony, the Mandan tribe celebrated this after the first of August after they moved north. Originally, their tribes were further south in the United States, and they celebrated the Okipe Ceremony in early summer. (This is why some sources site early summer for this celebration.) Since this story takes place in North Dakota, I am going by the later celebration date. I base my research for this and other Mandan facts from the book *The North American Indian* (volume 5) written and published by Edward S. Curtis (1909).

Chapter One

September 1897

Woaƿe closed her eyes and forced her breathing to return to normal. If they heard her, they'd find her hiding place. She took deep breaths and counted backwards from a hundred. By the time she reached eighty, her heart rate slowed.

She opened her eyes and scanned the clearing in the moonlight. The tree bark dug into her skin, but she didn't dare let go of the large branch stable enough to hold her weight. Thankfully, the leaves hid her. She just hoped it hid her well enough.

She heard a horse neigh and tightened her arms and legs around the branch. Biting her lip so she wouldn't inadvertently cry out, she drew blood. She ignored the sting and the metallic taste.

Be quiet. Just be still.

The three hunters spread out, their bows drawn. The steeds methodically made their way along the quiet prairie. They were getting closer. And she'd run out of options. This was the last place she'd found to avoid them.

Gulping, she drew a shaky breath. She couldn't afford to lose heart now. Not when all they had to do was pass under her

and keep their pursuit across the land. A coyote howled in the distance, but she kept her ears tuned into what the hunter moving in her direction was saying.

“She’s not here,” Tecumseh said, keeping his voice low.

“She’s here. She has to be,” Hothlepoya replied. “There’s nowhere else she could have gone.”

She shivered at the chill in Hothlepoya’s voice. Why couldn’t they just go? What made her so special anyway?

“I don’t see her horse,” Tecumseh said. “She wouldn’t abandon it.”

Hothlepoya and Tecumseh stopped their horses beneath her tree and studied their surroundings. She held her breath. They were right there! If they looked up...

Oh please don’t let them look up!

Who she made that request to, she didn’t know, but maybe whatever was out there guiding the fates of people was listening to her pleas now.

“Hothlepoya! Look!” the third Indian called out.

Woape’s gaze followed the trail he pointed at, and she shifted her weight slightly to get a good view of the man leading the mare she’d let loose. She felt her heart rate accelerate. What was he doing? Who was he? Why was he doing it? She glanced back at the two men below her who nudged their horses in his direction. Did the stranger just buy her some time?

“That’s Woape’s horse,” Tecumseh said. “Maybe the white man has her.”

Hothlepoya nodded. “Maybe.”

“Shouldn’t she be on the horse?”

“Not if he hurt her. The white man can’t be trusted.”

“You’re right.”

Hothlepoya pulled out an arrow and got it ready. “We won’t take our chances.”

The other two men followed suit and the three made their way over to the stranger who stopped as they approached.

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Whatever reprieve the white man had granted her was a temporary one.

But what should she do about it? Was there really any way to escape? Hothlepoya was an expert hunter, and the North Dakota prairie spanned for miles in every direction. No. She couldn't leave her hiding place. Her best chance was to stay in the tree and hope he and his two friends would continue their pursuit elsewhere.

She leaned forward slightly so she could see what the three were doing with the white man. They were too far for her to hear, but Hothlepoya lowered his bow and arrow—an indication that the white man wasn't the threat they feared. She wished she could hear them.

The white man shrugged and pointed behind him. That was the direction her horse went when she let the mare loose. He turned his attention back to the three Indians and handed the rope to Hothlepoya.

She realized her left arm had gone numb, so she shifted but a squirrel hopped onto her branch and startled her. Shrieking, she lost her balance and fell to the side. She managed to catch hold of the branch but the damage was done. They'd heard her.

The four men turned their gazes in her direction. She dropped to her feet, landing hard on a tree root jutting out of the ground. Ignoring the pain in her thigh, she bolted to her feet and ran. It was stupid. She knew it was stupid. There was no way she could outrun the horses, but instinct kicked into high gear and she wasn't thinking rationally. All she could think of was escaping.

They came after her. The sound of horses' hooves pounding into the ground thundered in her ears. A gunshot rang through the air. The horses came to an abrupt stop, and she dropped into the grass. She'd heard a gunshot only once in her life and it meant bad things. Unsure if she wanted to know what was happening, she looked over her shoulder.

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The white man yelled something and waved his gun at the other men who were six feet behind her. The white man moved his horse in their direction at a cautious pace. He yelled again, his authoritative tone startling her.

Hothlepoya glanced at her and their eyes met. There was no denying the animosity in his gaze. She swallowed the lump in her throat and forced herself to breathe. When the white man barked an order at him, he finally broke eye contact with her and backed the steed up.

She looked at the white man, trying to determine his motive. He couldn't know what was going on. Hothlepoya would never tell him the truth.

She tried to make out what the stranger looked like in the moonlight, but his hat fell too low over his eyes and the shadow of his beard hid most of his face. He spoke to her in gentle tones, forcing her mind back to the moment. He pointed the gun at Hothlepoya and pointed to her with his free hand.

She struggled with what to do. If she understood what he was saying, it'd help her make a decision. She knew Hothlepoya would hurt her, but the white man... He didn't appear to be a mean man, and he obviously wasn't siding with Hothlepoya. But really...what did she know about him? Nothing.

She glanced at Hothlepoya whose fingers twitched on his bow and arrow resting in his lap. If she went with him, she knew what her fate would be. If she went with the white man, she didn't know what would happen. But it couldn't be worse than what Hothlepoya would do. And she'd never outrun any of them, regardless of their intents.

Slowly getting to her feet, she said, "Help me."

Hothlepoya gave a low growl.

The white man cocked his gun.

They started.

The stranger tipped his hat back and that's when she caught sight of his eyes. Kindness. That was the first thought

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that crossed her mind, and in that instant, she knew she could trust him.

He motioned to her horse and held his free hand out to Hothlepoya.

Tecumseh raised his bow and arrow.

Before she could warn the white man, he shot the bow out of Tecumseh's hand.

"Did he get you?" Hothlepoya asked his friend.

"No, but he got close." Tecumseh studied his broken bow and looked at Hothlepoya. "Too close."

The white man said something to her in a gentle tone. Then he held out his hand again to Hothlepoya.

"We don't have a choice," Hothlepoya told his friends. "We must obey him." He glanced at her. "You got lucky."

She quickly averted her gaze from him.

He held the rope out to the white man who took it. He said something to her and motioned to the rope.

She wished she knew what he was saying, but all she had to go on were his actions. Nodding, she approached him, hastening her step past Hothlepoya's horse which snorted at her, and took the rope. She mounted her mare.

The white man made a comment, and since he looked at the horse's back and shook his head, she guessed it had something to do with the fact that she rode the animal bareback. He spoke to the three men and waved them in the direction she'd fled from. Home. She wondered if she'd see her father, brother, and sister ever again. She didn't dare return anytime soon. Not with Hothlepoya near there.

She glanced at the white man and wondered if she should leave too. It seemed logical. He'd just given her a means to escape. She could go in the opposite direction and go to some other place. Somewhere far from home. She blinked back tears at the thought of leaving everything she'd ever known behind. But did Hothlepoya give her a choice?

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She turned to the man who finally lowered his gun as the three men grew smaller in the distance.

He placed his gun into something that looked like a sack attached to a belt at his waist. Then he gave her a worried look.

She didn't know what it meant, so she shrugged.

He smiled and spoke to her, and even laughed.

Unsured of what he wanted, she also smiled. Smiling was good, right? He was being friendly. If he meant to harm her, he would have. He had the gun, and she didn't.

His head lowered and he made another comment. He took something out of the pouch hanging off his saddle and handed it to her. Then he returned his gaze to her and motioned to the land around them.

She studied the leather bag for a moment before she opened it. Food. At least that's what it seemed to be from the smell of it. She couldn't see it in the moonlight. Her heart warmed, for he had no reason to give a stranger food...or protection from Hothlepoya...but did. This man had a good heart. The heart of a warrior.

He waved to her and headed off in the direction from where she'd seen him coming.

She glanced over her shoulder, reassured that Hothlepoya wasn't lurking behind her, and peered back into the pouch. She touched one of the hard pieces in the sack. Curious, she pulled one out and sniffed it. Meat. Dried. She bit a piece off, noting how tough it was. But it was edible and it didn't taste bad. She put the rest of the meat into the pouch and closed it.

The white man led his horse in a leisurely pace. She bit her lower lip. Dare she go with him? What if Hothlepoya searched for her? Could she really afford to be without protection? Another glance over her shoulder showed her that the three Indians were now almost down the slight hill. Soon, they'd be out of her viewing range.

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Taking a deep breath to release the nervous energy of her plight, she nudged her mare in the sides and directed her to follow the white man.

Chapter Two

Gary Milton was surprised when the young woman followed him. He expected her to run off. But she stayed with him, her horse a mere six feet behind his. Finally, he stopped and waited for her to catch up to him. She might as well ride beside him if she insisted on joining him.

She pulled back the rope halter on her horse as soon as she was three feet behind him.

He turned toward her. He almost asked her why she kept her distance but knew she didn't understand his language. Sighing, he waved her forward.

Looking uncertain, she obeyed.

He nodded and led her to his campfire, noting she rode beside him this time. Once he dismounted, he went to help her from her pony, but she already slid from the bareback. He marveled at her skill on the animal but figured she'd probably learned to ride at an early age.

"You might as well rest." He took the rope from her and led the two horses to where they would remain for the night.

She carried his leather sack and sat in front of the fire.

As he took care of the horses, he noted her appearance. She was young. Maybe sixteen or a little older. He wasn't much

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older at twenty, but he wondered what the other Indians could possibly want with a young woman. What could she have possibly done to evoke their wrath? He'd never seen a woman that scared before. What was she doing—hiding in a tree? Well, this was one of those mysteries he'd never figure out. As soon as he made it to town, he'd find a place for her to stay and then she'd be safe.

When he returned to the site, he picked up a tin cup and poured water into it. He held it out to her. "Drink."

She tucked her black hair behind her ear and looked up at him with her dark brown eyes before her gaze drifted to the cup.

"Water." He made a drinking motion with his free hand and then pointed to her.

After a few seconds, she accepted the cup and sniffed the liquid in it.

He thought that was odd. For someone who was eager to follow him to his campsite, she sure did seem reluctant to take anything from him. Shrugging, he turned his attention to what their sleeping arrangements would be. He only had a bedroll. Well, she'd get it. He would make do on the grass. A quick scan of the area showed him they were alone. He didn't think the Indians would come after them, but he decided he'd stay alert, just in case. So he wouldn't need the bedroll anyway.

"You sleep here," he told her and patted the bedding.

She wrinkled her brow so he closed his eyes, pretending to sleep. When he opened his eyes, she nodded and said a word that he guessed meant 'sleep'. Turning her attention to the cup, she finally took a sip.

"Water," he said, pronouncing the word slowly.

She took a long drink.

He poured more water into her cup and sat against a tree not too far from her. The night was quiet except for the occasional howling in the distance and singing of crickets. He forced himself to relax. The Indians weren't returning. Still, to be on the safe side, he kept his gun close to his side.

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To his surprise, after she set the cup down, she picked up the bedroll and walked over to him. She placed the bedroll right next to him and settled into it.

“Go to the fire,” he said, pointing to it. “Fire. Warm.”

She shook her head and spoke in her language.

He sighed. What was he supposed to do? This was the best lookout point in the immediate vicinity, but he couldn't have her away from the campfire on a September night, even if she was in the bedroll.

He glanced at her. He was committed to her now. It wasn't something he minded. He was glad that she was alive and safe. As soon as he got her to town and talked to his family about where she would continue to be safe, he could continue on to his next job.

Again, he looked out at the vacant prairie. He didn't notice anything suspicious. His horse remained quiet.

Returning his gaze to her, he realized that she fully intended to sleep right beside him, for she had already closed her eyes.

Well, he couldn't let this happen. It was chilly and the last thing she needed was to get sick. What would be the point of saving her from whatever it was those Indians had in mind if he let her get ill? He nudged her in the arm.

She opened her eyes.

He stood up and stepped toward the fire. “Come.” He waved her over and motioned to the spot where his bedroll had been.

She did as he bid and carried the bedroll back.

He picked up some more sticks and threw them into the fire. Another glance along the horizon showed they were safe. His gun was in his holster. He was prepared...or at least as prepared as he could be.

She didn't lie back down. Instead, she watched him, as if judging what he'd do next. It became clear to him that she wasn't

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going to sleep unless she was right beside him. Seeing that he had no choice since he wanted her to sleep, he sat on the ground close to where she stood. She finally set the bedroll down, but she put it right beside him again. She must have been scared if she was willing to sleep right by a stranger.

“You know, you’re lucky I don’t have a wife,” he told her. “She’d have a fit if she saw this.”

She furrowed her eyebrows.

He smiled to show her he was joking.

Her body relaxed and she returned his smile.

She was a pretty woman, he realized. Funny how all the commotion made him miss that little fact before. He shook his head and returned his attention to the land. He had more important things to think about, like Indians who might be making their way back.

She settled into the bedroll and turned her face to the campfire, her back pressing against his leg.

He shook his head again. She had absolutely no idea what something like that did to a man. Ignoring her soft body, he kept his focus on the horse and the surrounding land. It wasn’t until the moon started descending into the clear sky that he finally fell asleep.

Woape woke the next morning to the sunlight hitting her eyes. She winced and rolled over. The ground beneath her was rough. Where was she? Images flashed through her mind. An axe.. blood.. Hothlepoya...

She jerked up, gasping. She quickly examined her surroundings. Prairie land spanned as far as the eye could see. The campfire had gone out. The two horses munched the grass. Everything was peaceful, so she could relax. Still, the previous night hadn’t been a nightmare. What was she going to do?

She looked at the man sleeping next to her. She was safe with him. He wouldn't let Hothlepoya hurt her. She'd stay with him, wherever he went. He had a gun and he knew how to use it, so if Hothlepoya came looking for her, hoping she was alone and defenseless, she'd be better off if she was with someone who knew how to scare him off. She'd never seen anyone who could stand up to Hothlepoya before.

She stood and quietly made her way to a remote area where she could relieve her bladder. When she returned to the bedroll, she saw that the white man was getting ready to get on his horse. She ran over to him. Did he plan to leave her behind?

She grabbed the back of his shirt. "Please don't leave. Let me come with you."

The white man turned and looked relieved. He motioned to the land around them and said something.

Her only indication that he wasn't intending to leave her behind was the fact that he seemed happy to see her. She relaxed.

He took her by the arm and led her to where they had slept. She watched him as he dug out another tin cup and poured water for both of them. She accepted the cup from him and drank the refreshing liquid. She wanted to thank him, but she didn't know how and even as she smiled her appreciation at him, it seemed an insufficient way to express her gratitude.

He pulled out some pieces of the food he'd offered her the night before and held out a couple to her.

Her growling stomach insisted she take it. She nodded and took them from him, no longer hesitant on accepting anything from him. If he wanted to hurt her, he would have already done so.

She bit into the salted meat. It didn't taste bad. In fact, it tasted pretty good. She wondered if this was what white people ate. She knew so little of the white culture since she'd spent her life among her tribe. A momentary wave of homesickness came over her. Her father, sister and brother must miss her. It didn't

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matter now. She was long gone and would never return. For now on, her life would be in a strange new world, with this nice white man.

After they ate, he got his things ready for his horse, so she followed suit. She joined him as he rode out along the prairie in the morning light. The air was still cool, but she knew by midday, the temperature would warm. Though the season was changing, summer was reluctant in leaving. Since she didn't know his language, and he didn't know hers, they remained quiet. She was content to listen to the melodic singing of the birds.

As the distance from her home grew greater, the tension in her body eased. If the white man took her far enough north, then maybe she'd never have to worry about Hothlepoya ever again. That would be good. Then she'd be safe.

She glanced over her shoulder. A couple of deer leapt across the land. It was peaceful. Just like her world had been a few days ago. She closed her eyes and sighed. She hoped her family would fare well without her.

She wiped the tears away and forced her attention to what was in front of her. This was her future. She wondered where it led. Well, she was about to find out. She decided she wouldn't look back anymore. All the wishing in the world wasn't going to erase what happened. For better or worse, her course was set with this stranger. She didn't believe in coincidences. Her parents taught her that everything happened for a reason.

And so she set her mind on what was to come and followed the man. When evening came, she helped him with the campfire. By this time, she knew what to expect from him. He didn't say much but he did say some words that were beginning to sound familiar, though she couldn't remember what word meant what. She figured that such knowledge would come in time.

The journey took a total of three days before they ran into another human being. And as soon as there was one, there came another and another until they entered a place he called "town".

She examined the buildings that lined the dusty road. A quick scan through the unfamiliar faces revealed that there was no one like her. Everyone around her was white, just like the man she was with. They studied her, but she didn't sense any animosity in their stares. They were curious. She wondered if they'd ever seen a Mandan Indian before. Maybe they hadn't seen Indians at all.

She moved her horse closer to the man, finding his presence comforting in the sea of unfamiliar faces. The people spoke in tones she recognized as questions. They were probably wondering where she came from, who she was, and what she was doing with one of their own. Though she was now surrounded by people, she never felt more alone in her entire life. She was different. Would she ever fit in? This was her new home. She hoped she could find a place here, among these people.

The man said something to her, directing her attention back to him. He pointed to a house on the corner lot. It was a small house with a post out front for them to tie their horses to, which was what they did. He gently took her by the arm and led her forward.

She wondered who lived here, but she couldn't ask him, at least not in a way he'd understand. When they reached the front door, she stepped closer to him.

He shifted a step away and opened the door. He called out a greeting and an older woman who looked old enough to be his mother ran out from another room. She shrieked and hugged him.

Surprised, Woape stood back. Another woman came running down a narrow staircase and took her turn hugging him. Woape bit her lower lip. This woman looked close to his age. Perhaps he was already married? Maybe he was married to this one.

He gave both women a big smile and turned their attention to Woape. They looked startled, as if they hadn't noticed her standing right there watching them. He spoke to the

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women and gestured at them with excited movements. When he stopped speaking, they all looked at her.

She took a deep breath and smiled. She greeted them in her language and waited for them to respond.

Finally, the older woman smiled in return and walked over to her. She wrapped her arm around her and led her to a place to sit. The cushion was soft and comfortable. The woman said something to him and then turned back to Woape and patted her hand.

The woman's kindness assured Woape that things would be alright. Woape tried to decipher what the woman might be saying and what the man answered, but none of it made any real sense to her. She just smiled and nodded whenever the woman asked something. She hoped she was acting appropriately.

The younger woman held back. She crossed her arms and didn't speak.

Woape wondered if the white woman was married to the white man. That would explain the tension Woape felt when she looked at her. Woape glanced at the white man who continued speaking to the woman sitting next to her.

Suddenly, the woman next to her stood up and took her hand.

Woape also stood and followed the woman up the steps until they reached a small bedroom. Woape heard the woman downstairs and the man talking, but the tones were hushed so it was hard to determine if the woman was mad at him for bringing Woape there or not.

The older woman exited the room, so Woape began to follow but she shook her head and motioned for Woape to stay. Woape nodded and stayed in the room. She glanced around the room, noting the bed and other furnishings. The window overlooked the town where several people rode on their horses. She sighed. This was her new home. The white man had brought her here. She wondered if this would be her new room or if she

might sleep somewhere else in this home. Whatever the situation would be, she'd be glad for it and do whatever they asked her. She'd earn her keep.

She turned at the sound of voices and watched as the older woman pointed to the center of the room. The man came in with a tub. They left and returned with pails of water which they dumped in the tub. The woman motioned for the man to leave so he did. Then the woman turned to a dresser and pulled out the drawer and took out a dress.

As she spoke, she went up to Woape and held the dress up to her and nodded. She rambled on as she grabbed a towel and set it by the tub. Woape got a warm feeling about the woman. The woman was one of the friendliest people she'd ever met. She set the dress on the back of a chair before she handed Woape a bowl with a bar of soap in it. She turned to the door and held up a brush, spoke again, and set the brush back on the dresser. Giggling, she waved and closed the door behind her.

Well, that was simple enough. The woman wanted Woape to take a bath. Woape could do that. She dipped her fingers into the warm water. Setting the bowl down next to the tub, she took off her dress, realizing she'd be putting on a white woman's dress once she was done bathing. She realized this was more than changing clothes. She was about to change her entire life.

As she settled into the tub, she gave the matter no more thought. The future was ahead of her, and she was safe. Hothlepoya wouldn't find her here. Now, she could relax.

Chapter Three

Gary glanced out the window and saw that the horses were doing fine.

“What were you thinking?”

He took his time in facing his older sister who came into the room. Her arms were crossed and a look of disapproval was on her usually pretty face. Leaning against the window, he shrugged. “What do you mean, what was I thinking? I already explained it to you.”

“Right. You found her on the run from members of her tribe.”

“No. I didn’t say that the Indians were members of her tribe. I just said they were Indians. There is more than one tribe in North Dakota.”

She shook her head and walked over to him. “Indians are savages. You’re lucky they didn’t scalp you alive.”

“I have a gun and I know how to use it, Julia. It wasn’t me I was worried about.”

She rolled her eyes as she smoothed her blond hair. “It’s not a smart move to bring her here. What if the savages come for her?”

“I made sure to keep a lookout for them. I didn’t venture back to my camp until I was sure they couldn’t see me.”

“I don’t know. They’re sneaky. They find ways to track people down.”

He groaned. “Will you stop?”

“Stop what?”

“Playing big sister. We’re not kids anymore. I can take care of myself.”

She didn’t look convinced, and that didn’t surprise him.

“I knew there was a reason I left,” he muttered under his breath.

She gave him a sharp look. “What was that?”

“You heard me.”

“I resent this, Gary. You left a year ago without giving us a real explanation-”

“I wrote a note.”

“A fine one it was too. ‘I have to discover who I am. I’ll be back when I figure it out.’ That could have meant anything.”

“Well, I didn’t know who I was or who I wanted to be with you hovering around me all the time telling me what to do.”

She gasped and pressed a hand over her heart. “Hovering around you?”

“Yes. Hovering.”

“I can’t believe this. I cooked your meals, cleaned your clothes-”

“Fought my battles.”

She blinked, as if surprised. “Fought your what?”

“You always stepped in and interfered where you shouldn’t have.”

“Are you talking about the incident with Harold?”

He stood up straight and took off his hat. In all the commotion, he forgot to take it off. He ran his hand through his hair that was a dark shade of blond. The mention of Harold

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always irritated him to no end. “No one wants their big sister beating up his bully for him.”

Her face grew red as she placed her hands on her hips. “I did no such thing!”

“Really? I wasn’t the one who gave him the black eye.”

“Oh. That incident.” She pressed her hand to her mouth and giggled.

“It’s not funny.”

“It was. Even today Harold runs in the opposite direction whenever he sees me.”

“Yes. He does that. But he and his friends still laugh whenever they see me coming.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Will you stop telling me that? I know when I’m being laughed at.”

“You’re imagining things. You were always a dreamer who lived in another world.”

“And it was up to you to keep me grounded in reality?”

Their aunt cleared her throat.

They stopped so they could turn in her direction.

“What a shame. Here, the prodigal son has come home, and all I hear is a bunch of bickering down here.” She clucked her tongue. “May God help us all.”

Julia stepped away from him and turned to their aunt. “She can’t stay here.”

“And why not?” Gary demanded.

“Enough,” Erin interrupted. “This is my home. I took you in when your parents died. I’ve raised you since you were ten,” she told Julia, “and you were three,” she told Gary. “I think of you as my own children. And ever since you’ve been here, you have been at odds with one another. I had hoped that when you

grew up, the bickering would stop. Even with Gary gone for a year, the first thing you do when he comes home is criticize him.”

“I’m not criticizing him,” Julia argued, looking exasperated. “I’m being logical. Can’t you see how dangerous this is?”

“And what if that was you?” their aunt asked her. “Gary said three men were after her, and they had arrows ready to shoot at her. Don’t you understand that her life was in danger? Would you have preferred that she died?”

“That’s not what I meant. You don’t understand what I’m talking about. I’m saying that he should have saved her but sent her somewhere else. Surely, there is another place she can go to.”

Gary shook his head. “I gave her food and figured she would find a place to go. I assumed that she would go back to her tribe. But she didn’t. She followed me.” Not only did she follow him, but she hadn’t allowed him to get out of her sight until his aunt took her upstairs. “I don’t know what happened to her. I don’t know why those men were chasing her, but she doesn’t feel safe out there. For some reason, she only feels safe with me. Maybe she’ll feel safe with Aunt Erin.”

Aunt Erin approached him, a concerned look on her face. “Are you heading out again?”

He shrugged. “I only came here because of her.” He pointed up the stairs.

Julia huffed. “So you didn’t even care to come by here to see us.”

“I was on my way to Bismarck, alright? My last employer said that he knew someone out there who needed a farmhand. I figured I’d give it a try.”

“A full year you’ve been gone and you still don’t know what you want to do with your life?”

His face grew red. “And you wonder why I don’t want to be here? You wonder why I left?”

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“Please,” their aunt began, groaning, “we have a scared young woman up there, and the last thing she needs is to deal with this. Let’s just look at what we can do for her now. Regardless of how you two feel about each other, it’s time to focus on someone else for a change.”

Gary rubbed his eyes and sighed. “You’re right. Look, I didn’t come here to cause trouble. I didn’t know where else to take her. I made sure that no one followed us. I was vigilant.”

Julia shifted from one foot to the other. “Well, I hope no one did follow you.”

Their aunt nodded. “It’s good that she’s here instead of wandering around by herself out there. We don’t want anything bad to happen to her.”

“What are we going to do with her?” Julia asked. She looked at Gary. “Are you going to run off again and leave us to figure out what to do with her?”

“I haven’t thought about it,” he admitted. When he saw Julia’s lips form a thin line, he continued, “All I could think about was getting her here, where she’ll be safe. I didn’t think beyond that. And don’t say it. I know. How typical of Gary. Acting first and thinking later.”

“I’ve heard enough,” Erin said. “You two need to get into different rooms before I get my broom and whack you both on the heads. You two will be the death of me yet.” She took a deep breath. “Gary, I need you to go out there and get those horses settled into the stable in town. I don’t have accommodations for animals of that size. Julia, I need you to go up there and help that woman get settled in. I’m going to prepare lunch.”

She cringed. “Why can’t I do the lunch?”

“Because this is my house, and it’d be good for you to get to know her.”

“How is that possible? Does she speak English?”

“Language is not that big of a barrier. Just imagine that you had nowhere to go and came into an unfamiliar place.”

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“Really,” Gary agreed, “would it hurt you to think of someone else for a change?”

“I grew up thinking of you all of my life,” Julia retorted, stomping her foot on the floor. “I’ve cooked for you, done your laundry, took care of you when you were sick—”

Suddenly their aunt darted out of the room.

Both of them gasped. That could only mean one thing. Aunt Erin was getting her broom.

“Later, sis,” he said before he ran out of the house.

She ran up the stairs.

Woape put on the dress, feeling out of place with it on. It was nothing like the clothes she usually wore. It was another reminder that she was now in a new world. She wiped the tears from her eyes and looked at her reflection in the mirror that hung on the wall. She was a mess—one tangled, wet mess. She picked up the brush. Considering the fact that her hair reached her lower back, this was going to be a long and painful process.

The door opened and the second woman in the house slowly entered the room.

Woape stopped brushing her hair, unsure of what to make of the guarded look the woman gave her. She much preferred the older woman, but what choice did she have? She was at the mercy of these people. The woman approached her, and Woape took a step back. She said something, but of course, Woape had no idea what it was. Judging by the woman’s stiff posture, Woape knew the woman wasn’t happy to have her there.

The woman sighed in exasperation before she took the brush from Woape. She then reached out and unbuttoned the top button on Woape’s dress. Out of instinct, Woape slapped her hand away. How dare she!

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The woman snapped at her before she slammed the brush on the dresser and yanked open the top drawer. She pulled out some white clothing and held them out to her while she continued talking to her in a frustrated or angry tone. Woape couldn't tell which emotion the woman was feeling. Perhaps both.

When Woape shook her head, the woman rolled her eyes and lifted the hem of her skirt, showing Woape that she had similar clothing on. That was when Woape realized that the white garments were supposed to go under the dress. She reluctantly took the soft fabric from her and nodded. But if the woman thought Woape was going to undress while she was in the room staring at her, she had another thing coming.

The woman didn't look convinced that Woape understood her but didn't make a move to remove Woape's dress, so Woape didn't protest when she picked up the brush and started working it through her hair. Even if the woman wasn't happy with the fact that the white man brought Woape here, Woape was glad she was gentle as she worked the tangles out of her hair.

Woape watched her in the mirror. She wished she could ask the woman if she was married to the white man. Then she could assure her that nothing had happened between them, in case that was what worried her. It was a shame if he was already married. She didn't know him. Not really. At least not well enough to have certain thoughts about him. And yet...

She returned her gaze to the woman who was almost finished. Woape refused to act on any feelings that were beginning to emerge. She'd snuff them out before they had the ability to take root in her heart. It was a simple matter really. Yes, the man was kind and brave. But he belonged to someone else, and she could honor that. She would honor that. All she needed was a place to stay and food to eat. She'd find a way to prove herself useful to this woman and the older one who lived with the white man. As long as she never had to go back, she'd be fine.

The woman finished and set the brush down. Woape touched her soft hair. The woman had done a good job. She smiled at her to express her thanks. The woman turned aside and opened the door and left the room. She quietly shut the door, leaving Woape alone again. This wasn't going to be easy. She gulped the lump in her throat, refusing to let the woman's cold manners affect her.

She's afraid I came to take her husband from her. It's not personal. It's not who I am. When she realizes I'm not a threat to her, she'll warm up to me. Just give it time.

She quickly undressed so she could put on the white undergarments before she put the dress back on. At least the clothes gave her a sense of warmth in the chilly room. She took a deep breath and walked to the door. Was she supposed to go to them or wait until someone came to get her? Her hand rested on the doorknob and she debated the consequences of either action. Finally, she decided to test her luck and go to them.

Her bare feet fell softly on the wooden steps. She heard two women talking in the kitchen, and as she turned to go there, the front door opened and the white man entered the house.

He took off his hat and looked in her direction. A smile crossed his face as he said something while he motioned at her. His tone told her he was pleased. He stopped rambling and finally touched her cheek and said, "Pretty."

Something about the word and the way he looked at her when he said it made her face flush with pleasure.

The older woman called out to them, so Woape turned her attention to the two women. Though the older woman seemed relaxed, the younger one frowned at her and crossed her arms. Woape immediately stepped away from the white man, ashamed she'd gotten as close to him as she did.

The older woman waved them forward, and Woape looked at him to see what he'd do. He spoke and pointed to the older woman. It took her a moment to realize he expected her to

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walk in front of him. She quickly obeyed, inching away from the younger woman who didn't take her eyes off of her.

Woape hated awkward moments. The only saving grace was the friendly demeanor of the older woman who chatted away as if nothing was wrong, but certainly, the woman knew something wasn't right, didn't she? Woape couldn't be the only one who sensed the tension in the air. She glanced at Gary who rolled his eyes at the younger woman.

Woape wondered what it meant. If she could understand what the older woman told the two, it would probably give her insight into everything. She had to learn their language, and the sooner, the better. She already knew one word. Pretty. Pretty was a good thing, and he was looking at her and touching her face when he said it. Her cheek was still warm from where his fingers had been. She absentmindedly caressed the spot. Pretty. She'd have to remember the word.

The older woman pointed to a chair so Woape sat down. The queasy feeling in her stomach intensified when she realized she'd have to spend the meal eating across from the younger woman. She clasped her trembling hands in her lap and stared at her plate. This was going to be a long meal.

The white man picked up the large bowl and scooped up a generous portion of meat. He handed the bowl to Woape. Her eyes widened in surprise. She took the bowl and did the same thing she'd seen him do, only she chose a smaller portion. She wasn't that hungry, though she wondered if she should have been considering the meager meals she'd shared with the man over the past few days. Sighing, she passed the bowl to the woman next to her. She missed the peace of being alone with him.

The older woman smiled at her. She returned the smile, and the knots in her stomach loosened. The man said something so she directed her attention to him and realized he had another bowl for her. This one was filled with a white lumpy substance. She sniffed it.

The older woman laughed and the white man told her something. Woape wondered if they were laughing at her. Maybe she wasn't acting right. But how was she supposed to act? She wasn't white like them. Her customs differed from theirs. She sighed. She was a part of their world now. She had a responsibility to fit in.

The older woman's warm expression settled her nerves. Maybe things were fine. Maybe she had nothing to worry about after all...well, except for the younger woman who didn't join in the merriment. But Woape didn't dare glance in her direction.

During the meal, the older woman rambled on and the white man threw in a comment here and there. The younger woman only spoke when asked a question, which wasn't often. Woape tried to pay attention so she could learn the language, but they spoke much too fast and after awhile, Woape felt as if her head was spinning. Finally, she decided to tune them out.

She thought of what her new life might be like. She scanned the kitchen and glanced at the small room to the side of it. A look over her shoulder showed the room she'd just been in. Few things were familiar to her. She had much to learn. Turning her attention back to her half-eaten plate of food, she finished her meal.

Chapter Four

Woaape cried in her sleep that night. She knew she was dreaming, but the memory was lodged in her heart, and even as she drifted between the reality of the present and the world where time had no meaning, she took a surprising comfort in seeing her mother again.

Her mother approached her along the outskirts of their village.

Woaape was watching her brother and his friend practicing chunky while she worked on finishing the dress she'd made out of deerskin.

Her mother placed the bowl of beans in her lap and gave her a curious look.

Woaape glanced up from the piece of buffalo hoof that she chose to adorn the bottom of her dress. "What?"

"Are you not working on your wedding dress?"

She shrugged and turned her attention from her mother's piercing stare. The prairie wind cooled her. She was looking forward to fall. Summer was much too hot unless she spent all

day in the lodge. But she didn't want to spend her time in there when she could enjoy the view of the Missouri River. She couldn't sit out here in the winter.

"Woape," her mother said, using a tone that told Woape she should answer her.

"I'll work on it later," she finally replied.

Her brother gave a hoot of laughter as his spear landed next to the stone.

"He just may win this year," Woape commented, hoping her mother would forget the impending marriage.

However, her hope had been in vain, for her mother shook her head. "You are going to be married in one week, and you haven't made any preparations for it."

She sighed and finished sewing the piece of hoof into the hem of her dress. She picked up another piece and judged the space she needed so it wasn't too close or too far apart from the other pieces she'd already put on it. "I'll prepare for it. I still have a week."

"Seven days isn't a long time."

She looked up at her brother and his friend as they picked up their spears and the stone. "I don't want to argue again."

"I don't want to argue either."

"Then can we not talk about it?"

Her mother clucked her tongue. "You do not do well to avoid it. This marriage was arranged at your birth. Just how much time do you need to accept it? Besides, how do you know whether or not this marriage will be good or bad? No one knows these things until they go through with it."

"Maybe I'll run away." Woape paused, shocked she'd voiced the reoccurring thought aloud. She'd said it to herself many times, but to say it like that...and to her mother... Her face grew hot as she struggled to finish adorning her dress.

"You are sixteen. It's time for you to be an adult." When Woape refused to acknowledge the statement, her mother gently

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reached out and cupped her chin in her hand. She turned Woape's head so that Woape had to look at her. "It is not as bad as you fear. He'll make a good husband."

Woape didn't protest. Instead, she nodded and blinked back the tears forming in her eyes. As soon as her mother released her chin, she turned her attention back to the dress.

"All will be well. You'll see." Her mother patted her on the hand before she stood up. "Start the dress tonight."

Across from her, her brother rolled the stone before he and his friend released their spears to see which spear would be the closest to the stone. Her brother won again and cheered. At least someone was having a good day.

Woape glanced out of the corner of her eye and saw her mother's retreating figure. Then she allowed herself the freedom to cry. The memory ebbed as Woape woke up, still crying. How was she to know that it would be the last time she had a chance to speak with her mother?

She turned her face to the window. It was still night. She closed her eyes and shivered under the soft blanket. The wind howled outside, reminding her of the screams. She rolled over so she didn't have to see the moon. Why did bad things always happen at night? She wished the white man was beside her. She felt safe with him. Nights were much too long and painful without him nearby.

Gary glanced over his shoulder. Sure enough, the Indian woman he'd brought home was still watching him from where she sat on the lawn. Had he not been on the roof digging leaves out of the gutter, she'd probably be sitting close by. He didn't know why, but she followed him everywhere.

Earlier that morning, his aunt asked him to buy some items from the store, and the Indian woman left the house with

him. Then after he returned home to drop off the food and went to check on their horses, she continued to follow him. He made small talk, not because she would understand anything he told her but because he didn't know what else to do with the awkward silence.

Now he worked his way around the roof and tossed wet leaves onto the ground, making sure he did it away from her. He stood up and made his way to the back of the house. Out of curiosity, he peered around the edge of the roof and—sure enough—she hastened to the backyard. He didn't understand it. The men weren't chasing her anymore. Why did she feel the need to keep him in her sight? Shouldn't she be more comfortable with his aunt? His aunt, after all, was a woman.

As he chucked another pile of leaves out of the gutter, he caught her peering up at him. He was beginning to feel self-conscious. His last boss had watched him at times, but that was to assist in case he needed help. What did she think he was going to do? Fly away? Disappear?

When he woke up that morning and left his room, she was standing outside the door. He wasn't sure, but he suspected she had slept part of the night outside his bedroom. He suddenly wondered if he should be spooked by this. One more look in her direction assured him that she wasn't a threat. Well, how could she be? She was the one running from the men. And that brought up another question. Why were they ready to kill her? What happened to her? Did she do something she shouldn't have done? Did she see something she wasn't supposed to see?

He finished removing the leaves and studied her. She didn't strike him as the violent type. He doubted she did something deserving of death. It must have been something she saw...or maybe her tribe had been invaded. He heard that kind of thing happened. He even heard that some Indians scalped their victims. The thought made him shiver. What a way to go. What a way to live. Not everyone who was scalped died.

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Deciding he'd let his imagination go far enough, he forced his attention on descending from the roof. Predictably, she was standing at the foot of the ladder when he reached the ground. He turned to her and laughed. "What are you? My shadow?"

She offered him a smile.

He grabbed the ladder to put in the shed. Of course, she followed, just as he expected. Once he placed the ladder in the small building, he turned to leave and almost bumped into her. "You don't have to come into the shed with me. There's no back door."

Her response was to smile again.

She was such a pretty thing, especially when she smiled. He shook his head and chuckled. "I'm calling you Shadow because if you keep following me all over the place, that is what you'll be."

She furrowed her eyebrows.

He pointed to her. "Shadow."

Tapping her chest, she repeated, "Sa...do."

"Shadow," he slowly said, making sure to emphasize the 'sh' sound.

"Sadow."

"Close enough." He stepped out of the shed and waited for her to join him.

She pointed to him.

Her meaning dawned on him. "Oh. I'm Gary." He tapped his chest. "Gary."

"Gary."

He nodded. "That's right. Gary."

"Gary." Then she pointed to herself. "Sadow."

Alright. Maybe that wasn't exactly what he intended. Now she knew his actual name, but he didn't know hers. He shook his head and pointed to her. "Name?"

She shrugged, looking confused.

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He motioned to himself again. "My name is Gary. Gary." Then he pointed at her.

A light of understanding lit up her eyes. "Woape."

A smile formed on his lips. "Woape." He liked it. It seemed to suit her.

"Sadow?" She shook her head.

Great. He knew he confused her. Then an idea came to him. "Woape. My shadow." He laughed and pointed to his shadow on the ground. "Shadow." He stepped back and motioned to his shadow. Even as he took another step back, she walked toward him. "See? Shadow." He pointed from his shadow to her.

She chuckled and nodded. "Woape. Shadow."

"Right. You follow me all over the place, just like a shadow."

"If you're hungry, I got lunch ready," his aunt called out from the front door.

"We'll be right there." He waved Woape forward. "Eat." He touched his lips and patted his stomach. "Eat. Food." He knew she would follow him, so he went to the house.

His aunt grinned. "You may have gotten yourself into trouble."

"She just needs to get used to being here. Once she feels comfortable with you, she'll ease up."

"Maybe." She warmly smiled at Woape.

"Oh, her name is Woape." He motioned to his aunt. "Erin."

"Erin," Woape slowly said.

"Well, come on in." His aunt wrapped her arm around Woape's shoulders and led her into the house. "You need to eat more."

Woape glanced back at him.

"I'll be there after I wash up." He held up his dirty hands before he walked up the steps to his room. He wondered if she

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would follow him, but she didn't. He poured water into his bowl and used the soap to wash his hands.

"I see that our guest has attached herself to you," Julia said as she leaned against the doorframe of his room.

"Why don't you talk to her? She could use another woman closer to her age to be with."

"You're the one who brought her here, not me."

He grabbed the towel from the hook on the wall and dried his hands. "If you'd been there when it happened, would you have let those men kill her?"

"No. But I wouldn't plan to drop her off and leave for my next adventure."

"I didn't say I was going to do that. I didn't even say I was going to leave. I just said I was on my way to a job when I ran into her."

"So what are you going to do?"

He threw the towel down and groaned. "I don't know. I just got here yesterday. Why don't you give me some time to figure it out?"

"Well, she won't leave you alone, and from what I saw, you seem to enjoy being with her."

He frowned. "What were you doing? Spying on me?"

"It's hardly spying when you're right in the open, talking and laughing with her."

"So what? I was being nice to her. Since when is being nice to someone a crime?"

"You're not nice to me like that. I can't remember the last time you even bothered to sit and talk to me."

"Maybe that's because you're always hounding me about something. I'm tired of hearing what I'm doing wrong."

"Well, you don't appreciate anything I've done for you."

He looked out the window and saw the rolling hills in the distance. Now he remembered exactly why he left home to begin with. Being here, in close proximity with his sister, was sucking

the life from him. He longed for the freedom of the prairie. Sure, he didn't have the comforts he had here, but he did have peace and quiet.

"I don't even know why I try to get through to you," she said, obviously exasperated.

"Then don't," he snapped. He groaned and rubbed his temples, willing the impending headache away. He didn't know how she did it, but she brought out the worst in him. He didn't like it.

"I gave up a marriage to Ernest to help our aunt raise you."

"Oh, God. Don't tell me she's going into this again."

"Well, Aunt Erin couldn't have taken care of you all by herself back then. Not when she was at death's door."

"For goodness sakes, Julia, I was eleven. I could handle things by myself."

She looked over her shoulder and jerked. Then she glared at him. "Your little guest is much too quiet." She stormed off and ran down the stairs.

He hastened to the hallway and saw that Woape stood still, a worried look on her face. Terrific. All she needed was to catch him and his sister arguing. He approached her and said, "Everything is fine."

She pointed to his bedroom and then down the stairs.

"Right. Eat." He passed her so that he could lead her down the steps.

She reached out to stop him.

It was the first time she touched him, so he didn't expect it. He glanced at his arm and then at her.

She spoke and pointed to the other bedroom doors.

He tried to decipher her meaning but couldn't. He shrugged to show her that he didn't understand her.

Opening a closed door, she peered into the bedroom.

"Erin's room."

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“Erin.” She pointed down the steps. “Erin?”

He nodded. “Erin. Room. Erin’s room.”

She closed the door and pointed to the room she was staying in. It was Julia’s room, but Julia refused to sleep there as long as Woape was in the house. “Woape...room?”

That was technically true—at least for the time being—so he nodded. “Woape’s room.”

She walked over to his room. “Gary room.”

Where was she going with this? “Yes. Gary’s room. My room.”

“Nunp mih?” She pulled her long braids up and twisted them in a bun and pointed down the stairs.

“Erin?”

She shook her head and crossed her arms and glared at him the same way Julia just had.

“Julia.”

She pointed to herself. “Woape.” She pointed to him. “Gary.” She pointed down the steps. “Erin. Julia?”

Oh, she wanted to know the names of everyone in the house. He chuckled. “Yes. Julia.” He crossed his arms and gave his best imitation of his sister’s usual scowl.

She giggled and undid the bun so her braids hung down her back again. “Julia?” She then motioned to the bedrooms and shrugged.

“Erin’s room.” He went to his aunt’s bedroom and opened the door. He found his sister’s nightgown and picked it up. “Julia.” Then he pointed to the spot where she slept.

Woape suddenly rambled on about something and motioned to his bedroom. He caught the word “Julia” and “Gary”, but that was all he understood.

He wasn’t sure of how to respond. Leaving his aunt’s bedroom, he shut the door.

She entered the room she’d been given to stay in and looked expectantly at him.

Uncertain, he said, "Julia's room."

"Gary's room?" She motioned to the bed.

"Oh." He shook his head. "No. Gary's room." He pointed to his room. "Julia's my sister."

"Mysister?"

"Sister." Then he shook his head. "Not wife." There was no way he'd marry someone like Julia. It was bad enough he was born into the same family she was in.

"Julia sister."

He nodded and said, "Yes."

"Notwife?"

"Wife." He should probably stop using the words 'no' and 'not' in front of a noun. "Julia sister."

A wide smile crossed her face. "Sister."

"Right. Yes."

Then she shook her head. "Wife."

"No. Julia sister."

She looked so proud of her newfound understanding of the English language that he grinned. She laughed and then said something that ended with the word "eat".

He wondered what it was, exactly, that she was thinking about but knew he wouldn't figure it out. So he chose to nod, say "eat" and lead the way down the steps.

Chapter Five

Woape hoped she understood right—that her initial impression of Gary and Julia had been wrong. If ‘sister’ meant what she thought it did, then Gary wasn’t married. She watched him and Julia during the meal. There was no indication that they shared any romantic interest. In fact, there seemed to be an underlying problem between them. She wondered what caused the tension. Then she recalled Julia’s mannerisms toward her. Perhaps *she* was the reason Julia was upset...but not for the reason she assumed.

She watched Julia in the parlor, trying to decipher clues that would tell her why she bothered Gary’s sister as much as she did. Since Gary remained in the house, Woape decided she was safe enough to leave his side so she could be in the room with Julia and Erin who worked on sewing quilts.

She sat in the chair closest to the stairs. She peered up the staircase. What did he do up there? When she wasn’t looking up the stairs to see when he’d return, she took a few peaks at the two women or glanced out the window. The scene between Erin and Julia reminded her of the times she spent with her mother. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she willed the urge to cry aside. If she hadn’t run when she did, she’d be miserable right now. But

she worried that the fact that she ran sentenced her mother to the world beyond this one...if such a world existed.

She returned her gaze to the stairs. When would he come back down? No. She had to figure out what was going on with Julia. Once she settled that issue, then she'd know for sure whether Gary was free to marry her or not. He'd keep her safe for the rest of her life...and he was nice. She really hoped he could marry her.

Erin's laughter caught her attention. She motioned to Woape and said "Gary", but she spoke to Julia.

Woape didn't know how to interpret that.

Julia's sharp stare, however, was as clear as day. She definitely didn't like the fact that Woape was there.

Woape took a deep breath and asked, "Julia sister...Gary?"

Julia didn't answer her. Instead, she turned to Erin and spoke in angry tones.

Erin responded, obviously trying to calm Julia down, but Julia stood up and threw her quilt on the couch and stormed out of the room and outside.

Woape looked out the window and saw Julia continue her walk down the street. What did she say that upset Julia? She sighed. Well, now there was no denying Julia was mad that she was there, and she didn't know what to do about it.

Erin eased out of her chair and approached Woape.

Woape fought the urge to flee up the steps.

To her surprise, Erin rested her hand on hers and nodded. "Julia is Gary's sister."

"Wife?" Woape asked.

She shook her head. "No. No wife."

Woape was beginning to understand what 'no' meant, and this was good. She wished she could ask Erin why Julia didn't like her but couldn't. She did realize that this was going to make things uncomfortable. Julia most likely wouldn't like it if Woape married her brother. But she wasn't going to let someone's

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opinion interfere from doing what she wanted. Not anymore. She had learned her lesson. Next time she chose a husband, it would be the one she wanted...instead of the one others chose for her.

Gary poured another bucket of hot water into the tub. That should do it. He turned to leave and, once again, Julia stood in the doorway of Woape's bedroom and shook her head.

"Her ways are not like ours," he said.

"She bathes so much I'm surprised that her skin stays on."

He rolled his eyes. "Water doesn't make skin fall off."

"Well, it's not normal."

"What do you expect? She's an Indian. She'll do things differently from us. And you know, a bath isn't a bad idea. We could all use one."

"Speak for yourself. I'm fine."

"Guess what I heard when I was in Fargo?"

She shrugged.

"The Indians say they can smell a white man coming."

"So what are you saying? Their sense of smell is superior to ours?"

"No. I'm saying that we stink."

She gasped.

He laughed. "They have a point, don't you think?"

Their aunt came up the stairs with Woape. "Now I've seen everything. Are you two actually getting along?"

"I'm not sure," Julia said. "He just told me that we all smell bad."

The older woman stopped and glanced at Woape who stood behind her. "I suppose we could all use a bath."

"See?" Gary shot his sister a pointed look.

“Tomorrow is the Lord’s day anyway,” their aunt said. “It’s fitting to go to church clean.” She stepped aside so Woape could get around her. “You might teach us some things,” she told Woape. Then she patted her shoulder. “Bath.” She pointed to the tub.

Taking that as his cue to get out of Woape’s room, Gary moved out of the way.

Woape glanced at everyone, and Gary couldn’t tell what the expression on her face meant.

Erin chuckled. “We should get out of here. The poor thing must be wondering why we’re all staring at her.” She lightly pushed Julia and Gary into the hallway. Turning to Woape, she said, “Don’t worry about us. We’ll get out of your hair.”

Gary and his sister had just finished descending the stairs when there was a knock at the door. He retraced a couple of steps so he could answer it.

Mrs. Clemens stood before him. “Oh my goodness! Are you the same boy who left over a year ago?”

A boy? “I’d just turned nineteen when I headed out.”

She grinned. “When you’re fifty, nineteen won’t seem that old to you, son.”

He supposed that was true.

His aunt wiggled past him so she could talk to her friend. “Did you finish making the clothes?”

“Almost. I want her to try them on so I’m sure I got the measurements right.”

“Her?” he interjected.

“Woape, of course,” his aunt replied. “I can’t have her wearing your sister’s clothes all the time.”

“Thank goodness for that too,” Julia called out from where she sat on the couch, working on the quilt in her lap. “She’s stretching my dresses out.”

A grin crossed his face. That was because Woape was more endowed up on top than his sister was.

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Julia glared at him. “I know what you’re thinking, and you’d better stop.”

Their aunt groaned. “It’s been nonstop fighting ever since he got back,” she told her friend. “I’m ready to pull my hair out.”

Mrs. Clemmens looked at Gary. “If you plan to stick around, why don’t you buy Matthew’s place?”

“Is he selling it?” his aunt asked.

“Sure is,” she told Erin. “He just made the announcement a week ago.”

“Why, doesn’t that beat all?” She nudged him in the side. “That was about the time you came here with Woape. If that isn’t a sign from above, I don’t know what is.”

Julia stood up and went over to them. “But he doesn’t even know if he’s going to stay in town or not.”

He cleared his throat. “I’m able to speak for myself.”

“I’m just saying that you’ve pretty much indicated that you’re going to leave Woape here and head off to your next big adventure.”

“Julia, go upstairs and see if Woape needs anything,” Erin stated, her tone edged with the implication that Julia didn’t have a choice in the matter.

Julia sighed but obeyed their aunt.

Gary wished he could get rid of her as easily.

His aunt turned to Mrs. Clemmens. “I’ll send Gary over with Woape when she’s ready. She’s taking a bath at the moment.”

“That is fine.” The older woman looked up at him. “Do you know where I live?”

“Yes,” he replied.

As she hobbled away, his aunt shut the door. “Just what are your plans?”

“I don’t want to stay in this house,” he replied before he went to the parlor and sat in a chair.

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She followed him and sat on the couch. “As a grown man, that’s natural. What are you going to do about Woape? I don’t mind keeping her here. It may take Julia some time to get used to her, but I’m sure she’ll adjust.”

He leaned forward and stared at his clasped hands. Should he head to his next job? Woape would be safe here. The men who were chasing her were long gone. That was one way of doing things. But was it the best one? He glanced at his aunt who waited for his response. “I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know if I want to head back out or not. I mean, a man has to settle down at some point, right?”

“Some don’t. Once Ned left, he never came back.”

He looked at his aunt. Her expression told him that she had finally accepted the fact that her son was gone for good. There was the question if he was even alive. Maybe he never had the opportunity to return. Gary realized those three Indians could have killed him. If his gun hadn’t been enough to convince them to back off, he’d be pushing up daisies along with Woape.

He cleared his throat. “I never intended to go from job to job my whole life. At the time, I just needed to get out of here.”

A scream from upstairs interrupted their conversation. His aunt shook her head. “It’s more than Woape that bothers your sister. You do understand that, don’t you?”

“Yes. I know.”

“And you also know that it’s not your fault...just as it’s not hers. The two of you are like night and day.”

Julia stormed down the steps, her wet hair hanging down her face. “She can’t stay here! I want her out!”

“What did you do to her?” Gary demanded, jumping up from his seat.

“Oh sure. Assume it was something I did!” she spat, wiping her eyes.

“What happened?” their aunt asked, hurrying over to her.

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“She dumped water on me.”

“Why?”

“Because she doesn’t like me.”

Gary shook his head. “What did you do?”

Their aunt shushed him. “Let me handle this. Julia, do you have any idea what set her off?”

“She wanted a pair of scissors so I got some, and when I saw that she wanted to cut her hair, I tried to help her. There’s no way she could cut it on her own and have it look right. Frankly, she needs a haircut. There’s no reason anyone should have their hair reach their waist.”

“Is she trying to cut her hair now?”

“No. After she grabbed the scissors from me, she threw them out the window. That was right before she took a cup of her disgusting bath water and poured it on my head. This is so gross.” She shivered as she touched her hair. “Now I do have to bathe.” She turned to Gary. “You better get my bath ready the same way you get hers ready every single day since you’ve been here.”

“She must have seen you as a threat,” he said.

“I didn’t threaten her! Really, has it come to this? You will defend her regardless of how she acts.”

“I don’t believe she wanted to hurt you. If she had, she would have stabbed you with the scissors instead of throwing them outside.”

“I ran from her before she could do that.”

Their aunt set her hands on their arms. “I don’t believe Woape meant any harm. Maybe she didn’t want a haircut and didn’t know how to express that any other way.”

“Then why would she put scissors up to her hair?”

“I don’t know. And since she does not speak our language, we’ll probably never know.”

“Well, whatever the reason, I will not help her anymore.”

She nodded. "That's probably best. I can help her with anything she may need for now on."

Julia's mouth formed a thin line. "I want her out of here."

"And where is she going to go?" Gary asked, aware that his voice had risen in irritation.

Their aunt held up her hands to stop them. "This is my home. The decision is mine."

"Uncle wouldn't have gone for it," Julia sulked.

"Well, he's up in Heaven, so he doesn't have a say in this. The Lord wouldn't want us to turn our backs on someone who needs help, and that is why she is staying."

"The Lord is also against murder," his sister said. "Perhaps Woape should be reminded of that."

"She wasn't trying to kill you," Gary argued, unable to believe his sister was still harping on that ridiculous story.

"She hates me," Julia insisted.

"And you've shown her such great kindness," he scoffed.

Their aunt turned to him. "I agree that you need to find somewhere else to live. Whether that is in this town or seeking out your next adventure, I don't care. You two will give me a heart attack unless you leave." She then turned to Julia. "Woape is welcome to stay here whether you like it or not. So find a way to get along with her. This is not up for debate. Gary, get Woape and take her to Mrs. Clemmens."

Gary sighed but started toward the stairs to obey his aunt.

She reached out to stop him. "Get her some things to make her feel more at home here."

"Like what?"

"Things a woman likes."

He shrugged. What would those things be?

Julia grumbled as she stomped to the kitchen.

His aunt smiled at him. "Start with a comb or brush. A hand mirror. Maybe even a nice piece of jewelry. I believe Indians wear jewelry. A pretty shawl. Things like that. Maybe

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once she has some things that are her own, she'll begin to feel comfortable here.”

“Alright.”

Seeming to be content, she went to the kitchen.

Chapter Six

Woape finished braiding her hair. She noted the scowl on her face and realized how ugly her anger was making her. She took a deep breath and tried to focus on what her mother used to tell her. “If you get angry, think of the gentle spirit of the bird. It flies on by and leaves its cares behind to be tossed into the wind.”

She struggled to find the peace her mother spoke of. She even closed her eyes and imagined that she was one with the birds. But she couldn’t grab onto it because she could hear Julia shouting downstairs and knew the woman wouldn’t have the decency to tell them the truth.

“Care not what others say. Let your actions speak for you,” her mother always said.

She gritted her teeth and opened her eyes. Julia was yelling and so was Gary. Did he believe his sister? Woape quickly finished with her braid. The knot in her hair was still there in the few strands she wanted to cut. She tried to comb through the tangle, but her efforts had been in vain. The stubborn thing remained in place. Why did Julia feel it necessary to grab the scissors from her and cut her bald?

Woape did have comfort in knowing that her hair was safe. It was an honor to have her hair at the length it was.

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Someday, she hoped it would be longer. She thought of her mother and the others. The screaming...the whips...the ropes... If she hadn't run away, she would be dead. Tears slid down her cheeks as she touched her hair. Maybe she should cut it. Those in mourning could do it. Was she wrong to keep her hair? Should she have let Julia cut it? But what good would that do? It wouldn't bring the others back.

The knocking at the door made her pause. Should she answer it?

“Woape?”

She relaxed. It wasn't Julia. She made sure all the buttons on her dress were done before she strode to the door and opened it.

Gary smiled at her and waved her forward.

Relieved, she stepped out of the room. Good. He wasn't mad at her. She returned his smile.

He motioned to the staircase and then the front door.

Nodding, she followed him out of the house. She was glad she didn't have to run into Julia on her way out. For all she knew, Julia had another pair of scissors waiting for her. Turning her attention to their surroundings, she studied the buildings and houses lining the dirt road. Several people stopped to stare, but she didn't mind since they also waved a friendly greeting. Gary spoke to them and mentioned her by name, so she guessed he was explaining why she was there. It seemed to her that people liked Gary, so she concluded he had lived here for quite some time before he headed in the direction of the Mandan Village.

As they progressed along whatever journey he was taking her on, the cool afternoon reminded her that Fall was quick in approaching. Fall meant change. She couldn't deny her life had drastically changed in the course of two weeks. Ever since that night she snuck away from her tribe, everything had changed. She didn't recognize her life anymore. She wondered what other

changes were coming. She glanced at Gary. Perhaps not all changes were bad. He, after all, was turning out to be a good one.

He stopped at a house and knocked on the front door.

She wondered who they were going to see. She expected to go to a store or check on their horses like they had before.

An older woman opened the door and smiled when she saw her.

Woape smiled in return, momentarily wondering why people seemed friendly except for Julia. What had she done to deserve to have her hair cut off?

The woman waved her forward and since Gary waited, she crossed the threshold. Woape followed her to a room filled with all kinds of fabrics and clothing. Gary talked to the woman and pointed to some of the items. Woape watched the exchange carefully. She heard her name but that was all she could decipher. Neither he nor the woman said any of the words she'd started to recognize.

He pointed to a pretty blue shirt and brown skirt, and the woman retrieved the items and handed them to Woape. She led her to a small bedroom, and Woape understood that she was to put them on. Woape nodded and went to do her task. Her heart raced in anticipation as she donned on the new clothing. It was nice to wear something other than Julia's dress.

But there was a bigger reason for her excitement, for if she understood what he was doing, then it meant he was interested in marrying her. Unlike the man she was supposed to marry, Gary hadn't brought her gifts of a horse and food. Gary didn't seem to have more than one horse, and he didn't grow food so how could he give her such things? However, he found clothes to give her.

When she emerged from the room, he smiled, looking pleased with his gift for her. He told the woman something and she quickly gathered a dress and shoes. Woape was ready to put the dress on, but the woman shook her head and motioned to the shoes.

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Woape obeyed and put them on. They felt restrictive compared to her moccasins, but she could walk around in them without hurting her feet. She wondered how the woman could make her clothes and shoes without knowing her.

Gary indicated that their business at the woman's house was done, so Woape collected the gifts, Julia's dress, and the moccasins and followed him out of the house. They strolled down the street until they came to a store. Woape recognized the place since he'd bought food from there as well, but she was surprised when he led her to a new section. At least, it wasn't the section she'd seen before.

An older man came over to them and Gary pointed to her and then the items on the shelves. Turning to her, Gary encouraged her to look at the things neatly laid out.

Uncertain, Woape touched a brush with a nice shiny blue handle.

Gary nodded, picked it up, and put it on top of the clothes and moccasins she was holding.

Her smile widened. More gifts! This had to mean he was asking her to be his wife, and by accepting his gifts, she was agreeing to the marriage. She eagerly took anything he offered her. Under ordinary circumstances, she would have held out. After all, it had been to her benefit to delay her acceptance of Citlali's proposal. Her parents had been proud of it. Little did they realize she delayed the acceptance for as long as she could because she didn't love him.

Woape's mind drifted back to the present as Gary put a bonnet and hat in her arms. He indicated for her to follow him to the counter so she obeyed and nearly protested when he took everything but her new clothes out of her arms. When she realized he meant to purchase them, she relaxed. Things were different here in the white man's world. It would take her some time to adjust to her new life.

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At least, Gary was giving her a permanent place by his side. He'd proposed. She accepted. As soon as she joined him in his room, then they'd finalize the marriage. It wasn't exactly the way it would have been with Citlali had she stayed for the wedding, but in many ways, it was better. She liked Gary more than Citlali. Gary seemed to enjoy life...and he was very brave. He could be a chief. Anyone who could scare Hothlepoaya could lead a tribe.

As long as she stayed with Gary, she wouldn't have to worry about Hothlepoaya or his two friends ever again. Also, maybe it meant that Julia would have to leave her alone. Why Julia insisted on bothering her while she bathed, she didn't know. Woape was perfectly capable of taking care of herself. Maybe she'd start putting a barrier in front of the door so Julia wouldn't be able to barge in on her. But would Julia dare enter Gary's room? Woape never saw her enter it.

Well, it didn't matter. What did matter was that she had a secure place with Gary. Where he went, she would follow. She wondered if he would head off on horseback like he had before when he'd found her. It would make her feel much better if she didn't have to deal with Julia at all. Perhaps his time here would be limited. Regardless, the important thing was that he planned to keep her by his side, and that was all that mattered.

He returned the items to her.

"Gary...ibero," she said. She did not know his word for 'husband', but she could tell him her word for it.

"Ibero?" he asked.

She nodded. "Ibero."

He smiled. "Yes. Ibero."

There. It didn't get any clearer than that.

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That night Gary went to sleep, not expecting anything unusual to happen. For sure, he didn't expect someone to slip into his bed. When a warm naked body pressed against him, he initially assumed he was dreaming. Unlike his other dreams though, this one seemed particularly vivid. Part of him struggled to wake up, to find out if it was really happening. The woman snuggled in his arms and began kissing his face. She started at his cheeks and before he knew it, she was kissing him on the lips. He finally stirred enough so he could kiss her back. The problem was, unlike his other dreams, he could actually feel everything. Her lips were soft, as was her flesh. By the time he realized that he was not dreaming after all, he was caressing her breasts.

Startled, he bolted up in the bed and tried to get out of it. Since he was tangled in the sheets, his attempt to distance himself from the situation resulted in him falling onto the hardwood floor with a loud thud. He tried to stand up but tripped and fell again, this time landing on his stomach.

The door to his room flung open and his aunt and sister gasped.

"What is going on in my home?" Aunt Erin demanded, holding the kerosene lamp up.

Once he was able to successfully stand up, he saw Woape frantically wrapping the robe around herself. Then it dawned on him that he'd been doing things with Woape that he'd never done with a woman before. Well, of course it had to be her. No one but her would even think to come to his bed. But why? He glanced at his sister who stared at him and Woape in shock, her hand over her mouth.

"Gary, what is the meaning of this?" his aunt asked, her eyes a steely gray.

"Wh-...I..." He shrugged. "I don't know what she's doing here."

His sister finally took her hand down and clucked her tongue. "A likely story."

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“It’s true. I was asleep and...” Oh, for goodness’ sakes! The last thing he wanted to do was give them any details! “I didn’t know she was in my bed.”

His aunt didn’t look convinced. “You aren’t stupid.”

“I was sleeping! When I woke up, she was next to me.” And no, he wasn’t about to say any more than that!

“Something was happening,” Julia insisted. “A woman doesn’t get caught naked in a man’s bed unless she’s planning on something she ought not to do until she’s married to him.”

“Really, Gary. I thought I raised you better than this,” Erin scolded.

“We didn’t do anything,” he said.

They rolled their eyes.

He looked at Woape who didn’t look as ashamed as he thought she should for pulling such a stunt. Didn’t she realize how weak a man’s will was when confronted with a naked woman in his sleep? She was lucky he had the sense to wake up and put a stop to this nonsense! He waited until Woape looked at him before he asked, “What were you thinking?”

“Wife,” she replied. She pointed to Julia who still stood there with her eyes wide in disbelief. “Sister.”

It took him a good thirty seconds before he realized what she was saying. “Wife?”

She nodded. “Wife. Gary ibero.”

“You think we’re married?” Who in the world told her such a ridiculous tale? He looked at Julia. “Did you put her up to this?”

Julia inhaled sharply. “I would never tell a woman to engage in immoral activity.”

Erin frowned at him. “So you don’t know why she’s insisting that you are her husband all of the sudden?”

“No!” He ran his fingers through his disheveled hair. Then he remembered that he was in his night clothes. “Why

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would I be dressed if I thought I was going to...you know...with her?”

“Hmm...” His aunt tapped her foot on the floor. “I guess you have a point. Still, something you said or did encouraged her.”

“I never took her to the preacher.”

“Her customs differ from ours. Apparently, something happened that made her think you married her.”

“I don’t know what that could possibly be. I didn’t kiss her. I didn’t even hug her.”

“Well, for some reason, she’s decided you married her.”

“Fine.” He turned to Woape and noticed that she looked upset that his aunt and sister were still in the room. After he took a deep breath to settle his rattled nerves, he said, “Woape...no wife.”

Woape’s eyebrows furrowed. Then she spoke in her native tongue, and there was no way he could figure out what she said. Then her overwhelmed tone became soft and sorrowful. Her eyes filled with tears and she ran out of the room, pushing past his aunt and sister. The slamming door of Julia’s bedroom echoed through the still house.

He stared back at his relatives, feeling as bewildered as they looked. Finally, he sighed. “I reckon that solves that misunderstanding.”

Julia still didn’t look as if she believed him, but she quietly turned and went back to their aunt’s bedroom.

Julia, however, was the least of his problems. He hated that sad look on Woape’s face. Did it really mean that much to her that he married her? Great. Now he felt bad. Still, if he went along with what she expected, then how was he supposed to go to church with a clear conscience? In her culture, maybe they were married...how, he didn’t understand at all...but in his culture, they weren’t; and he wasn’t about to compromise that to spare her

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feelings or to satisfy his curiosity about what went on between a man and a woman in bed.

His aunt walked up to him. "You should marry her."

"What? Why?"

"Because it's about time you settled down and established a family."

"I didn't get her in the family way."

"No. But why not do it? She's a sweet girl, and I think you've taken a liking to her, even if you don't know it."

"Of course, I like her. She's nice."

"There you go. That's all you need to get started on a life with her."

"I don't know." He rubbed his eyes and gave a loud sigh. "I'm not looking to get married. I'm not even sure what my place is in this world."

"You don't want to end up like your cousin. It's not good for a man to roam all of his life. Didn't you get some idea of what you enjoy while you were gone?"

He thought over the jobs he'd done. He'd helped out with the railroad, learned to build houses, and delivered supplies. None of those appealed to him. Was there a job in town that he could enjoy doing? But maybe life wasn't about seeking out the job that a man got up every morning so excited about he dreaded going home. Maybe life was more than that. He was sure that God had a plan for him. If only he could figure out what that plan was.

His aunt put her hand on his arm and spoke to him in a soft tone. "Your cousin was more concerned about his pleasures than his responsibilities. You remember what happened to him?"

"I don't like to drink moonshine."

"Everyone has a weakness. Alcoholism was his."

He knew his cousin had hurt his aunt when he left. Though his aunt managed to resolve her grief, there was a hole in her heart no one could fill. Gary walked over to the window and

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stared out at the landscape that spanned for miles. What exactly was he searching for?

“At least think about it,” his aunt said.

“Cousin Ned left after he married Carol. Why do you think marriage will settle me?”

“Because you have something he didn’t.”

He waited for her to continue.

She smiled. “You have an emptiness that God and this world can’t give you. Don’t you know that God said it wasn’t good for man to be alone?” She stepped toward the door. Glancing over her shoulder, she added, “Your cousin didn’t think God was worth considering. It clouded his vision of what really matters.”

As soon as she shut the door behind her, Gary plopped back into bed and looked up at the ceiling. The room was dark since she had taken the kerosene lamp with her, and he suddenly became aware of how silent it was. His aunt was right. He was lonely, though he wasn’t lonely enough to stick around with Julia in this house. He did want to leave his sister. But did he have to leave town?

He rolled over in bed and unwittingly recalled how it felt to have Woape beside him. His body responded to the memory, so he rolled back to his previous position. She seemed like a sweet person. She certainly was beautiful. He didn’t think being married to her would be a painful experience. It wasn’t like she was Julia.

But marriage? Marriage was for life. Did it make sense to marry someone he hardly knew? His head ached from the internal debate raging inside of him. For the time being, he’d put the matter out of his mind and go to sleep. Maybe in the light of day, things would make better sense.

Chapter Seven

By the time Gary woke up, he heard his aunt and sister talking downstairs in the kitchen. He knew they were talking in the kitchen because of the clattering dishes. From the rise of the sun, he guessed it was just past breakfast. He wondered if he could stay in bed all day and avoid facing them and Woape. Once again, he longed for the freedom of the prairie...but this time for different reasons.

What did he do that made Woape think he proposed to her? He slowly exhaled and wondered how he could explain things to her, to let her know he didn't mean to give her false hope. Maybe he could hide out in bed for the rest of his life and not confront the issue at all. That really seemed to be the best solution in the midst of this mess.

The sound of footsteps crept into his awareness. He laid still and waited. Someone was coming up the stairs.

"Neither one has ventured downstairs," his aunt Erin said. "One would think they disappeared."

"Both are probably too ashamed," Julia replied.

Alright, so make that two people who were coming up the stairs. And those happened to be the last two people he wanted to see right now. The steps got closer to his door. He didn't

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think they'd come into his room. At least, he hoped not. It wasn't like he was making any noises. If they thought he was still asleep, that would be best.

They stopped in front of Woape's door and knocked. He breathed a sigh of relief. Good. They wanted to comfort her. That was for the best. He never meant to hurt her feelings like he had. When they knocked again, he frowned. Something wasn't right. He quickly stood up and went to his door. As soon as he opened it, he noticed the neatly folded pile of clothes and other items he'd gotten her the day before.

He glanced up at his aunt and sister who had opened the door to Woape's room. They currently stood in the empty room and stared at him. Great. More staring. He forgot how nice it was to be out on the land with no one watching him.

"Apparently, when you got her those things, she thought you meant to be her husband." Erin sighed. "This is my fault. I should have taken her to get them. It's just that she wanted to be with you all the time, so I thought she'd be more comfortable if you did it. Oh, I should have gone with you both."

"How were you to know that she'd take something innocent and turn it into...this?" Julia asked. "It doesn't matter now." She looked over at Gary. "I don't suppose she's in there?"

"No!" Oh for goodness sakes! Did they really think he'd bring Woape back into his room?

"Don't take any offense to the question," his aunt said. "The fact of the matter is that we can't find Woape anywhere else. Your room was our last option."

The knot twisted tighter in his gut. He knew it. He just knew something was wrong! He hurried back into his room and got dressed. As he buttoned his shirt, he studied the landscape beyond the town limits. It took a moment, but he caught sight of a woman riding east on a horse. There was only one woman he knew who wore a deerskin dress. He felt horrible. He never meant for Woape to leave. Those men could still be out there

searching for her, ready to kill her at any moment, and he had been lingering around his bed like someone who couldn't make a decision. Well, there would be no more of that. He would marry her. It was better for her to be safe with him than to risk her neck out there in the middle of nowhere.

When he finished slipping on his boots, he rushed to the parlor where his aunt and sister were getting ready to leave the house.

"I found her," he told them.

"Where is she?" his aunt asked.

"Heading out of town." He grabbed his hat from the top shelf of the closet and plopped it on his head. "I'll get her. You get the preacher."

"The preacher?" The older woman looked at him with a curious expression on her face.

He flung the door open. "We can't get married without the preacher." Before either his aunt or his sister could respond, he shut the door and ran to get his horse.

Woape did everything she could to evade him, but Gary caught up to her. Why he should bother finding her when he had such disdain for her, she didn't understand. For some reason, she displeased him, and she couldn't bear the shame of continuing to be in his presence. Wasn't it bad enough Erin and Julia witnessed his rejection of her? Why did he feel it necessary to bring her back under their disapproving stares? Hadn't she been humiliated enough?

She glared at him as he led her horse by the reins. Even the chill in the air wasn't enough to cool the heat on her face. How could he be so quick? She wondered if he could outmaneuver Hothlepoya. She shook the question from her mind. What did it matter? Hothlepoya was back at his teepee,

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probably enjoying the spoils from his latest conquest. She steeled herself against the images that threatened to assault her mind. She wouldn't cry. Not now. And especially not in front of Gary.

Instead, she turned her attention to the prairie that stretched around them. The town was a good ways off. She'd gotten far. A little further out and she might have made it to... To where? North. Hothlepoya was south of them. As long as she kept going north, it didn't matter where she ended up. Only, Gary had her trapped. What good had running away done her? It seemed to her that no matter if she ran from the chief's son or Hothlepoya or Gary, the result was the same. She went from one man's authority to another. Since Gary was the strongest of them all, she shouldn't be surprised he succeeded in the end.

Another gust of wind crossed the landscape and blew across her skin. She shivered.

Gary looked over at her and asked her a question.

She decided to ignore him. Even when he called her name, she refused to glance in his direction.

He stopped, and her horse—the traitorous beast she was!—also stilled. “Woape?”

Gritting her teeth, she stared forward, aware that there was beauty around her but unable to see it in the midst of her bitter emotions. He sighed and reached out to touch her, but she jerked away from him. What right did he think he had to do that after his cruel treatment of her?

“Sorry,” he slowly stated.

What the word meant, she didn't know, but she detected tenderness in the way he said it.

“Woape?”

She debated whether or not she should acknowledge him.

“Woape wife. Gary i... ibero.”

Now she knew he mocked her! She shot a glaring look at him.

His eyes grew wide in surprise.

“What do you expect?” she asked him in her language. “You give me gifts and have me believe you will marry me, but when I accept, you say no!”

He spoke, not sounding angry but bewildered.

She had no idea what his game was, and she didn't care to figure it out. She knew better than to fall for his lies again. He could lavish her with all the gifts in the world, but she'd been burned once and that was one time too many.

After a tense moment, he gave a slight shake of his head and turned his attention back to directing their horses to town.

She bit her lower lip and considered jumping off her horse and running. Could she outrun him? He'd have her horse to deal with. It was worth a chance. She waited until his eyes were turned to the town and quickly leapt off the horse. Her horse reacted and caused him to settle it down, which is what she had hoped for. However, her horse quickly came under his control.

The stupid animal hadn't been so tame in the past! She knew it was a long shot, but she had to try so she continued to run. As she feared, he caught up to her, and he didn't even have to forfeit his hold on her horse to do it. She didn't know whether to be annoyed or impressed.

He moved his horse in front of her, and she tried to dodge him but he was too quick for her. She stomped her foot in anger and openly glared at him. Did he enjoy making her do what he wanted? All this time, she had thought he was better than Hothlepoya. But maybe she was wrong. Maybe she shouldn't have followed him to his home.

When she saw that he was getting down from his horse, she turned to bolt, but his hand wrapped around her wrist. His touch wasn't rough. Unlike Hothlepoya, he was gentle. The realization was so unexpected she froze in place. She didn't want to think of how he made her weak or how her heart sped up in an unfamiliar excitement as he closed the gap between them.

“Woape,” he whispered. “I'm sorry.”

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From the concern in his eyes, she reasoned the words ‘I’m sorry’ were ones that expressed caring. No, he wasn’t like Hothlepoya. Hothlepoya’s eyes were always cold, and when he did smile, there was a hint of cruelty on his lips, as if he deemed everyone around him unworthy of his acceptance. Such was not the case with Gary. He felt bad for what happened the previous night and was trying to tell her that. The muscles in her face relaxed.

He took her hand and pressed it against his chest. “Ibero.” Then he pointed to her. “Wife.”

She shook her head. He’d told her no. Why did he say yes now?

He nodded. Slipping his hand behind her waist, he pulled her against him and kissed her.

The action startled her, but only for a moment. His lips were soft and warm. His body was strong and safe. So unlike Hothlepoya. She responded to him, thinking that this was much better than the kiss they’d shared before when he’d been half asleep. Now he was wide awake and making the move. Did it mean he changed his mind?

When he ended the kiss, he looked into her eyes as if trying to figure something out. He took a deep breath and smiled. “Pretty.”

She recognized the word. It meant he liked what he saw. She offered a tentative smile in return.

“Gary. Ibero? Woape. Wife?”

Was he asking her? She pressed her palm on his chest. “Ibero?”

“Yes. Ibero. Husband.”

So Ibero meant husband. “Murse.” She tapped her chest. “Wife. Murse.”

“Woape, my murse.” He motioned back to the town.

When he kissed her this time, she leaned into him. It felt right to be with him. She wished she could wrap herself in his

embrace and stay there forever. She rested her head on his shoulder and held onto him, closing her eyes and listening to his heartbeat.

Finally, he stepped away from her and pointed to the town. “Come.”

She nodded and got back on her horse.

He glanced in her direction. Smiling, he shook his head, said something, and hopped on his steed.

Sometimes it frustrated her that she couldn't understand most of what he said, for how could she decide if what he meant was good or not? As he reached for her hand and kissed it, her cheeks grew warm. There were some things they could communicate to each other that didn't require words. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze before he let it go. She could still feel his lips on it. And her lips still tingled from his kiss.

No one had ever kissed her like he did. His actions were tender. They were a great relief after what she went through with—

She closed her mind to the memory. No. She wouldn't think of it. As horrible as it was, she wouldn't let it tarnish the memory of this moment.

He waited for her until she rode by his side. It was strange to be next to him this way, as if he saw her as an equal. She liked it. It made her feel as if she had some value. At least, more value than Citlali had attached to her. She studied Gary's profile, wondering what changed his mind about her. She realized she wouldn't understand it until she learned his language. But there was time. He was going to marry her, so she had the rest of her life to find out everything there was to know about him and his world.

Chapter Eight

The preacher pronounced them man and wife, and Gary kissed Woape. It wasn't the way he pictured his wedding when he did give it thought, which hadn't been often in his life. Weddings were more of his sister's imaginings. She talked of a church, a gathering of family and friends, and adorning herself in a white dress she'd make herself. He figured his wedding would be similar, except instead of a dress, he'd wear a nice suit.

Such was not the case for him. He and Woape stood in his aunt's parlor, and his guests consisted of a happy looking aunt and a sour looking sister. He thought Julia would protest but she held her tongue. He reasoned that Julia was relieved he was at least doing right by Woape...not that there was anything to 'do right' about. But how could he prove it?

Woape was beautiful in her Indian clothes. It was strange that she hadn't married yet. From what he recalled in talking to others at his last job, it wasn't unusual for Indian females to marry at fourteen. Woape was older than that, but still younger than him. Not that such things mattered. For whatever reason, he happened to find her when he did, and he was convinced that there was a purpose in it. What that purpose was, he'd find out sooner or later.

“Congratulations,” the preacher said, breaking Gary out of his thoughts.

He blinked and turned to the older man. “Thank you, sir.” He shook the man’s hand. Looking over at Woape again, he said, “Murse. Ibero.”

She nodded, and he figured she understood that in his culture, this is how their marriage became official.

“You two make an adorable couple,” his aunt gushed, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. “It’ll be good for you to have a wife, Gary.”

“Man isn’t meant to be alone,” the preacher agreed. He closed his book. “I better get back to preparing this Sunday’s sermon.”

“Well, I appreciate you coming on short notice,” Gary said, holding Woape’s hand. Now that he’d warmed up to the idea of being married, he realized it wasn’t so bad after all. In fact, judging by the kisses he had shared with Woape so far, it had a particular appeal to it.

“It was my pleasure.” The preacher placed his hat on his head and left the house.

Gary caught Julia’s scowl as she walked up the stairs. That was it. There was no way he was going to keep living in this house with her. He waited until his aunt stopped telling Woape how pretty she looked before speaking to her. “Aunt Erin, do you think I could get Matthew’s house?”

“So now you’re staying?” she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

“I’m not opposed to being in town.” He lowered his voice so Julia wouldn’t overhear. “I don’t want to stay in this house, and I think you know why.”

Growing serious, she nodded. “I do. And I think Matthew would be happy to talk to you about his property.”

“Good.” He turned to Woape. “You stay with Erin. I’m going to find a place for us to live.” By the expression on her face,

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he knew that she didn't understand him. Of course, she didn't understand him. She had a limited vocabulary of the English language. "Woape here." He pointed to the floor. "With Erin." He pointed to his aunt. Pointing to himself, he motioned to the door. "I...Gary...go. Then return." He then motioned to the floor and himself.

As soon as he took a step toward the door, Woape followed.

He glanced at his aunt who was chuckling. "You'll have to take her with you."

"But I also have to find a job. I can't take her with me for all of that."

Still in good humor, she said, "Then let's try this method." She put her arm around Woape's shoulders and steered her to the kitchen. "Cook for Gary."

Woape looked over her shoulder at him.

He sighed. What could he do to help her understand he'd return? Inspired, he took off his hat and put it on her head. He wouldn't leave his hat behind. "Gary return to Woape. Ibero. Murse."

She relaxed and nodded. Then she turned to Erin.

His aunt laughed. "Well, that settles that. When you get back, we'll have supper ready."

"Alright. I don't plan to be any longer than an hour."

On impulse, he gave Woape a light kiss. Being affectionate with a woman was new, but he certainly enjoyed it. His spontaneous nature had led him to do many things in haste in the past, but he knew, deep down, that this was one of the best things he'd ever done. Content, he headed off to see Matthew. With any luck, he and Woape would be under a different roof before the night was over.

It wasn't what Gary expected his first home to be like, but considering his limited funds, it would have to do. And it wasn't one he owned. Matthew agreed to let him rent it until he could afford to pay for it. Gary realized this was going to take awhile. He wasn't used to waiting, but he realized it was time he started to learn how to do it. The house had very little. Matthew didn't feel like lugging his cook stove or his washtub out of the house.

And that was pretty much all Gary currently had to work with. Well, that and the camping gear he'd taken with him when he left town. Maybe he should have accepted his aunt's offer for some money to buy furnishings, but he wanted to do this himself. He had enough to buy a couple of items. He was just in too much of a hurry to get away from Julia, he didn't care that all the stores were closed and he and Woape would have to sleep on the floor.

The important thing was that he was finally away from Julia and her death stares. It amazed him that they came from the same parents. Was it his fault that he got married before she did? She didn't have to forgo a proposal for his sake, but she had and she reminded him of it every chance she got. He really hoped the town was big enough so he wouldn't have to deal with her more than the occasional run in or Sunday mornings at church...with the possible lunch at Aunt Erin's place afterwards.

He glanced around the sparse kitchen. Woape watched him, as if trying to gauge his reaction. Well, he wasn't prepared for any of this, but he didn't regret it so that counted for a lot. He smiled and she smiled back. That was good. At least she wasn't upset with him. She seemed to be alright with her current living conditions. And she did have her new clothes again, so that was something else to be thankful for.

"I'm going to need my hat back," he told her and pointed to it.

She reached up and he thought she was going to hand it to him, but she didn't. "Hat," she said.

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He nodded. "Hat." He took another look around and motioned to the staircase. "Sleep." Since he was holding his camping gear and their clothes, he had to rely on her to hold the kerosene lamp up as he went up the steps. As predicted, she followed him. He grinned. His shadow was still there. "Stairs," he told her.

"Stairs."

She was doing better at pronouncing words. He was surprised she was such a quick learner. That was good. The sooner he could figure out what she wanted, the better. He did hope that someday she'd be able to tell him why those three Indians wanted to kill her.

For the time being, however, that knowledge would have to wait. As soon as he reached the top of the stairs, he waited for her to join him. He peered into the two empty bedrooms and decided to take the bigger one. He set their things on the floor. There was nowhere to hang the clothes or a dresser to put them in, so he laid them neatly out the best he could.

He wondered what she was accustomed to. Did this small wooden house match anything she grew up in? He knew some Indians had teepees, but some tribes used them more than others. It was a shame that his understanding of her culture was so slim. She had to have been a part of the Mandan, Hidatsa, or Arikara tribe. They were in the area he was heading for. That was about all he knew too. He thought he'd learn more once he reached Bismarck.

He picked up the bedroll and smoothed it out on the floor. "Woape." He paused, wondering if she'd understand what he was asking her. "Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara?"

"Woape. Mandan." Then she pointed to him. "Gary. Waci."

Waci? That wasn't the name of this town. "Sykeston."
She shook her head. "Waci."

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He had no idea what she meant, and he was too worn out to care so he decided to pretend like he understood. “Waci.”

She seemed pleased that he agreed with her, and it made him wonder if he should put forth more effort into figuring out what ‘waci’ meant. But then she set the kerosene lamp down and started to undress—a process which made him forget all about ‘waci’ and how tired he was.

The moment seemed somewhat awkward since he hardly knew her, but he wouldn’t let that deter him from finishing what she’d tried to start last night. They were married, so he could do anything he wanted with her. Now *that* was an exciting thought.

He quickly retrieved the blankets his aunt had given him and added it to the bedroll. There was no box stove in the room, and it was bound to get chilly during the night. He wasn’t chilly yet. He was too geared up and ready to go to care about the temperature of the room, but he reasoned that they’d be glad for the blankets once they finished consummating their marriage.

Once he was done, he started to unbuckle his belt. He glanced at her and stopped. Last night had been such a blur, and he hadn’t taken the time to really look at her. But now he could...and so he did. She had wonderful curves, and he unwittingly recalled how her flesh felt beneath his hands. The light gave him an ample view of her front, making him wonder why she wasn’t embarrassed to be naked before him.

She gave him his hat and he mutely took it. Then she gave a slight shiver before she settled under the blankets.

Right. The bed. He definitely wanted to be there with her. He shrugged off his clothes, not bothering to see where they ended up, and joined her. The hardwood floor wasn’t very comfortable, but he hardly noticed. What got his attention was her warm and soft body. This was much better than last night. This time he knew exactly what was happening. He pulled her into his arms and smiled at her. He thought about extinguishing the light in the kerosene lamp, but he was enjoying the ability to

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see her too much to do that. Moonlight was fine, and there was enough of it drifting through the small window, but the light gave him a much better vantage point.

His eyes drifted down to where her breasts pressed against his chest. He moved slightly back and let his fingers lightly touch them. Soft. Warm. Very nice. Well, maybe not nice. It was more like a thrill. If he had any idea of what it'd be like to lay next to a woman, he'd have considered marriage sooner. Oh well. Nothing could be done about that now.

His gaze drifted up and he saw that she'd been staring at him, still studying his reaction. He brought his hand up and caressed her cheek. "Pretty," he whispered.

A smile formed on her lips.

She really was a sweet person. He'd never come across anyone who was as eager to please him as she was. That was when he decided that he'd do whatever he could to be a good husband for her. He'd make her glad that she found him instead of someone else when she fled from those men. He lowered his head and kissed her.

She responded to him and brought her hands up to his shoulders. She pulled him closer to her and tried to move under him. It suddenly occurred to him that she expected him to enter her immediately. Startled, he shifted back so she was next to him again. Granted that neither one of them had done this before, but he was sure the process didn't have to be rushed, even if the male part of him was more than happy to oblige her. There was the other part of him that wanted to take his time and learn her, and that was the part he decided to go with.

He took her hand in his and kissed her palm. She looked intrigued as he made a trail of kisses from her wrist down to her neck. He took a deep breath, aware of how lovely she smelled. She bathed every day, except for that day when she tried to run off. Thankfully, she came back with him.

This time when he kissed her, he let his lips linger on hers. She gave a contented sigh and he traced her lower lip with his tongue. She opened her mouth for him, and he accepted her unspoken invitation. He wondered what it would be like to share an intimate kiss with a woman like this. He'd heard about such kissing from childhood friends but actually doing it was much better than talking about it. He moaned and deepened the kiss, enjoying the way she responded to him since it notified him that she liked this as well.

As much as he wanted to keep kissing her, his curiosity got the best of him and so he removed the blanket. He took his time in exploring all her curves. He still couldn't believe how soft she was to the touch. His hand stopped just below her right breast. In the light, he moved so he could see what was wrong. There was a scar an inch long. How did that get there?

She opened her eyes and jerked away so he couldn't figure out if it was from a knife or not. Before he could question her about it, she kissed him. The kiss seemed more insistent than it should have been, but he was too aroused to care. He thought about rolling on top of her, but the floor was rough and if anyone was going to get bruises from this, it was going to be him. He shifted onto his back and urged her to straddle him.

When he entered her, he groaned. His hands guided her hips and he watched her as she moved. Once she developed a rhythm that brought him closer to the peak, he cupped her breasts in his hands and marveled at how the consummation of their marriage could bring him more pleasure than he'd ever known. His release came sooner than he wanted. He had hoped to let the experience linger longer than it had, but he assured himself that there would be more times—many more, and so he let the moment consume him.

After he regained coherent thought, he opened his eyes and smiled at her. She returned his smile and leaned forward to kiss him. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her close. Yes,

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marriage was definitely turning out to be better than he thought it would be. Those poor single saps out there just didn't know what they were missing. Well, now he knew and he had to admit that getting married was the best thing he'd ever done for himself.

Chapter Nine

The next morning, Gary wrapped a shawl around Woape's shoulders. He knew she wanted to take a bath, but they needed to buy soap—among other necessities—before that would happen. The sunlight poured in through the parlor window and casted a halo around her head.

He smiled and kissed her. "You look like an angel."

Of course, she didn't know what he meant, but that was fine. In time, she would.

He pulled her into his embrace and enjoyed the quiet peace the moment provided. She rested her head on his shoulder, and he kissed the top of her head. This was much better than roaming the countryside, looking for his next job.

The thought of working reminded him that tomorrow he had to report to Edward Phillips the next day about building and repairing wagons. He didn't know if he'd like it or not but figured since it was the only available job in the area, he couldn't afford to be picky. He'd do whatever job he had to in order to keep Woape safe in a home with food on the table.

Sighing, he released her. If it was up to him, he'd spend the rest of his life right there, just holding her and loving it. He grabbed his coat and hat and held his hand out to her. She

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accepted it, and they walked out the front door. He wasn't used to having a woman by his side, but he liked having her next to him. This was the day where they'd make their house a home. The thought warmed his heart and he squeezed her hand. She gave him a shy smile in response.

When they reached the furniture store, he let her select the table, chairs, armoire and bed that she wanted. He'd have to wait until he got paid to get anything else. As it was, he only had enough left over for food from the money he'd saved up over the past couple of years.

As he searched through the general store with Woape, he wondered how much his aunt taught her in cooking. Did Indians cook the same way white women did? After they bought groceries and put them where they belonged in the kitchen, he took Woape to Aunt Erin's house, already dreading the inevitable confrontation with Julia. His stomach tensed as he knocked on the front door. At least he could get out of there and return home with Woape when this was over.

His aunt opened the door and hugged them. "It's so good to see you again!" Then she waved them forward. "Come on in and have a seat."

He laughed. "You act like you haven't seen us in months."

"Well, it's just nice that you stopped by." She motioned for Woape to sit on the couch in the parlor which Woape did.

"Where's Julia?" he asked in a low tone.

"She's at Patricia's."

He breathed a sigh of relief. So this would be a pleasant visit after all.

She patted Woape's hand and glanced at him. "You must be good to her. She looks happy."

He shrugged and sat beside his wife and took her hand in his. For some reason, he couldn't stop touching her. "We're managing alright."

Her eyes twinkled as she poked him in the arm. “You’re looking pretty happy yourself. I think ‘alright’ is an understatement.”

“Anyway,” he began, eager to change topics, “I was wondering how much Woape knows how to cook. Did you teach her anything?”

“I showed her how to make bread and that stew we had. She likes corn and beans. There’s not much to preparing those. I’m sure she’s capable of making some things. Did you let her pick out the food?”

“Of course. I don’t know how to make anything.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And you wonder why I insisted you marry. Jerky isn’t a long-term plan. I’m sure that she will be able to make something tasty out of the items she picked, but if there are any problems, I can come and help out.”

That made him feel better. He looked at Woape who was smiling at him and his aunt. Would she be smiling if she realized that they were debating whether or not she was able to cook? He figured that she wouldn’t, so it was good that she didn’t understand what they were saying. He didn’t want to hurt her feelings.

“You’ll be fine,” his aunt said. “She’s a smart one.”

They stayed for a few more minutes before they returned home. As he glanced around the house, he knew they still had a long way to go before it would truly feel like a home, but at least they had what they needed—and that was a good start.

He knew Woape wanted to take a bath, especially since she hadn’t had one the day before, so he heated up the water on the cook stove and filled the washtub with it. He decided to join her, thinking he could also use a bath and it’d be more fun to take one with her than by himself. Since there were no curtains, he set the tub in the bedroom where the window overlooked the land. The last thing he wanted was for someone to walk by and see them.

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As he poured the last bucket into the tub, he noticed that Woape hadn't taken off the new dress his aunt had bought for her. Considering how she didn't hesitate to undress before, he thought it was odd. Then he figured it must be because it was day. Maybe she was more bashful in the sunlight. He could understand that. Still, he wasn't going to let the hot bath pass them up. The last thing he wanted to do was drag hot water up the stairs again.

He took off his clothes and grabbed the soap and motioned for her to join him. She seemed hesitant but slowly took her dress off. He went over to help her with her undergarments but she shook her head, said something, and stepped back.

Something isn't right.

He debated whether he should press the issue or not but decided against it. Instead, he turned his attention to the tub and got in so he could start washing himself. He just finished rinsing his hair with a cup when she approached him. He stood up and helped her into the tub. It wasn't big enough for two people, but he didn't care. It was an excuse to be close to her, and he liked the way her body felt against his. He gave her a lingering kiss, already imagining where things were headed. At least this time they could make love on a bed.

When he ended the kiss, he motioned to her braids. Then he held up the cup full of warm water. "Wash hair?"

She nodded and swiftly unbraided her hair.

He got out of the tub so she could sit down. He hadn't realized her hair reached all the way to her waist until it fell down her back. She had beautiful hair. He reached out to touch it and marveled at the silky feel of it. She shifted so she faced him and held out her hands for the cup.

He did as she bid and picked up the soap so he could work up a good lather. She could wash her hair, but he would insist on washing the rest of her. He took his time in rubbing the

soap into her skin as she rubbed the shampoo in her hair. Her body still fascinated him. He wanted to memorize every inch of it. For some reason, it looked better in the sunlight—probably because he could see everything. The night had a tendency to cast shadows that obscured a clear view, and she was a view he didn't want to miss. He had no idea that bathing could be so exciting. If she wanted to keep bathing every day, he just might pick up the habit as well.

When his fingers traced the scar beneath her right breast, he reasoned that it was probably the result of a childhood accident. He, after all, had accumulated a few scars from tumbles he'd taken. In the light of day, it didn't seem as alarming as it had when he first saw it. Turning his attention to the rest of his duty, he gently washed her breasts, noticing that she had finished with her hair which hung nicely down her back.

He figured she might like to have her back washed as well, so he reached for her hair to move it aside. She shoved his hand away. The harsh movement startled him. They were having a wonderful time together...or at least he thought they were. When he looked into her eyes, he realized she wasn't mad at him, like he initially assumed. Instead, he caught a glimmer of fear in her expression. Fear of what? Of him?

He reached for her hand and gently held it while he studied her reaction. No. She wasn't afraid of him. But it was becoming obvious that she was afraid he'd see her bare back, which explained why she faced him whenever she was naked. He waited for a moment, wondering if he should press the issue. Finally, he decided that she was his wife and the sooner he uncovered her secret, the better. After all, how could they deal with whatever shadows lurked in her past if they didn't confront them, especially in the light of day?

He took her other hand and urged her to stand with him. She resisted, probably guessing at what he was doing. But he was determined to find out what was going on.

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“It’s alright, Woape. Trust me,” he softly said.

She shook her head and tried to pull her hands out of his but he wouldn’t let her.

“I won’t hurt you. I care about you.” He sighed, knowing very well she couldn’t understand him. “Gary ibero. Woape nurse.” Those words were inadequate but they would have to do.

Staring at the water in the tub, she slowly stood up.

He released one of her hands so he could brush the hair aside. A welt ran across her back. “What the...?” He stepped around her so that he had a clear view of her from behind and pushed all of her hair out of the way. His blood turned cold. She didn’t just have one red mark seared into her skin. He guessed there were twenty lashes and multiple bruises that ran the length from her shoulders to the top of her thighs.

“Is this what they did to you? Is this why you ran away?” he asked, immediately criticizing himself for the anger that laced his voice. He wasn’t mad at her. He didn’t want her to think he was mad at her. She didn’t inflict this on herself. “Woape, I’m sorry,” he whispered. He turned her around and wrapped her in his arms.

Her shoulders shook as her tears wet his chest.

“It’s alright, honey. You’re safe now.”

She cried harder, and he didn’t know how to get her to stop. He hated the fact that she was crying. It made him feel helpless. He wanted to wipe away all her pain so she’d forget whatever happened to her. But all he could do was hold her. And so...that’s what he did.

Woape was dreaming again. It was another nightmare. A remembrance of what happened to her right before she escaped from Hothlepoya. Hothlepoya stood in his teepee with his arms crossed, glaring down at her as if he were a god and she was the

disobedient creature. In many ways Hothlepoya portrayed himself as a god. He never actually came out and said it, but it was in the way he handled himself.

Sobbing, Woape trembled on the ground. She made a futile effort to scramble out of the tent, but Tecumseh grabbed her by the neck and lifted her off the ground. She struggled to breathe, but his grip was too tight.

“Let her go,” Hothlepoya said in a cold voice that left no room for argument.

Tecumseh dropped her.

She managed to roll away before he could kick her.

“Enough,” Hothlepoya told him. “Just hold her in place. Don’t restrict her breathing. I want them to hear her scream.”

Tecumseh kneeled down and pressed her back into the ground.

She knew Hothlepoya liked it when people fought, but she couldn’t help but fight to get away. It was pointless. She knew it was, but she used all the energy she had. The survival instinct raged in her and demanded she do everything she could to flee. Tecumseh had her pinned with his weight, and all the kicking and hitting didn’t move him a single inch.

Hothlepoya bent forward with a feather to wipe the tears from her face. Smiling, he stood up and inserted it into his headpiece. “Another conquest. How sweet are the tears of a prey.”

She bit her tongue. She didn’t want to cry anymore. It gave him too much satisfaction. But even as she fought against her tears, more slid down her face.

In methodical motions best suited for a hunter, he took the rope made of braided horse hair off the rug and turned to her. It was caked in dried blood. “No one steals what’s mine.”

A cry escaped her throat and she dug her heels into the ground and tried to get up from under Tecumseh’s weight.

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Tecumseh growled and slammed his hand over her nose and mouth.

“She’s strong.” Hothlepoya’s smile widened with pleasure. “I like that.” He looked at her. “You just might be worth keeping.” Returning his gaze to Tecumseh, he said, “Strip her.”

In one fluid motion, Tecumseh got off of her and ripped her clothes off. Before she had time to think, he rolled her onto her stomach. He grabbed onto her legs so she couldn’t escape.

Hothlepoya slowly approached with the rope. “This is for helping Tama leave.” He lifted the rope above his head.

She screamed as he brought it down.

Her eyes flew open and all around her, it was dark. Her back stung, but she knew it was the memories that hurt. She was safe. Hothlepoya wasn’t still beating her. She wasn’t in his teepee. She was... She blinked, trying to remember everything that had happened since that terrible night. Reality emerged through the fog as the world of dreams dissipated around her.

Gary. She turned her head and saw that he was asleep. Relieved, she exhaled, thankful it was over. She was with Gary now, and he defeated Hothlepoya. Snuggling up to him, she wrapped her arm around his waist. He sighed and brought his arm around her shoulders to draw her closer.

She kept her eyes open for a good half hour, afraid that if she closed them, she’d return to the world of dreams and face Hothlepoya and the other horrible things he did to her. She never wanted to go through any of it again. He made sure never to harm the front of her body, saying that when he looked at her, he wanted to enjoy his prize. Hahnee almost lost his hand for letting the knife cut her under her breast. It was a slip, but it marred her and evoked Hothlepoya’s wrath.

She shivered and turned her eyes to Gary whose eyes were still closed. He had a faint smile on his lips. He had good dreams. How she envied him that. He wasn’t haunted night after night.

The nightmares had gone away when she was near him...except for tonight. She knew why they came back. Gary saw her wounds. He knew the truth. Well, he didn't know all of it. There were many things he didn't know. But he knew more than she wanted him to know. Even if he'd been gentle with her and applied some ointment to her back, it still filled her with shame that he'd seen her like that. Had she known he would have looked at her back, she would never have allowed him in the room with her when she bathed. But she didn't think he'd be interested in her back. After all, the back held no appeal for Hothlepoya, which was why he inflicted his punishments on that part of her body.

She turned her attention to the tree outside the window. Most of the leaves were still on the branches, but she knew it was just a matter of time before they fell off. A full moon shone through the cluster of leaves and created shadows on the ceiling. The shadows hadn't bothered her last night. But they did tonight. *It's not over. It's just a matter of time before he finds you.* She blocked the thought from her mind. She didn't want to think it. And so she focused on the tangible—things that were solid and real. Things that could take her mind off of her fears.

If only this moment could last forever. She wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of her life in this bed with Gary. She took comfort in his warmth. Her fingers brushed the thin hair on his chest. She inhaled the scent of soap they'd used earlier that day when they bathed. How she wished he hadn't seen her scars. Blinking, more tears fell from her lashes and onto his chest. She quickly wiped them away. Would she spend her life crying in the dark? She hoped not. She wanted to laugh again.

If only she could go back and redo the last month of her life. Then she never would have run from her tribe. She thought nothing could be worse than marrying Citlali. How wrong she'd been.

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She needed something—anything—to distract her from thinking anymore. Lifting her head, she nudged Gary in the side. When he was awake, it was easy to forget the demons in her past. Maybe he'd make love to her. He was so gentle with her that she couldn't help but feel safe and cared for. "Gary?" she whispered.

He shifted but didn't wake up.

She sat up and shook his arm. "Gary?" she asked, making sure he'd hear her.

His eyes opened and he looked in her direction. "Woape?"

Already feeling better now that he was awake, she snuggled up to him and kissed his cheek. If nothing else, she had learned that it didn't take much to encourage him. And as she'd hoped, this time was no different than the others. He rolled over so that he was facing her and kissed her on the lips. She eagerly responded to him. The shadows were quickly fading and she was, once again, safe.

Chapter Ten

For the third time, Gary led Woape up the pathway that led to their home. “Woape. Home.” Then he pointed to himself. “Gary. Work.”

He led her into the kitchen and glanced at the clock. This was his first day working for Edward Phillips, and if he didn’t hurry, he was going to be late. And Edward didn’t have a reputation for being patient...or forgiving.

Sighing, he turned back to Woape who didn’t look happy about being left behind. He wondered if she worried that he wouldn’t return. Taking his hat off, he placed it on her head. It worked last time he tried it. Maybe it would again. He took her face in his hands and kissed her. “I’ll be back.” Inspired, he dug his watch out of his pocket and pointed to the five. Then he motioned to the clock on the kitchen wall. “Gary. Home. Five.” He tapped the five. Then he tapped his hat. The action made the hat fall over her eyes. Chuckling, he adjusted the hat so she could see him.

A slight smile graced her lips.

“Pretty,” he whispered. She was amazingly beautiful when she smiled. He kissed her, wishing as he did that he could take

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her with him. The day was bound to run long without her. “I’ll miss you.”

Sighing, he exited the house. He made it to the edge of the property before he realized she had shut the door and followed him down the path. Stopping, he watched as she made her way over to him. Then he recalled the wounds on her back and the men who’d been pursuing her. Maybe she didn’t feel safe by herself.

“Alright.” He took her hand and walked with her. “But you can’t come to work with me. I’m taking you to Aunt Erin’s.”

She looked at him. “Erin?”

“Yes.”

She shook her head. “No Erin.”

He didn’t expect this to upset her. Didn’t she like his aunt? “Woape, I have to work.” He crossed the street with her and stopped in front of Edward’s repair shop. “Gary. Work.” He pointed to the building. “Work. Here.”

Her eyes lit up with understanding. “Work.”

“Yes. Woape, Erin. Gary, work.”

Her face fell.

“Woape home?” He could tell she didn’t like that anymore than going to his aunt’s. “I can’t take you to work with me. I just can’t.”

She stood still and watched him with her sad eyes.

He groaned. If he didn’t get to work, then they wouldn’t have a place to stay or food to eat. “I’m sorry, but you have to spend the day with my aunt.” Taking her by the arm, he led her down the road until they reached his aunt’s house. He noticed the hesitation in her steps. “You can’t be with me all the time.” When they reached the white picket fence lining the property, he asked her, “Why? Why no Erin?”

She furrowed her eyebrows in a way that told him she understood half of what he said and was struggling to figure out the other half.

“Erin.” He smiled and nodded. “Good?”

She nodded. “Yes. Erin good.”

Alright. So what was the problem? Unable to think of a suitable word, he shrugged and pointed to the house.

Her eyes grew wide and she nodded. Then she crossed her arms and scowled at him. “Julia.”

Oh. That’s why she didn’t want to be there. She didn’t want to deal with his sister. Despite himself, he chuckled. He did like the way she described Julia. Well, who could blame her? Still, he didn’t have much of a choice. “Woape at Erin’s.” Pointing in the direction of Matthew’s place, he added, “Or Woape at home.”

“Woape work.”

“No. Edward...” He thought for a moment and then he crossed his arms and scowled. “Edward. Work.” Setting his hands at his sides and relaxing his face, he said, “Woape no work.”

She finally seemed to understand for she glanced at their home before turning her attention to his aunt’s house.

He sympathized with her plight. Neither option was good for her.

Stepping forward, she went up to his aunt’s front door.

He quickly ran after her and gave her a long hug. “I’ll be back for you, Woape. I promise.” He kissed her and then knocked on the door. “I’ll miss you.”

She offered him a smile but it lacked any enthusiasm.

His aunt opened the door. “My goodness! I didn’t expect you here this early.”

“Woape doesn’t want to stay at Matthew’s place by herself, and I have to go to work. Can you keep her company until I get off work at five? I’ll come by to take her home.”

“I’ll be happy too.” Erin urged Woape into the house. “Oh, Gary, you’ll need your hat.”

Before Erin could take it off Woape’s head, he held his hand up to stop her. “It’s alright. Woape needs to know that I’ll come back.” He leaned forward and kissed Woape’s cheek. Then

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he realized how ridiculous it must seem that he couldn't stop kissing her in public, so he stood back up. "I'll be back."

"You'd better get to that shop before Edward explodes. He's not someone you want to anger."

Didn't he know it! He ignored the inclination to give his sad looking wife another hug and hurried to his job.

Julia couldn't believe it. As if having Woape take her room and her clothes when she lived in the house wasn't bad enough! Now her irresponsible brother was shoving Woape at her and Aunt Erin so he could go off to work? Why did he always leave something for her and their aunt to take care of?

Because he can't see past his own nose. It's always been what he's wanted. She brushed past her aunt who was fussing over the Indian girl and grabbed her by the arm.

"What are you doing?" Erin admonished. "Let her go."

"Gary needs to watch her. He brought her here and then married her. She's his responsibility. Not ours."

Woape slapped Julia's hand away and glared at her.

She resisted the urge to slap her back. The ungrateful girl used her things and consistently swatted at her as if she were an annoying insect. "How much abuse must I endure?"

Her aunt shook her head. "Julia, she doesn't understand what you're doing. She thinks you're trying to hurt her."

"That's ridiculous! I've never tried to hurt her."

"With the way you grabbed her arm just now, I can't say that I blame her. If I didn't speak your language, saw the scowl on your face and had you yank my arm, I would have slapped you away too."

Fuming, Julia crossed her arms. "I can't believe this. You're taking her side?"

Ruth Ann Nordin

“I’m not taking anyone’s side. I’m explaining how things must look from her perspective.”

“Because you sympathize with her.”

She groaned. “Not this again.”

Woape moved further away from Julia and sat on the couch.

Julia gritted her teeth. Leave it to Woape to play the victim. Woape undressed and hopped into her brother’s bed, and now he married her to atone for his sin. Was she the only one who could see Woape for what she really was: a conniving shrew? And she’d taken advantage of her brother’s naiveté.

“Is she coming here every day?” Julia asked her aunt.

Erin shrugged. “It could be that once she settles into her new home, she’ll stay there when Gary’s at work.”

Exactly how long would that be? “She hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you.”

What did Erin know? Woape was nice to her! Julia looked at Woape who stared at her hands that were folded in her lap. She couldn’t stand it. Woape had her aunt wrapped around her finger.

Erin walked toward the kitchen and glanced back at her. “Why don’t you help me with the wash?”

“What will she do?” Julia pointed at Woape who didn’t bother looking up.

“Wait for your brother to come get her.”

Julia was about to argue that Woape should do her part, but then she realized that she didn’t want Woape around her so she bit her tongue and hastened to the wash.

Three days later, Woape found herself on the way back to Erin’s house. Since Gary hadn’t ventured to ‘work’ for the past two days, Woape thought he was done. But that morning after

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breakfast, he put on his coat and hat and headed out the door. Startled, she threw her coat and bonnet on and joined him. He looked surprised to see that she followed him.

“Work,” he said, turning to her.

Work? But he was done. Wasn't he?

“Saturday. Sunday. No work. Monday. Work.”

She recognized the days of the week. If she was right, then Monday meant there would be four more days before Saturday. Did that mean he would be going to work today and four more days? She stepped closer to him. Maybe today she could join him.

As if he read her mind, he sighed. “No. Gary work. Woape home.”

She didn't fully understand what he had to do during the day and why it meant that they had to be apart. All she knew was that someone named Edward wouldn't be happy with him if she was there. But Julia wasn't happy to have her in Erin's house either. Though Erin was kind to her, Julia didn't hide her disapproval whenever Erin left the room. Woape tried to make sure she didn't end up alone with Julia, but there were times when she'd find herself alone with the intimidating woman.

“Woape. Work,” she finally said. She could lend a helping hand. Maybe if she did, then he'd get off work sooner.

“Oh, Woape.” He brought her into his arms and kissed the top of her head.

Closing her eyes, she snuggled up to him and enjoyed the safety she experienced every time he held her. To her dismay, he let go of her and placed his hat on her head. She knew what that meant. It meant he wasn't going to take her with him. And she didn't like it.

“I'm sorry,” he replied. “I can't.”

Her frown deepened.

He took her hands in his and warmed them up. “Woape want Erin's house?”

“No.” She shook her head and tightened her grip on his hands. “Woape work.”

He chuckled.

What was so funny about that? She had helped her father and brother on occasion.

“Woape home. Gary work. Women home. Men work.” He motioned to the house. “Here? Or Erin’s home?”

She grimaced. How did she say no to both options? But she knew she had to choose. He wouldn’t let her go to work with him. She glanced at the surrounding landscape. To one side was the open land. To the other was the town. They were about a mile away from the first home situated in the town, which meant they were also isolated enough so if she was found... But what was the chance that Hothlepoya would find her?

She gritted her teeth. She hated this! Hated needing to be around someone in order to feel safe. And no one made her feel safer than Gary. After all, who else but Gary could stand up to Hothlepoya and win?

She scanned the countryside. Winter was fast approaching. Patches of snow covered the ground. Would Hothlepoya venture out across the prairie this time of year to find her? Hothlepoya wasn’t like other men. He probably wasn’t affected by the cold weather. She admonished herself. Of course, the cold would bother him. He was flesh and blood. If he wasn’t, he wouldn’t have been afraid of Gary. Sighing, she decided she was better off being close to Gary, even if it meant being in the same house with Julia while she waited for him to get off work for the day.

“Erin house,” she finally said.

He pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head.

His embrace warmed her. If only he could always be with her... Then she wouldn’t have to be afraid at all. Maybe as time passed, this lingering fear that Hothlepoya would find her and drag her back to his teepee would ease. She took a deep breath

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and reminded herself of what her mother had often said, “You must take things one day at a time.” If her mother was still alive, it might be what she’d tell her now.

She glanced at the home Gary had brought her to so they could be together. In time, maybe she would be able to stay there by herself. But today was not that time. Tomorrow wasn’t going to be that time. It would be awhile yet. For the time being, she would bide her time with Julia.

Chapter Eleven

A month later, Woape watched Gary as he got dressed for work. Once again, she debated whether or not she could manage by herself in this house while he was gone. She wished she could stay here. She didn't want to face Julia again. The woman hated her, and even if Erin interceded on most of the disputes between Julia and Woape, it wasn't good enough. And today, Woape didn't feel like facing Julia, especially when that morning's breakfast threatened to come back up.

As soon as he finished buttoning his vest, he turned to her. "Woape, dress?"

She looked down at her nightgown. She knew what keeping it on meant. It meant she would stay here through the day. Grabbing a fistful of the cotton material in her hands, she braced herself for the day ahead. She could do this. She could be alone and be fine.

"Woape?" he asked.

"Woape stay here," she softly said, her breath no more than a whisper.

He frowned and walked over to her. Sitting by her on the bed, he took one hand in his and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Woape scared."

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Yes, she was, so she didn't bother denying it. But being scared was better than another fight with Julia, especially when her body wasn't up for it. All she wanted to do was lay in bed and rest. She couldn't do that at Erin's. Granted, Erin had allowed her to lay down on Friday when she was there, but Julia kept finding her way into Erin's room to put things away or clean...and Julia hadn't been quiet about it.

Just the memory was enough to cause bile to rise up in Woape's throat. She needed some ginger. Her mother used to give her that when she was a little girl. But she didn't buy any the last time she went to the store with Gary. She knew she'd need it, but she was too afraid to get it because as soon as she did, she'd have to admit what was happening to her. If she admitted it, then she'd have to admit another possibility—one she didn't wish to entertain—one that scared her much more than seeing Hothlepoya again.

“Woape, what's wrong?”

She shook her head. No. She didn't want to talk. Not right now. Not until she was ready. She'd rather push her worries aside and focus on getting through this day without Gary...and most of all, without Julia. If she could get through one day while he was at work, then she wouldn't have to face Julia again. Well, at least not until she had to go to church.

Gary sighed. “Woape, I have to work.”

She nodded. She knew that.

“You want to stay here?”

“Yes.” Since her voice shook, she cleared her throat and made sure she sounded braver when she said the word again. “Yes.”

He didn't look convinced.

She waited until she could stand up without losing her breakfast and eased up from the bed. “Woape work here. Gary work town.”

After a moment of silence, he stood up. “Alright.” He kissed her. “I’ll miss you.”

She hugged him and let him know she’d miss him too. When he left, she remained in bed for the rest of the morning. She could smell him on the sheets, and if she closed her eyes, she could imagine him right next to her. When she did that, she felt relatively safe. It wasn’t as good as if he was truly there, but at least it was something—and she managed without going to Erin’s house.

When she finally got out of bed, her stomach had settled down. As she slipped on her dress, she caught sight of her deerskin dress hanging in the armoire. Even if she departed from that life, it was still a part of her. It always would be. But there was one thing she hoped would signify her new life. Something she hoped wouldn’t be a reminder of what she escaped.

She finished buttoning her dress despite her shaking hands. Would she be able to tell the difference when the baby was born? Her skin was darker than Gary’s. But then, so was Hothlepoya’s. If she could remember when her cycle had last come upon her, she might be able to determine who the father was. But the days with Hothlepoya blended into each other until there was no real sense of time. She hadn’t wanted to be with Hothlepoya that way. She fought him, but he was stronger.

The timing couldn’t have been worse. She didn’t want to have Hothlepoya’s child. But it might not be his. It could be Gary’s. The last time she’d been with Hothlepoya was close enough to when she had first been with Gary. She didn’t know how to explain it to Gary, and truthfully, she didn’t want to either. In some ways, not being able to adequately speak his language gave her a good excuse to avoid it. *I should have waited until I had my cycle before I became intimate with Gary.* But then, what if her cycle didn’t come? Then she’d know she was doomed to carry and give birth to Hothlepoya’s child.

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She glanced out the window. Snow fell softly to the ground. She approached the glass and turned her gaze to the sky. She wondered if God really lived up there. Whenever Gary prayed, he was either kneeling by the bed or looking up. It seemed silly to think a God of any sort would reside in a bed. Besides, when he prayed by the bed, he kept his eyes closed. When he looked up at the sky, he had his eyes opened.

It wasn't unusual to think of an intelligence in the sky. Her mother sought them in all forms of creation, whether it be in trees or elsewhere. But she noticed Gary kept his attention to the sky. And he didn't seem to be staring at anything in particular, like the sun or moon.

She studied the sky. There wasn't anything unusual up there. Just a bunch of clouds and snowflakes. She wondered if Gary's God would make it so that this child was Gary's. How did a person even petition such a thing? Did she even venture to ask? She decided against it and turned her attention to the tasks she could do to occupy her mind until Gary returned home.

Today, she decided to forgo the braids and wrapped her hair into a bun. If she planned to scrub the floors, then she didn't want her braids to get in her way. A part of her knew it meant she was adjusting to her new world—assuming a new identity. But what could be lovelier after the hell she'd just gone through? She was Gary's wife. She wasn't Hothlepoya's slave anymore.

She spent the afternoon cleaning. When she didn't let her mind go idle, she didn't have to think of the pregnancy or what it might mean if the baby was born and Gary wasn't the father. She didn't even know if he'd be able to tell...or if she'd be able to tell. But Gary wasn't the type of man who'd divorce her. He saw her back and stayed with her. As painful as it would be, maybe someday she'd learn enough words to tell him what happened. For the time being, she preferred to forget.

When Gary came home, she was dumping dirty water on the grass. The sight of him made her heart leap with joy. She

dropped the bucket and ran into his arms, nearly knocking him over.

He laughed and gave her a big hug.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. How she missed him! But then she realized she'd done it. She made it through the day without him, and she didn't have to spend the day with Julia to do it.

"Now that's the kind of welcome a man's very happy to come home to," he said with a wide smile on his face.

She didn't understand all the words, but she knew he was happy and that's all that mattered. She wanted to make him happy, for he'd given her a reason to enjoy life again. "Gary home. Good."

He brushed back a stray strand of hair that had fallen to her cheek. "Woape here. Good." His lips softly touched hers and he held her closer to him. "I love you."

Love. That was a good thing. It meant he cherished her. He'd whispered it to her last night after he made love to her. "Woape love Gary," she replied.

"Good." He kissed her on the cheek. "You're cold." He let go of her, took off his coat, and draped it over her shoulders. "Come." Pulling her against his side, he led her across the grass and into the house.

Something was bothering Woape. Gary knew it, but whenever he tried to find out what it was, she found a way to brush him off. On Thanksgiving morning, he woke up, expecting her to be in bed next to him, but her place was empty. Turning over in bed, he saw that she stood by the window and peered up at the sky. It seemed that she did that a lot lately. He wondered what she was doing. Was there something significant with the sky in her culture?

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Sighing, he realized it was time to get up anyway. His aunt would kill him if he and Woape didn't go see her. It was, after all, a special day. He just didn't know how he was going to tell Woape where they'd be. The last time they were at his aunt's, which happened to be two weekends ago, Woape and Julia nearly got into a fight. What the fight was about, he didn't know. Woape was so upset she spoke in her native tongue, and when she had calmed down, she refused to talk about it. He really didn't feel like asking Julia what happened. He was sure that whatever the problem, his sister instigated it.

God, help us all to get through the day without killing each other, he silently prayed as he got out of the bed.

Woape turned to him and smiled.

She wouldn't be smiling when he told her where they'd spend their day, but he returned her smile and got dressed by the box stove. Though he sealed up the drafts as much as he could, the wind still found ways to penetrate through the window—which was another reason that Woape's window vigil struck him as odd.

He hesitated to walk over to her. She was already dressed in the blue shirt and brown skirt he thought looked especially pretty on her. Of course, she made everything look nice. She even had her hair braided. That was his favorite hairstyle on her.

"Thursday today. Gary go to work. I make breakfast." She stepped to the door.

"No."

She stopped and waited for him to continue.

He inwardly groaned. He hated this. Shifting from one foot to the other, he shrugged. He might as well get it over with. "Today is Thanksgiving. We go to Erin's."

Her eyebrows furrowed and she shook her head.

"Yes."

"No. Gary go. I stay home."

There was no way he wanted to go there alone. He dreaded it as much as Woape did, but at least with Woape there, he had someone he could be with. Not that his aunt wasn't an ally, but she didn't see what Julia was doing. As much as he loved his aunt, the woman had a blind spot when it came to his sister. He really couldn't blame her though. Julia had been with her when he left.

"I don't want to go," he told Woape.

"Stay here."

To Woape, it was that simple. But things weren't as simple as that, and he didn't know how to explain why. "I have to. You come too."

She cringed.

"I love you," he ventured, wondering if that would convince her to join him.

To his relief, she relented and he got the buggy ready. By the time they reached his aunt's house, he noted that the tension in her shoulders had gotten worse. He wondered how long they needed to stay there. Three hours at the most. It would be enough time to sit and talk and eat. Maybe he should help with the dishes. If he did, then things would go faster. Well, no they wouldn't. The kitchen was too small for all of them. He could insist that Woape sit down while he do the tedious chore with his aunt and sister. That would separate his wife and sister, and it would ease Woape into coming back for Christmas. Yes, that was the best thing to do. He'd help out in the kitchen.

As he took care of the horses, he noted that Woape stayed near him. She was still his shadow. The thought made him smile. He couldn't blame her for putting up with the cold instead of seeking the warmth of his aunt's house. When he couldn't delay the inevitable any longer, he took her hand and led her to the house.

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Woape forced her feet to remain still as Gary knocked on the door. At least she had a small bag of ginger in the purse Erin had given her so she could carry things around. The sickness came and went throughout the day, but she figured her stomach might upset her even more since she'd be around Julia.

She still hadn't told Gary about the child. She didn't know how. Did she let him assume he was the father or tell him she wasn't sure? The uncertainty stalled her from any kind of action.

He knocked on the door again, and Erin opened it. Woape smiled. She liked Erin. In some ways, the woman reminded her of her mother. She was warm, caring, and quiet. She was unassuming in a lot of ways, but she was unforgettable. Woape took a deep breath. It was because of her that her mother passed on from this world to the next. She couldn't blame it entirely on Hothlepoya. Not when it was her decision to get out of marrying Citlali. She should have just insisted that she couldn't marry him, even if her parents approved of him.

"Woape, sit," Gary told her.

She blinked, letting the guilt subside. It was too easy to dwell on the past when she was here, under the careful scrutiny of Julia's eyes as she watched her from across the room. In many ways, Julia reminded her of a grim cosmic punisher. But how was Woape to know her action would set off a sequence of events that led to this point in time? She never meant for anyone to get hurt.

"Woape?" Gary asked.

Realizing that Gary and Erin were waiting for her to sit, she obeyed. She thought Gary would sit next to her, but he told her he'd be back and got ready to go to the kitchen with Erin and Julia. She wondered what he was doing in there. Did they need to talk in private now that she understood some of the language? Was there something they didn't want her to know?

She reached for his hand. "No." If they had something to say, she'd prefer them to say it in front of her.

"Cook. I'm to help Aunt Erin and Julia cook."

She frowned. Cooking? Whatever was he cooking for?

Erin patted his hand. “Stay with her. Julia and I can finish with the pie.”

From there, they talked so fast that she had trouble making out exactly what they said, but in the end, he shrugged and sat down, his body comfortingly close to hers, and for the moment, she didn’t mind that Julia never once took her eyes off of her.

Gary relaxed when Julia followed Erin into the kitchen. He put his arm around her shoulders and kissed her cheek. “We’ll be home soon,” he whispered.

They spent a good ten minutes in silence. She enjoyed the way he rubbed his hand up and down her arm. With his free hand, he held one of her hands. She closed her eyes and rested her head on his shoulder. Now she could handle this. If this was all she had to deal with whenever she had to come here, it would be bearable—pleasant even.

All too soon the spell was broken for Erin announced that it was time to eat. Woape reluctantly opened her eyes and let Gary help her up. Once they entered the kitchen, Woape stepped up to a chair that would ensure that she didn’t have to watch Julia while she ate. Sure, it meant she would have to sit next to her, but at least Julia wouldn’t be in her direct line of vision.

The meal was tense. Woape didn’t have to know their language to understand the awkward moments of silence and Erin’s forced cheerful chatter meant they were all uncomfortable. Gary made an effort to respond. Julia didn’t even pretend to be interested in the conversation.

At least, Woape had an excuse. The problem was, she couldn’t focus much on eating because her stomach felt queasy. She needed to take a dab of ginger from her purse and put it under her tongue, but she didn’t dare do it. She’d wait until she was alone. She wasn’t ready for anyone to know about her

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pregnancy. There might be questions, and she didn't feel like answering them.

So she spent her time nibbling on corn and a potato. The smell of turkey only intensified her nausea so she ignored it. The stuffing and cranberry sauce was doable, but she didn't have the appetite for those either.

Gary glanced her way several times and seemed concerned, though he didn't say anything. Instead, he sighed and looked over at Julia who frowned at him. Then he turned his gaze to the clock. Despite any unease he must have felt, he managed to eat extra helpings of everything on his plate.

Woape finally put the fork down and sipped some water, wondering when she'd be able to get a moment alone. As soon as she tasted the ginger, her stomach would settle—even if her nerves wouldn't.

When Erin announced that dinner was over, a collective sigh of relief echoed through the kitchen. Erin motioned for Woape to go to the parlor with Gary. "Julia and I will take care of dishes."

"I clean dishes," Woape quickly spoke up. "Erin and Julia rest."

Erin smiled. "There are many."

"No. I can clean."

"Good. Let her." Julia placed her plate back on the table and left the room.

"I can help Woape," Gary said.

"No," Woape argued. "Talk to Erin and Julia. I be back." She needed to get the ginger. If she didn't, she was going to throw up. She recognized the all-too-familiar watering in her mouth. She hurried to the parlor and grabbed her purse and returned to the kitchen where Gary and Erin appeared to be arguing. "Go. Please," Woape said. Her body was beginning to feel weak.

"I don't know," Erin replied, uncertain.

“Please!” Woape didn’t mean to yell. She immediately lowered her voice. “Sorry.” She swallowed. “Please.”

“Alright.”

As soon as Erin and Gary left the kitchen, Woape undid the strings of her purse and pulled out the small bag of ginger. She placed it next to the pie left out on the counter to cool and opened it. Just as she dipped her finger into the brown powder, Julia ran into the room.

“What are you doing?” Julia snapped.

Woape ignored her and got ready to put the ginger under her tongue.

Julia grabbed her hand. “What is this?” She glared at Woape. “Poison?”

Woape had no idea what ‘poison’ meant, but she shoved Julia away from her. What right did Julia have to be in her business? She wasn’t doing anything to hurt anyone.

Julia slapped her. “You will not poison me or my family!”

Months of animosity finally got the better of her, and before Woape had time to think, she slapped Julia back.

Julia grabbed the bag of ginger and dumped it in the sink.

What right did Julia have to do that? Woape tried to slap her again, but Julia stopped her and grabbed both of her wrists. Woape struggled to free herself but Julia’s grip was too strong. Another image flashed in her mind. Hothlepoya had grabbed her wrists too and threw her down to the ground.

“No!” Woape screamed and grabbed Julia’s hair. Never again would she allow someone to bind her. She forced Julia’s face into the pie. “No!”

Someone grabbed her and pulled her off of Julia who gasped for air. The sudden movement was all Woape needed to throw up on the floor.

“What did you do to her?” Gary yelled at Julia.

Julia wiped the pumpkin from her eyes. “She was going to poison us!”

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Erin ran to grab two hand towels. She handed one to Julia and wet the other one before wiping Woape's cheeks and chin. "I'm sure she wasn't going to poison us."

From there they spoke too fast for Woape to figure out any of the words they said. Not that she could focus much on the angry shouts between Gary and Julia or the frantic pleas from Erin who cleaned the floor. Woape's skin was clammy. Though her stomach no longer bothered her, she didn't have the energy to stand on her own so she rested against Gary who held her.

Gary used a tone that told Woape he'd had enough. He picked her up. "We are going home, and we will be home for Christmas." Then he carried Woape out of the kitchen.

Chapter Twelve

The following Monday, Gary went to work, and on his way there, he caught sight of Julia leaving her home. Before he had time to talk himself out of it, he rode up to her and slid off his horse so he could speak with her.

“What did you do to Woape?” He took a deep breath to calm his nerves. He promised himself he wouldn’t let his anger get in the way of a civil conversation. Clearing his throat, he spoke in a milder tone. “What happened on Thanksgiving?”

Julia stuffed her hands into the pockets of her coat. “She was trying to poison us.” She shook her head and snapped, “I know you don’t believe me. Aunt Erin doesn’t believe me either. But you don’t have to believe in gravity for it to exist.”

He rolled his eyes. Leave it to his sister to make *that* kind of analogy. “If Woape wanted to poison me, she would have done it by now. I’ve been in the same house with her for two months, and I’m as healthy as ever. In fact, I actually feel better. I don’t know what she puts in the food, but it tastes great and has done me a lot of good.”

“She doesn’t want to poison you...apparently,” she conceded. “But she was ready to put something into the pie.”

“You saw her put poison into the pie?”

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“I said she was about to. She dipped her finger into some brown powder and held it up to her face.”

He blinked. “Was it in a small bag?”

“Yes.”

“You know something. You need to stop jumping to conclusions. She likes to taste that spice from time to time.”

“Maybe she’s building up an immunity to it, so she can eat the same thing as us and not die.”

The notion was so preposterous that he laughed.

She frowned. “There’s nothing funny about it. There are poisons that you can take in small doses so that they no longer affect you.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sakes. It’s not poison. It’s ground ginger.”

“Ground ginger?”

“Sure. I saw her get it from the store.”

“What would she be doing eating it? Shouldn’t she be putting it in food?”

“She doesn’t feel good sometimes. She puts a bit of it under her tongue and then she feels better. It’s one of those things she learned while growing up. It actually works. I had a stomach ache and she gave it to me. It settled my stomach right down.”

Julia looked as if she didn’t know whether to believe Gary or not. “She could be getting you used to it too.”

Was she still sticking to this story? Gary couldn’t believe it. “Woape is not trying to poison anybody.”

“She hates me.”

“I don’t blame her.”

She gasped.

“Are you surprised? You go into the kitchen and attack her.”

“I was protecting us.”

This was getting them nowhere. “Look, whether you like it or not, Woape is my wife, and you need to be nice to her.”

“I’m your sister.”

And how he’d tried to forget! But he held his tongue. He needed to find a resolution. He was going to spend the rest of his life in this town which meant he had to run into his sister, and he didn’t want to be bickering with her a good thirty years from now. After the urge to retaliate subsided, he asked, “Will you try to work with Woape? She’s learned some words now. Maybe if you two talked, things could be bearable when we have to get together again for Aunt Erin’s sake. It wouldn’t hurt you to extend the hand of friendship.”

“Did you give *your wife* the same lecture you’re giving me?”

He groaned. “I’m not lecturing you.”

“Yes, you are. Despite what you think, I’m not stupid. I can see what Woape is up to, even if you can’t. There’s something going on with her, and it’s not good.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that she’s conniving and dangerous.”

“She is not!”

Their aunt emerged from the house. “I can hear you two arguing from the kitchen. What is the problem?”

He rubbed his eyes. “I’m trying to get Julia to talk to Woape.”

Erin tightened the shawl around her shoulders and shook her head. “Julia, go on to the store. I must speak with Gary.”

“Gladly,” Julia said and headed down the road.

His aunt turned to him. “I’m afraid there’s no way to get those two to get along. I’ve talked to Julia. She insists that Woape was going to put something harmful into the pie, and no amount of reasoning will work with her.”

“So you know Woape wasn’t trying to do anything bad?”

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“Oh, of course she wasn’t. But Julia is convinced that she was.” She sighed and gave a slight shrug. “I really don’t know how to reason with your sister.”

“That’s because she’s unreasonable.”

A grin crossed her face. “You don’t know her as well as I do, Gary. Sure, she has her moments...and Lord knows she’s irrational when it comes to Woape...but deep down, she does her best. She’s not a bad person. You just haven’t seen that side of her.” She paused for a moment and tightened the shawl around her shoulders. “She was deeply hurt when you left.”

He blinked. “What?”

“Well, it’s true. You were her last connection to your parents, and when you left, it was as if your parents died all over again.”

“That’s ridiculous. I’m her little brother.”

“A little brother she took under her wing and loved with all her heart. She gave up a lot for you. You just don’t realize it because you were too young to understand a woman’s heart.”

He didn’t know whether to accept this premise or not, but his aunt obviously did. “I’m not a kid anymore. I’m a grown man who can take care of himself.”

“But you never told her you were leaving. You just got up and left one morning and wrote a note. How was she to prepare for the fact that you grew up?”

It always came back to that morning. He didn’t realize it was so important he made a formal good-bye. It wasn’t like he never planned to come back. He said he would. He just hadn’t specified when.

“Anyway, try to remember that there are two sides to every story,” Erin softly said. “Things aren’t always as they seem. As for Julia and Woape... It’s not that far-fetched to understand why Julia panicked. I don’t know what Woape was doing with that bag’s contents, but-”

“It’s ground ginger. She uses it to calm her stomach. So there’s nothing to worry about.”

She frowned. “Calm her stomach? Is being around Julia making her so nervous she gets sick?”

“I don’t think so. She’s been taking it a lot lately.”

“She doesn’t look ill, and she didn’t take it when she lived here.” She motioned to the house. “It started after you two got married.”

“Right.”

“Is she expecting a child?”

“No.”

“How do you know? Did you ask her?”

He shrugged. “I wouldn’t have to ask. She would tell me.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Why wouldn’t she?”

“Does she know the words to tell you that she’s with child?”

He furrowed his eyebrows. Did she? Mentally working through the words Woape knew, he realized that words like ‘baby’ and ‘pregnant’ weren’t in her vocabulary. Excitement spread through him as he considered the possibility. Could it be true? Funny, how he hadn’t thought about being a father. He should have expected it. After all, he and Woape certainly spent enough time together in bed to make sure such a thing happened.

Erin nudged him in the arm. “You should ask her.”

Of course, he’d ask her! He couldn’t wait to get off work so he could. Work! He quickly glanced at his pocket watch. “Alright, Aunt Erin. I’ll talk to her when I get home. I better go before Edward gives my job to someone else.”

“And I’ll try talking to Julia again, but don’t expect me to do that today. She needs time to calm down.”

What else could he expect? But at the moment, he didn’t care. If his aunt was right, then he was going to have a son or

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daughter next year. He wondered when that would be. He and Woape married on September 22. At the most, it would be a little over two months. So the baby would be born in the early summer.

As he headed over to his employer's, he reminded himself that he couldn't jump the gun. It was possible that Woape wasn't pregnant. It really could be the stress with adjusting to her new life and having to deal with Julia that was making her sick. But as much as he tried to keep his imagination in check, he couldn't help but run through the possibilities of having a child. He could teach a boy to ride a horse and shoot a gun.

But the child might be a girl. He didn't know what he'd do with a girl. He shrugged. If the child was a girl, he'd figure something out. Maybe he could teach her to ride a horse. Woape did it, so the notion wouldn't be foreign to her if he wanted to teach their daughter to ride too. He stopped in front of the building he worked at, tied the reins to the post, and patted his horse. This would make a fine horse to train on.

After another admonition to wait until he verified Woape was even expecting a child, he turned his attention to the matter at hand. No one would be doing any good if he didn't get to work on time. Time for dwelling on the 'what if's would come soon enough.

Woape finished working on the blanket she was making when Gary came home. She set aside the blanket and stood up from the rocking chair in the parlor so she could help him. To her surprise, he gently took her hands before she could reach for his coat. He looked so excited that she wondered what could possibly be on his mind.

He smiled and patted her stomach. "Baby?"

Her breath caught in her throat. Was he asking what she was afraid he was asking? She pulled her hands away from his and stepped back. She wasn't ready for this. She wasn't even sure if she'd ever be ready. Only if she gave birth and knew this was his child could she be fully ready.

Taking off his coat and hat, he placed them on the hooks along the wall and approached her. "Woape?" He paused and then, looking inspired, he made a cradling motion with his arms. "Baby?"

She watched him, unsure of what to say. She knew what he meant, but the fact that he didn't know that bought her a few seconds of time. Should she tell him that yes, she was with child but no, she didn't know if it was his? He was obviously thrilled with the notion of being a father. Would he be pleased if he knew the truth? She placed her hand over her stomach. She just might throw up if she had to tell him.

"Are you sick?" he quickly asked. He led her to the chair in the parlor and prompted for her to sit.

Before she could argue, he ran to the kitchen and picked up the bag of ginger she'd placed on the counter with the other herbs and spices she'd lined up. How did he figure out that she used the ginger to deal with the sickness the baby caused? She didn't think men cared for things pertaining to pregnancy.

He hurried to her and handed her the bag. Then, even more startling to her, he picked up her blanket and wrapped it around her waist and legs. "Rest."

"Eat," she protested, ready to throw the blanket off. Yes, food would be a good distraction. Maybe it would make him forget his question if he realized his favorite stew was simmering on the cook stove.

But he stopped her before she could stand up. "I can get it. You rest."

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She just couldn't believe it. No matter how much she wanted to look away, she couldn't. She'd never seen him this excited.

“Woape,” he whispered, kneeling in front of her and peering up at her with undeniable hope in his eyes. “Baby?”

She lost heart to tell him what he should probably know. Maybe there was no need to tell him. Maybe this was his child. If that was the case, then what was the point in making him upset? Should she deliver the child and see that it wasn't his, then she would tell him. Pushing the nagging voice aside telling her she needed to warn him now, she finally nodded.

He practically jumped for joy and started speaking so fast that she couldn't figure out what he was saying. After a good minute of his rambling, he glanced in her direction and laughed. Then he pointed to the steps and went to get something.

She didn't care what he was doing. Wiping the tears from her eyes, she looked out the window—her gaze turned to the sky. Once again, she prayed to Gary's God that this child was truly his.

Chapter Thirteen

May 1898

Woaape opened her eyes that morning, reluctant to get out of bed. By the position of the sun, she knew it was an hour past dawn. The movement in her womb filled her with dread. The baby would be born in a month and a half. She wasn't ready. Time had passed much too fast. When the baby was born...if Hothlepoya was the father...would she be able to tell? Would Gary be able to tell?

Gary came into the bedroom and smiled. "You slept well."

"It is easy to sleep with you," she slowly replied, testing out each word before she spoke. She worked hard to learn his language and felt that she was progressing well.

"I know. You snore."

Her eyebrows furrowed. "Snore?"

He closed his eyes and pretended to snore to show her the meaning of the word.

Gasping, she picked up her pillow and threw it at him.

He laughed as he dodged it.

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“I no snore,” she insisted. “Women no snore.”

He chuckled and slid under the covers so he could pull her into his arms. “Women do snore. Julia does.”

“Julia not...” She didn’t know the correct term for what she wanted to convey, so she settled for finishing, “Julia not like women.”

“What?”

He looked much too amused to give this particular conversation any serious thought, so Woape gave up. Besides, maybe she did let out a little noise in the night, but it was feminine, she was sure. Even so, there was no need to admit that to him.

“I don’t care, Woape,” he whispered, stroking her cheek with his thumb. “I love you.”

Relaxing, she giggled. “You snore more.”

“Yes. I do. And louder.” He gave her a light kiss. “You make me happy.”

Now this was much better than talk of snoring. “You make me happy too,” she carefully said, trying to place the words in the right place.

“Good.” He let his hand trace down her body until he cupped her rear end and squeezed. “You feel nice.”

“You no hungry?” Usually, the day didn’t begin until he ate, and where he put all the food he ate, she didn’t know.

“I’m cooking this morning.”

“What? Why?”

“You are tired.”

“No. I woke up.”

His eyes twinkled as he pulled her closer to him. “You will be tired.”

His meaning dawned on her at the same time he reached up to unbutton her nightgown. Her pulse raced in anticipation. She liked being with Gary this way. At first, it was a way to feel close to him, to push Hothlepoya from her mind. The memory of

Hothlepoya—how he touched her with demanding hands—had eased over the months she was with Gary. Gary wasn't always soft. There were times when his passion led him to be forceful, but it was different with him than it had been with Hothlepoya. With Gary, there was the underlying care for her. Hothlepoya never cared for her; he only cared for what she could give him, whether it be her body or servitude.

But that was all in the past. She was with Gary now, and that meant she was safe. She eagerly responded to Gary and sat up to remove her clothing. Then she waited for him to undress before she settled next to him. She was relieved that he no longer checked her back to make sure her wounds had healed. She had told him how the welts got there. The scars would always be there, but if that was the only reminder of what Hothlepoya had done to her—if the child wasn't also going to be a reminder—then she could bear all the physical scars in the world.

Gary kissed her and the thoughts faded as the slow burn of desire began to spread through her body. It hadn't been this way with Gary in the first months of marriage. Her desire for him had stemmed from the need to be safe and protected. But as she got accustomed to his touch and kiss, she learned to relax and enjoy it. Now she could fully enjoy the way he kissed her neck, caressed her breasts, and stroked the area between her legs.

That part of lovemaking had been the biggest surprise. Thankfully, Hothlepoya had never touched her there. So it was something completely unique that she could connect with Gary, and so it made it her favorite part. She concentrated on the moment and how Gary was being wonderfully intimate with her.

He took his time, not in any hurry to bring her pleasure that was new to her. It wasn't until a month ago that she discovered her body was capable of the heightened sensations that made her forget everyone and everything until all she could do was get caught up in her body's urgent need for release. When she climaxed, she cried out and tightened her hold on his arms.

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His fingers gradually slowed, bringing her softly back to her awareness of everything that was going on around her.

When she was ready for him, she propped her lower half on the pillow to better accommodate his entry. Being with child made this part of lovemaking a challenge, but they'd worked on different ways to enjoy the act. She watched him as he proceeded to make love to her. She liked to watch him because it reminded her that she was with him, loving him and being loved in return. It was wonderful. Not cold. Not painful. But beautiful and full of pleasure. She smiled to herself as he came, happy that she was the one who gave him this joy that completed the marital act.

He spent a good ten minutes holding her before the baby kicked. She didn't want to tell him, but he'd felt it and spread his hand over her stomach so he could feel the next round of movement. "I can't wait to see our baby."

Despite her apprehension, she smiled at him. This could be Gary's child. It was possible. She took a deep breath to steady her anxiety. A month and a half and they would know for sure...wouldn't they? Was it possible that they would never know? Then she could easily pretend the child belonged to Gary. No. She shouldn't think 'pretend'. If she couldn't tell, she would assume Gary was the father.

Gary kissed her. "Stay put. I'll get breakfast." He quickly stood up and slipped into his clothes before he headed for the kitchen.

Relieved for the moment to be alone with her swirling emotions, she rolled onto her back and stared out the window. Even as she turned her gaze to the sky, she wondered if she was wasting her time in prayer.

The next day, Julia sat in church—her arms crossed and back stiff against the wooden pew. Once again, her aunt was doting over

Woape on the other side of the church. So what if Woape was with child? Why did that make her special? Julia hated her. Ever since Woape came, Gary's attention had been drawn to her. It was always Woape this or Woape that. Even her aunt was won over by her.

Her aunt gave Woape a hug and Julia felt her blood come to a boil. She couldn't take this anymore. She was the one who sacrificed all of her life, devoting herself to her brother and aunt, giving up on the simple joys of a husband and children. Responsibility always came first. But then her brother went off to pursue his dreams and came back with a woman who was no better than a whore.

She groaned. She couldn't take this again. Not today. She jumped up and strode out of the church, ignoring the curious looks from the congregation. What did they care about her? They didn't have to endure being constantly pushed aside because someone else was more important.

As soon as she was outside in the bright sunlight, she stopped for a moment. Where could she go? There wasn't anywhere she could run to. Her life was here. It was here since the day her parents died, and it would be here until the day she died. She was doomed to be a spinster. And her wayward brother who sought out his own pleasures was married with a child on the way. Where was the justice? Where was her reward for years of obedience? She'd done everything according to the rules. And all for what?

Nothing. She did it all for absolutely nothing.

Huffing, she marched along the road, pretending not to see old Nelly and Jim as they approached the church. What did they care if she said hi or not? They didn't. Not really.

If she hadn't been so angry, she might have cried. But the time for tears was in the past. She was tired of letting life drag her along its long, lonely road. It was time she did something for

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herself. She didn't have to die here. She didn't have to keep sacrificing and waiting for life to come her way.

Her purposeful steps paused on the edge of town. The land spanned out before her—as endless as the possibilities. Did she dare do it? Did she dare do the same thing Gary did? What were the chances that a woman could manage on her own in the middle of nowhere?

Well, she didn't have to travel on her own. She could wait for the stagecoach and go to the nearest train station. She had some money saved from the inheritance from her parents. Places out there needed school teachers. As a teacher, she'd be dissuaded from marrying, but what did that matter to her? She wasn't going to get married anyway. No. Love was out of the question for her. Instead, she needed to find a place where she could live—to be her own person. Yes, she could be a school teacher. Sure, it didn't pay much. But she would be away from this town.

Even as her spirits lifted at the thought, she lost heart. It was a big world out there. Much too scary. Much too unknown.

She glanced toward a movement on her right, and her gaze fell upon three riders heading her way. Squinting, she tried to make out who they were. From the looks of it, they were Indian.

She wondered what they were doing out here. Tapping her foot on the ground, she debated whether or not she should wait for them to arrive. What were the chances that Indians would be here? Until Woape arrived, none had come here before. Was there a connection between these men and Woape? She glanced back at the church. Service had begun. Naturally, no one went to search for her...even though she wasn't there. Bitterness welled up in her throat like thick bile.

Turning her attention back to the men, she decided to walk further out of town, but not too far from the nearest building, and waited for them. She took a deep breath as they neared. Something in their stature made her uneasy. She couldn't

explain what it was that intimidated her. Maybe it was their stoic expression, as if they were statues. It made them seem cold.

The one in the middle held his hand up to his companions, and they followed him over to her.

She stepped back, suddenly questioning the wisdom of her decision to wait for them.

“Greeting,” the one in the middle said.

“Uh...hello,” she replied.

“Do you have Indian woman here?”

She knew it! “Woape?”

The man’s eyebrows rose. “Yes.”

“Is she your wife?”

“She belongs to me.”

That explained why she sensed something deceitful about Woape. Sure, maybe Woape wasn’t married to this Indian...yet, but he told her that Woape belonged to him. He wouldn’t come all the way there to look for someone he didn’t love. And if Woape left this man, she might leave Gary. What good would that do Gary? All it would do was cause pain and heartache. Her brother might have such a thing coming, but she decided she would spare him the inevitable.

Yes, she had to protect her brother, even if he was too stupid to appreciate it. “Woape is here.”

His eyebrow rose in interest. “Where is she?”

“Right now, she’s in church.” She pointed to the building located in town.

“She’s with people?”

“Of course. There’s a service happening right now.” And that meant there wasn’t anyone lingering outside but her. But she wanted to be alone. At least she wanted to be alone until they arrived.

“Where does she live? With you?”

“No.” She fought back the urge to make a sarcastic retort about how Woape had manipulated her brother into marriage. As

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far as she was concerned, the marriage between Woape and her brother was illegitimate, especially in light of this. “She lives there with my brother.”

The man’s gaze turned to the house located farther out on the prairie. “She has a man with her?”

“She tricked him.”

His sharp eyes returned to her. “You do not like this.”

“Why should I?” She shrugged. “She doesn’t belong here. She belongs with you, just as you said.”

“Yes. She is my property.”

For a moment, apprehension slithered through her.

“Thank you.”

To her surprise, he gestured to the two men with him and they rode off in the opposite direction. She frowned. Whatever was that about? Obviously nothing. After all, they were leaving. Sighing in disappointment, she turned and went back to the church. So much for getting rid of Woape.

Chapter Fourteen

It was in the middle of the night when Gary woke Woape up. Her eyes flew open, automatically knowing something was wrong. Before she could ask him what was going on, he pressed his hand over her mouth.

“Shh...” He turned his attention to the window and then the bedroom door.

Despite the sudden anxious thudding in her heart, she listened. All was quiet. What did he hear?

“You have to hide,” he whispered.

The very fact that he was afraid prompted her to action. She got out of the bed as fast as she could while he got dressed. She wondered if she should take off her nightgown and pull on a dress, but there wasn’t time to do anything but follow him to the closet in the hallway. In haste, he climbed the shelves and removed the portion of ceiling leading to the attic.

“Come on.” He held his hand out to her.

She hesitated for a moment but a creak from the porch startled her forward. Someone was outside. But who would be there in the middle of the night?

Gary touched her arm and pulled her closer to the shelf. “Reach up to the hole.”

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Without further thought, she obeyed as he lifted her up. She stepped onto the middle shelf and pushed herself up through the hole. It wasn't easy to climb when her belly got in the way but fear was a terrific motivator. Whatever was out there wasn't good. She didn't need Gary's apprehensive movements to tell her that. She felt it deep down in her gut.

As soon as she was in the attic, she turned and held out her hand to Gary, fully expecting him to join her. But he didn't. Instead he flipped the rectangular board that sealed the entrance to the attic so she could grab the hook when she needed to get down. She understood what he was doing. He was making it so no one could go up there while allowing her to get out.

"Gary. Come," she pleaded in a soft voice, unwilling to be separated from him.

He didn't answer. He turned his head, notifying her that he heard something from their bedroom.

Her hands gripped the fabric of her nightgown. More than one intruder. This wasn't good! She didn't dare say anything else, lest she give Gary's location away. It didn't surprise her when he sealed the opening and closed the door to the closet. All at once, everything was dark. The moonlight from the bedroom was gone. Everything grew silent. All she could hear was her fast breathing. She stayed still, waiting for any sounds from below.

What was happening? Where was Gary? Where were the intruders? How many were there?

The baby kicked, distracting her—but just for a moment. She had to focus. And that meant she had to calm down. Closing her eyes, she took deep breaths. She spread her hands out along the hardwood floor. It was cool to the touch...and dusty. She wiped her hands on her nightgown and swallowed the lump in her throat.

Opening her eyes, she noticed a sliver of light from the corner of the small triangular space. Shadows formed slowly, but it looked like a trunk and several crates were her only companions.

The musty smell finally penetrated through the sense of doom hovering around her. Turning her attention back to Gary, she held her breath and listened. Everything was still quiet, and she didn't know if that was a good sign or not.

She glanced around the eerie room. The stream of moonlight penetrating the darkness beckoned to her. She slowly made her way toward it, taking great care in being quiet. As she neared the source of light, she realized that most of the window had been boarded up. If she removed the boards, she'd probably make noise. Maybe she could see enough through the exposed section.

Peering through it, she caught a glimpse of the grassy plain. She caught sight of the barn that had seen better days. In there was the buggy and horses. Farther out, she caught sight of a coyote minding his own business. A movement behind the tree close to the house caught her attention.

Her breath caught in her throat. She'd recognize that spear anywhere. Tecumseh. And if Tecumseh was there, then Hothlepoya couldn't be far away. Tecumseh, after all, did everything for Hothlepoya. Currently, that entailed being a lookout.

How did Hothlepoya find her? How did he know she came here? And after all this time? How many months had it been since she'd last seen him? Seven months. About the length of her pregnancy. The child! Hothlepoya must not see her like this. If he did...if he suspected he might be the father... She didn't want to think about it.

A gunshot vibrated through the house and with it, she jerked. She held her breath and waited. Within a second, a crashing sound exploded below her. The struggle raged as she tried to figure out who was doing what and where they were. Since she had nowhere else to look, she looked back out the window.

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Where had Tecumseh gone? Her fingernails dug into the boards. She scanned the land, but she didn't see anyone. Gritting her teeth, she concentrated on the ruckus in the house. Banging. Loud thuds. Another gunshot. Her stomach tensed, and the baby kicked harder against her ribs.

If only she knew what was going on! But did she really want to know?

The front door burst open, so she anxiously peered out the window again. Hothlepoya came into view, fleeing as another gunshot echoed through the night. Her heart leapt with hope. That meant Gary was still alive! And maybe Gary would get rid of her nemesis once and for all. Then she could really be safe again.

Don't miss the next shot!

But another shot did not ring through the silent night. For one long agonizing moment, nothing happened. And then, without warning, another gunshot did penetrate the darkness followed by the image of Gary chasing Tecumseh toward the barn.

"No!" she screamed, despite the fact that she was supposed to keep quiet.

Hothlepoya came up behind Gary and struck an arrow into his shoulder.

Gary fell into the tall grass, and Tecumseh turned around and stopped running.

Get up! Get up!!

Despite her silent pleas, Gary reminded on the grass and Hothlepoya came upon him. As soon as Hothlepoya lifted the axe, Woape fell back against the adjoining wall and collapsed on the floor.

The scene was much too familiar. She couldn't watch another loved one being beheaded and then scalped. She'd seen it once...when Hothlepoya killed her mother. Bitter tears slid down her cheeks. Not again. Both times Hothlepoya had robbed her of someone she loved, and each time, she couldn't stop him.

She heard the door open and knew he returned to find her. She didn't dare give into her urge to wail in sorrow. That's how Hothlepoya found her after he killed her mother. She squeezed her eyes shut tight and urged aside the guilt. It was her fault both had died. When she ran away to avoid marrying Citlali, her mother had followed her. Except Woape hadn't gone to Hothlepoya's set of teepees. She'd stayed on the edges long enough to steal some food, but her mother had stopped by to ask after her.

How many nights did Woape spend awake, wishing her mother had never searched for her? When her mother turned to leave, Hothlepoya wouldn't let her. And then... Woape bit her lower lip until she drew blood. Refocusing on the physical pain allowed her the temporary reprieve from the sight of watching her mother die.

Below her, someone moved with stealth. Part of her wanted to give up, to have this nightmare over with. But the baby tossed and there was that part of her that thought Gary might be the father, and if he was, this was a part of him she still had with her. And so she remained quiet and waited.

Woape waited until dawn was breaking before she made a move to leave the attic. She hadn't heard anyone shifting through the house for roughly three hours. It was because she knew the position of the moon in relation to the hour of the night that she could guess the passage of time.

Lifting the board that had protected her, she tentatively found her footing on the shelf beneath her and slowly made her way down. The house was quiet—so much so that she could hear the pounding of her heart. She recognized the smell of death and had to force back the bile that rose up in her throat. Gary had managed to kill someone last night. In light of his death, that was

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little consolation. Still, she had to get out of there. She had to go to Erin and tell her... Bracing herself against the onslaught of tears, she turned her attention to getting to Erin. She could cry later. Right now, she had to get out of there. What if Hothlepoya came back? She couldn't risk staying there.

The hallway loomed long in front of her. She didn't want to make the rounds through the house to see what had transpired the night before, but her dreaded curiosity prompted her to examine the damage. Shattered glass from the bedroom window, broken furniture, clothes strewn through the room... Sighing, she forced her feet down the rest of the hallway and to the edge of the staircase.

She screamed when she saw Agwe lying on his back at the bottom of the steps. As soon as she realized his neck was turned at an odd angle and dried blood covered his chest from a bullet wound, she relaxed. But only slightly. He was dead. He wasn't a threat anymore.

Despite her shaky legs, she proceeded down the steps and gingerly passed him. Her skin crawled when her ankle hit his cold shoulder. She hurried out of the kitchen, and just as she reached the door, she ran into a strong chest. She screamed again and stumbled back.

"Woape?" The Indian looked at her with caring eyes.

An instant wave of relief flooded over her. It wasn't Hothlepoya or Tecumseh. It was her brother's friend. "Chogan? How did you know I was here?"

"Everyone's been looking for you. You had us worried." He glanced at her belly. "And for good reason."

She didn't feel like explaining it. Not now. "You'll take me home?"

"I was going to have you ride a horse. But with this—" he motioned to her stomach.

"We—I mean, I have a buggy. We can take that." It wasn't Gary's anymore. She stepped onto the porch and

examined the area of grass where Hothlepoya had murdered her husband. "I should bury him." It would only be right.

"Who? Him?" Chogan pointed to Agwe's corpse.

"No. I don't care if he has a burial or not." She refused to pay that honor to one of her tormentors.

"Then who?"

"Him." She pointed in the direction of the barn, knowing Gary's body waited for her to tend to. As much as she dreaded it, she knew it had to be done. It was the least she could do for him.

"I already took care of the white man," he said.

"What? Where did you bury him?"

"He's over there."

Her eyes finally caught sight of the fire in the middle of a well dug out pit. "You can't burn him!"

He stopped her before she ran out to the flames. "I'm taking care of his body in the way he deserves."

"In a way he deserves? You have disgraced him!"

Holding onto her shoulders, he made purposeful eye contact with her. "Look at you, Woape! Your father and brother will be shamed when they see what he did to you."

"It was not him who made me a prisoner or..." She couldn't say 'got me with child'—not when she didn't know if he was the father or not. Instead, she settled for saying, "He never forced me."

As if she burned him, he released her. "Our people and our way of life are becoming extinct and you would mate with a white man?"

Her cheeks flushed with a mixture of shame and indignation. Was it any of his business if she had a child who wasn't a full-blooded Mandan? Why did she have to partake in the burden of replenishing their tribe? She didn't love Citlali any more than he loved her. Being with Gary had been worth it. Wasn't love more important than blood lines?

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Chogan slowly exhaled, his body visibly relaxing. “All is not lost. You can have more babies. This one...” He motioned to her belly and shrugged. “This one will just have to do.”

She shot him a searing look. “No. This one will not just ‘have to do’.” Not if this was Gary’s child. If this was Gary’s child and that would be all she’d have left of him, then she was going to love this child more than anyone else. She rubbed her stomach, willing the child to be Gary’s. Because if the child wasn’t his, she didn’t know what she was going to do.

Chogan’s face softened. “This child will still be a part of the tribe. We just need the next ones to be full-blooded.”

She took a deep breath. “I need to bury my...” She paused. She didn’t think he’d like hearing her say ‘ibero’, so she opted for another word. “I need to bury him.” Turning to the kitchen, she grabbed a bucket and got ready to fill it with water so she could douse the fire.

He groaned. “Why? He’s practically ashes by now.”

“It doesn’t matter. He’ll still be buried in a manner befitting him.”

“I would like to get back to the tribe before you give birth.”

“I won’t be ready to give birth for at least another month.” Suddenly remembering her nightgown, she added, “I need to get dressed.”

He reached for the bucket. “I’ll take care of the fire. You get dressed.” Glancing at Agwe’s body, he said, “I will take care of him.”

Nodding, she handed him the bucket and went to get dressed. She tried not to think of leaving as she brushed her hair and redid her braids. Blinking through the tears, she struggled to keep her hands steady. When she finished, she searched the trashed room for Gary’s watch and hat. She would keep those for herself. But she wanted to bury Gary with something, so she took

off her wedding ring and retrieved the blanket she had made for him.

By the time she walked out of the house, Chogan had stopped the fire and was digging a grave. Once it was wide enough for what she needed, she asked him to leave her alone. As soon as he obeyed, she set the hat and watch aside so she could spread the blanket out on the ground.

It was painful to look at the body. All the flesh had been melted off. Nothing remained but a partial skeleton and ashes. Crying, she collected as much of the remains as she could and gently placed them in the blanket. This was a day she didn't think would come until she and Gary had seen their grandchildren or great-grandchildren. She thought they had time. But in one moment, her future had been wiped away. When she finished her task, she placed the ring on the bones on what was left of his hand and carefully wrapped the blanket around the body. She placed it into the hole, making sure he was sitting upright.

Chogan came up beside her with his shovel.

She knew he'd find reason to fault her if she gave into the urge to pour a handful of dirt over her head and openly wail. So she refrained. Instead, she gathered Gary's hat and watch and clutched them to her heart as Chogan filled in the hole.

As the reality of the events unfolded before her, tears fell down her cheeks. Gary—her Gary—was gone, and there was nothing she could do to bring him back.

"Woape?" Chogan softly asked. "Can we go now?"

Turning her attention back to Chogan, she realized he was done. Even now, even when she couldn't do anything else for Gary, she hated to leave him. But what other choice did she have? Exhaling, she dragged her feet to the barn to get the horse and buggy ready.

Chapter Fifteen

Julia woke up to the sound of her aunt crying. Surprised, she quickly put her robe on and went down to the parlor. She hurried over to the chair and knelt by her aunt.

Erin wept into her handkerchief. “Woape just left.”

She furrowed her eyebrows. Why should that distress her aunt? “She lives in town. She’ll be back.”

“No. She’s going back to her Mandan tribe.”

Even though this caused her aunt great distress, Julia thought this might be a good thing. Now everyone could go back to their lives. Sure, her aunt and Gary would be upset for awhile. That was natural. But in time, when things returned to normal, they could be a whole family again. Julia reached out and touched Erin’s hand. Giving it a gentle squeeze, she said, “We’ll get through this. Gary can move back here and—”

“He’s not coming back!” Erin snapped. Immediately looking sorry for her outburst, her face relaxed and she clasped Julia’s hands. “Julia, I...I might as well just come out and say it.” She paused to take a deep breath. “Gary passed on to the next life.”

It felt like the wind was knocked out of her. Julia took a moment to organize her thoughts so she could speak coherently. “He’s dead?”

“It happened last night...early this morning...” She sniffed again. “Before sunrise.”

Julia bolted to her feet. “Why did you let that deceitful...” She bit back the word she wanted to use. “Why did you let Woape go? We need to turn her over to the marshal.”

Erin shook her head, obviously irritated. “What is wrong with you? Woape didn’t hurt him.”

“It’s time you faced reality. Woape’s not the innocent person you think she is. She’s wheedled her way into our lives, stole Gary from us, and then when his use wore out, she got rid of him.”

Standing up, she glared at Julia. “That poor girl watched an Indian kill Gary. The only reason she survived was because Gary hid her in the attic. And all you can do is point the finger and accuse her of foul play. Woape was a good wife to your brother. She loved him. But all you can do is think of yourself. This world and the people in it do not revolve around you, Julia!”

Julia gasped. “A-an In-Indian?”

Disgust evident on her face, her aunt stormed toward the staircase. As she set her hand on the banister, she glanced back at Julia. “The real tragedy isn’t the Indian and what he did. The real tragedy is that you were so selfish that you had to make Gary miserable. No one’s holding you here. I told you to marry when Ernest proposed.”

“Are you saying you don’t want me here?”

“I’m saying that you need to do what Gary did—enjoy life. That’s the only thing that gives me consolation. Even if you live to be a hundred, you’ll have wasted your life because you filled your days with hate and self-pity.”

Julia’s jaw dropped. “I can’t believe you’re talking to me this way!”

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“Well, it’s been long overdue.”

Julia watched in stunned silence as her aunt proceeded up the stairs.

Though Woape stared out at the countryside, she didn’t really see where they were going, so she blinked in surprise when she realized they were nearing a town.

“We need food,” Chogan explained.

She nodded. Of course, they did. It would be several days before they reached their tribe. She glanced at the two horses pulling the buggy. If she hadn’t been with child, she could have ridden hers. But she knew it would be best to take it easy. The other horse pulling them belonged to Chogan. She wished it was Gary’s. But she had to leave Gary’s steed behind. Closing her eyes, she forced her attention off the sorrow that beckoned her. There would be time for tears later—when she was safely back with the tribe.

The baby moved, directing her attention to the life inside of her. She placed her hand on her belly. She had to remember this child was hers too, regardless of who the father was. That was easier said than done though, for even now, she struggled to hold back the urge to detest anything associated with Hothlepoya.

Chogan slowed the horses as they reached the first road that marked the city’s limits.

She straightened up, noting that her back was stiff and her bottom was sore. It would be good to get up and walk around for a bit. The day had been long and evening was fast approaching, and it had been a good two hours since she had last gotten a chance to get out of the buggy.

Chogan counted his coins and then got out of the buggy. “We should have enough. Your family will be glad to see you when we get back.”

She winced, though he turned his attention back to the coins so he didn't notice. Little did she realize running away from marrying Citlali would result in so much pain...and death. "I'm sorry," she whispered, quickly looking away so he wouldn't see her tears. She got out of the buggy, but a rock juttied out of the ground and made her trip.

Chogan raced over to her and stopped her from falling. "I wish you had let me help."

"I'm fine." She tucked Gary's hat and watch under her arm and marched over to the general store lining the business district. "We can get food here."

He stood still, as if in shock. "You can read their language?"

"Some. Not a lot. I can speak it pretty well too."

"I can also speak it. Maybe not as much as you."

"You can?"

"So can your brother and Citlali, among a few others. How do you think we engage in trade with the white man?"

She hadn't given it any thought. She just knew that was what they did, but up until that moment, she hadn't wondered how. "Why didn't anyone teach me?"

He shrugged. "Why would you ever need to know it? You weren't going to marry a white man or live with them. And you certainly weren't supposed to have one of their children."

A slight scowl crossed her face and her hand went over her belly.

"I'm just saying that you were to stay with the tribe and marry Citlali and have his children. Women grow the crops and the men deal with the trade. You had no reason to know the white man's language. As it is, our understanding of it is enough to do business. We prefer to keep to our traditions and our language. You won't be teaching your child the white man's words."

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She didn't think it was any of his business what she did or did not teach her child. Resisting the urge to argue with him, she entered the store. She managed to get through the task of picking up some food supplies that would last them for the duration of the trip. Just being there, picking up the items, reminded her of Gary, for he'd take her to the store and stay by her side, often telling her how much he enjoyed her cooking.

She forced back another wave of tears. How was she supposed to go on without him? Life would never be the same again.

"Are you ready?" Chogan asked, breaking her out of her thoughts.

She sighed but nodded.

After Chogan paid for the supplies, he opened the door to leave.

She had just stepped through the doorway when her gaze fell on Hothlepoya and Tecumseh. Gripping Chogan's arm, she pulled him back into the store.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Did you forget something?"

"It's them," she whispered, peering out the window by the door.

"Who?"

"Remember the man who was dead in my house? Two others were with him. There they are."

He got close enough to her so that he could look out the window. "They're not from the Hidatsa or Arikara tribes."

"I think they're Sioux."

He stiffened. "Sioux?"

She nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat.

"Are you sure?"

"When they speak, I don't hear them use the letter 'L'."

Shaking his head, he said, "This isn't good."

He didn't know the half of it, but now wasn't the time to tell him.

Hothlepoya and Tecumseh directed their horses over to the buggy and stopped.

She ducked and pulled on Chogan's arm so he wouldn't stay there, gawking out the window like a moron. "They're smart. And dangerous."

"That explains all Sioux," he remarked.

"No. They're different. They're worse." She glanced at the store owner who stared at them warily. "I don't think we can stay in here for long."

Chogan looked over his shoulder at the owner. "He probably thinks we're going to steal something."

She could tell the owner wasn't happy to have them there by the cautious expression on his face, but there was no way she was going out there with Hothlepoya outside.

Chogan slowly stood up and peeked out the window. "They're coming in."

Her eyes grew wide. "No."

He winced as he turned his attention back to the window. "Did they hurt you?"

She hesitated to tell him, but what good would holding the information back do either of them? "Yes. The leader, the one with all those feathers in his headdress, killed my mother. Because she came looking for me." She hung her head in shame.

Chogan took a deep breath and wiped his palms on his deerskin pants. "I saw what they did to that white man. They showed no mercy."

"Maybe they won't realize you're with me."

"Stay here. I'll try to get rid of them."

As he stepped out of the store, she backed up and watched from a safe distance as Chogan stopped Hothlepoya to talk to him. Hothlepoya narrowed his eyes at Chogan, and she knew what that meant. It meant that Hothlepoya didn't believe whatever Chogan had told him—which was meant to protect her. Once Hothlepoya walked toward the store, she knew he'd find

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her...unless she could find a way to escape or prevent him from entering.

She ran over to the owner. "Is there another door?"

"Why? Is he trouble?" The man indicated to Hothlepoya as he neared the store.

"Yes."

As if to prove her point, when Chogan tried to stop him, Hothlepoya shoved Chogan back and ordered Tecumseh to hold him.

The owner swore under his breath and grabbed a rifle from under his counter. "You might be able to get out the window in the back room."

She didn't wait to see what was going to happen. She hurried in the direction he motioned to and opened the window. If she'd been any bigger than she was, she wouldn't be able to squeeze out of it. Placing a chair by the window, she stepped up on it and swung one leg out. Her large belly made it hard to maneuver through it. The sound of a struggle and resulting gunshot made her jolt.

Hothlepoya barged into the back room. He glared at her. "Woape!"

She lost her balance and fell out the window. She landed on her side, her arms instinctively protecting the child. Her side hurt, but she knew it would just be bruises—and bruises were things she could live with.

Hothlepoya started to climb out the window. "Tecumseh! She's over here!"

She clutched the hat and watch before she got to her feet. Then she ran as fast as her condition would permit her. As she rounded the corner of a building, she caught sight of Chogan who jumped in front of both Hothlepoya and Tecumseh in an effort to block them. She didn't bother to stick around to find out if the marshal running by her was going to help Chogan. She needed to get out of there—and fast!

She found an alley and raced down it, ignoring the smell of garbage and other odors that would normally make her queasy.

A whistle blew, and it took her a moment to realize it was coming from a train. Her heart jumped with excitement. A train. Of course! Even if Hothlepoya got on horseback and chased her, he'd never catch her if she was on a train. She didn't have money. All she had were Gary's hat and watch, and she refused to part with those.

The train station came into sight. People were boarding. Good. That meant she still had a chance to escape. She hopped on the other side of the tracks and crouched behind a large crate. Scanning the train cars, she caught sight of the cargo cars. If she could hide in one of those, then she wouldn't have to pay for a ticket.

"Stop him!"

Gasping, she turned her attention to the marshal who was chasing Hothlepoya. She nearly cried out in despair. How could he know that she came this way?

A group of men jumped on Hothlepoya and knocked him down.

That was her cue. She bolted for one of the train cars full of large crates and climbed into the one with an open door. Scurrying to one of the corners where she could hide between two crates, she gave herself permission to finally relax. The baby kicked her in the ribs. She winced and moved so that the sharp jab would lessen. All she needed to do was remain quiet and no one would find her. She gathered the hat and pocket watch to her chest and closed her eyes, willing her breathing to calm.

The day had been long—much too long. And it was just the first of many she'd have to endure without Gary. Again, she fought the urge to cry. Once the men closed the door and the train started, she could cry. Until then, she had to be quiet. Where would the train take her? Would Hothlepoya find her

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wherever she ended up? Would he hunt her down for the rest of her life?

Within a minute, she heard some men load in another set of crates before one said they were done. Then the door closed and she was plunged into darkness. And that was when her tears finally fell.

Chapter Sixteen

It was true. She wanted to deny it, to look for any reason to believe that Woape had lied, but all the evidence proved that Indians had broken in and there was no sign of Gary—except for the lone marker.

Julia slowly made her way back to the house where the marshal and several men were cleaning up. The sight of blood was finally gone, but the odor of death still permeated the air.

Her aunt carried a bundle of Gary's things.

"I can help with that," Julia softly spoke, approaching the staircase.

Erin's sharp gaze met hers. "I think you've already done enough."

"I didn't know the Indians would try to kill her or Gary."

"But you intended for them to take her away from him, even when you knew how happy she made him. Don't talk to me right now. I'm much too upset."

Knowing there was nothing she could do to ease her aunt's sorrow...or anger, Julia stepped aside and let Erin pass her. Shame warmed her cheeks, and she wished, once again, that she hadn't been so quick to rat Woape out like she had. She knew it

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was wrong, but at the time, she hadn't cared. *But I never once thought they would kill Gary.*

But did she think they would kill Woape? She winced. The truth was, she didn't care what happened to Woape. She wiped the tear that slid down her cheek. *Oh God, what have I done?*

"I'm sorry, Miss Milton," the marshal said as he walked by her. "Your brother was a good man. It's a terrible loss."

She gave a slight nod before she turned away and left the house. Once she was out of sight of the men, she allowed herself the freedom to cry. The magnitude of her sin weighed heavily upon her, threatening to suffocate her. How could she stoop so low? True, she'd resented Gary's ability to go off and do whatever he wanted, but her aunt was right: she never should have let her jealousy cloud her judgment.

She found Gary's marker and knelt beside it. "I'm sorry, Gary. I'm so sorry."

Then she broke down. She had plenty of chances to make her peace with him and Woape, but she let bitterness and pride prevent her from doing the right thing. And now there was no going back in time—to undo the wrong she'd wrought. Her tears ran down her face and splattered off her fingers which dug into the dirt. She tried to say more, to confess her sins, but her body wracked with sobs and she could hardly speak, let alone breathe.

She hated herself. She wished it had been her the Indians came after and killed. If she could take her brother's place, she would gladly do so. If she could go back in time and tell the Indians that she hadn't seen Woape... If she had turned back to town as soon as she saw them... If she'd stayed in church... If only... Her head swam with all the if only's racing through her head.

In her mind, she played out the various scenarios of how she could've redeemed herself, and each one tore at her heart, making her sick with guilt. All it did was increase her self-loathing. She couldn't go back in time and undo her wrong. She

couldn't rectify her treatment of Gary or Woape. She couldn't do anything.

She was doomed.

Daylight struck Woape's eyes and the sudden burst of activity woke her up. She tried to hide for cover as the men invaded the quiet interior of the freight car, but one saw her as she crawled behind a crate. She knew he saw her. And, just as she feared, he called out to the other three men that an Indian woman was in the corner.

She didn't try to evade them as their footsteps moved closer. What was the point? She was boxed in, and there were four of them and only one of her. Gripping Gary's hat and watch close to her, she prayed that they wouldn't hurt her or the child tumbling about in her womb.

Two men pushed the crate, and from the way their muscles strained under their shirts, she realized the contents were heavy. Once the crate was aside, she watched them.

"The poor thing looks scared," one of them finally spoke.

The one with a mustache and soot on his face extended his hand to her. "It's alright. We won't hurt you. We want to help."

"She probably can't understand what you're saying."

"Well, I don't know any other language."

"We should get a woman," another one spoke up. "I'm sure we aren't easing her fears."

"That's a good idea. I'll get my wife." He turned and left the car.

The others stood still, looking right back at her for half a minute before one of them said, "We might as well get to work."

The two nodded their agreement and turned to their task.

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She finally exhaled. So they weren't going to hurt her. She almost spoke to them, to let them know she could understand them, but then, she decided it might be to her advantage to hold her tongue. If these people thought she couldn't understand them, then they would speak freely in front of her, and she'd know if they meant to harm her or not. Yes, she was better off remaining silent.

The men had unloaded half the car when a kindly looking round woman roughly ten years older than Woape stepped onto the train. She approached Woape and smiled. "Hello." Patting her chest, she said, "My name is Rachel. R-a-chel."

Woape nodded.

"You?" She pointed in her direction. "Your name?"

Woape frowned, uncertain of whether or not to act like she understood the woman.

"Never mind," the woman replied. "Jerry, do you have the blanket with you?"

"Yes, honey." Jerry gave her the folded up quilt.

Kneeling beside her, Rachel wrapped the soft blanket around Woape's shoulders. "I'm going to take you to the church. The preacher and his wife will take care of you. They're good friends."

Woape relaxed her grip on Gary's hat and watch. She was safe with this woman, and she was certain the same would be true with her friends. She stood up and Rachel gasped. Wondering what startled her, Woape examined her dress. She had some dirt on her clothes, but there was nothing out of the ordinary.

"Oh my dear, what you must have gone through."

It took Woape a moment to understand that Rachel meant her pregnancy. Woape touched her belly, aware of the sympathetic gazes around her.

"You think a white man did that?" one of the men asked.

"It must have been. She's dressed in a white woman's clothes and holding a white man's hat and watch." Rachel reached

for the items, but Woape shook her head and clutched them to her chest. Rachel sighed. "I've heard of this kind of thing happening, but I hoped that I'd never see it."

"What happened?" Jerry asked as he came up beside her.

Rachel lowered her voice so that the other men wouldn't overhear. "A white man took advantage of her."

"You don't know that. Maybe she was married to him or something."

"She doesn't have a ring."

"Oh." He glanced Woape's way before looking back at his wife. "I suspect her opinion of white people isn't so great then."

"Probably not." Rachel wrapped her arm around Woape's shoulders. "You're safe now, and so is your little one."

Relieved to have a reprieve from her running, Woape simply nodded and joined Rachel.

Julia exhaled. She couldn't eat. Taking the bowl of oatmeal to the sink, she pondered how she could live with herself, knowing she was the one responsible for her brother's death and Woape's and her aunt's heartbreak. The burden weighed heavily on her soul, and she lost any desire to eat. How could she enjoy food when her brother would never eat again?

She hesitated before she left the kitchen. Her aunt was in the parlor. Julia would have to pass her to get out the front door. But she had to go back to Gary's grave. Maybe she would retrieve his horse and... And what? She had nowhere to store a horse. But she couldn't get rid of it either. Gary loved that animal. For the time being, she would put the horse at the local stable. She could figure out what to do with the steed in due time.

After she went to her room to collect the fees necessary for boarding the horse, she slipped the coin into her pocket and put a bonnet over her blond hair. One look in the mirror showed

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her how pale she'd become. Dark circles were under her eyes, evidence of how little she could sleep. She had no desire for sleep, for it was in sleep when the nightmares plagued her. Over and over, she'd find herself walking down empty corridors with whispers accusing her of murder. Then, when she found a door and opened it, she realized she was looking into a mirror, and she saw herself as she truly was: a monster.

But now in the daylight, when she was wide awake and looked in the mirror, she saw a woman wracked with grief and guilt. Maybe she wasn't physically a monster, but she knew the ugly side of her lurked in her heart. So much for all those years of sacrifice, where she'd look into the mirror and was convinced that her good deeds made her beautiful. That beauty was just an illusion meant to keep her unaware of the fact that in and of herself, she wasn't the good person she thought she was.

No. There was no beauty in her. The image of the monster in her dream momentarily returned to her mind. She shivered and hastened out of the room.

As she reached the front door, her aunt called out to her, "Where are you going?"

Julia turned to her aunt who sat in the chair, working on a quilt she'd started making out of the patches she'd cut from Gary's and Woape's clothes. Wrapping her arms around herself, Julia said, "I thought I'd get Gary's horse before Matthew takes his house back."

Erin nodded and wiped a tear from her cheek. "That's a good idea."

Julia waited to see if her aunt would say anything else, but since she didn't, Julia turned and left the house. Though the sun beat down on her, she felt cold. She didn't feel like going back for her shawl. Being chilly was insignificant compared to being dead. Gary would never be hot or cold again.

As she passed the church, she realized there was another funeral. Curious, she crossed the street and made her way to the

white building. They couldn't be having a funeral for Gary. They'd already done that two days ago. So who else had died?

She waited for Mr. and Mrs. Clemmens to reach the entrance before she asked, "Who died?"

Mrs. Clemmens directed her sad eyes to her. "Matthew."

"The one who owned the house my brother and his wife stayed in?"

"I'm afraid so."

"How did he die?"

She shrugged. "No one's sure. He lives alone, so no one noticed that he went missing until yesterday when I had to check on him. He wasn't there, and it became apparent that he hadn't been there for several days. The marshal's looked for him but he can't find him. I'm afraid there's only one conclusion we can come to. You know, he was too old to go off anywhere, and all of his belongings were still at his room in the boarding house." She sighed. "There's only one conclusion anyone can come to."

"His body will turn up sooner or later, and when it does, we'll bury it," Mr. Clemmens added.

Julia quickly thought over what the marshal had said the day she and her aunt went to collect Gary's things. If she remembered right, he specifically said there were only two bodies that were found: one that Woape had dug into the ground—which the marshal dug up before he reburied it to make sure it was a body—and the Indian on the staircase.

What if Woape hadn't buried Gary? What if that was Matthew in the ground?

Mrs. Clemmens patted her arm. "Take care, and tell your aunt that I'll be by tomorrow afternoon to visit."

Julia gave a nod, though she wasn't paying much attention to what the woman was saying. Hope had sprung in her heart, and she couldn't let it go. It was possible, wasn't it? Maybe the Indians didn't get him. Even as she hated the thought that

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Matthew might be dead, she couldn't deny the joy that would come if she found out for sure that it hadn't been Gary.

Did the marshal and his men check out the entire property? Perhaps Gary...or Matthew...was lying somewhere they hadn't taken the time to inspect. She hurried down the road, gaining momentum with each step. If Gary survived, then where would he be? By the time she reached the property, she was out of breath. She stood still for a moment and scanned the land. She saw the marker for the grave and heard a horse neigh.

"Gary?" she called out. When no one answered her, she yelled out his name again.

Still, no answer.

She debated where to go first and finally decided on the barn. First, she checked around it, taking her time to examine everything in sight while she called out his name. But she found nothing. Inside the barn, she checked the loft, which was empty.

The horse neighed at her. The poor thing probably hadn't been fed since she last came out to do that. She snatched the rake by the door and hauled some hay into his trough.

"I'll get you out of there before I leave," she promised the animal.

Without waiting to see if the steed would eat, she left the barn and ran into the house. Maybe there was a secret place no one bothered to check. She opened all the closets, checked under what was left of the bed, and tested everything that might hide a human body. As she opened the closet in the hallway, she found that part of the ceiling didn't match up with the rest of it. Stepping on the shelves, she touched the section and realized it moved. Excited, she shoved it aside and leapt up into the attic.

"Gary? Are you up here?"

Her voice made a mild echo, which spooked her. She'd hate to be stuck in here for any length of time. Despite her nervousness, she carefully studied the room and lifted old sheets off of trunks that had long been forgotten.

Disappointed, she sighed. She really thought this was going to be it. She reluctantly left and returned to the kitchen. Outside the window, she noticed an Indian riding onto the property in a buggy with two horses. She recognized it as Gary's buggy. But from what her aunt told her, Woape had gone back to her tribe in that buggy.

Grabbing a knife, she headed out of the house. "Who are you?"

He hadn't been among the three men who'd inquired about Woape, so she didn't know if she could trust him or not. Her aunt did say Woape was with an Indian from her tribe. Maybe this was him. But Julia tightened her grip on the knife as he climbed out of the buggy. She couldn't let her guard down yet.

His movements were slow, and he kept his eyes on the knife. "I look for Woape."

She stopped six feet from him, not willing to get any closer in case he'd take the knife from her trembling hand. "Woape's gone. She went home." Even as she said it, she winced. No. Woape's home hadn't been with her tribe. Not anymore. It had been with Gary. *Oh God, why didn't I understand that before?* Clearing her throat, she continued, "You can't hurt her."

He looked confused. "I not hurt. I am friend to her brother."

She glanced at the buggy and Woape's horse standing next to the other one. If that was true, then her aunt would recognize him. She studied him, trying to decide the best course of action to take.

"I take Woape, but Sioux—Hothlepoya—came. She run. I not find her in town. She come back?"

She only had a vague idea of what he meant since his English was choppy, but she had to find out if he was from Woape's tribe. If he was, then she could trust him. "Come with me. I need to see if you are who you say you are."

"I Chogan, friend to Woape brother."

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“I have to make sure that is true.”

“She not here?”

She fought the urge to groan. “No. But I can help you, if you are who you say you are.”

“You know Woape location?”

“No, but if my brother is alive, then there might be a way to find her.” That was a long shot. It was such a long shot...but she had to try. Doing nothing was equivalent to losing all hope, and she couldn't lose hope, not when she'd come so close to finding out her brother might not be dead. But before she could do anything, she had to know if she could trust this Indian standing in front of her.

“I go with you.”

Good. Maybe now some of the pieces to this puzzle would start to fall into place. She didn't trust him enough to get into the buggy, so she asked him to walk with her—but at a safe distance. The hope that Gary was alive hurried her steps, and by the time they reached her home, she was nearly running. The man behind her kept up with her, and although she was out of breath, he wasn't.

She opened the front door and waved him in. “Aunt Erin?” she called out, checking the parlor but finding it empty. “Aunt Erin?”

“I'm up here, child.”

Julia turned her attention to the staircase. “Can you tell me if this is the man you saw the last time Woape was here?”

Chogan stood by the door, seeming uncertain of what to do.

She figured that was good. As long as he stayed in one spot, she didn't have to worry about him trying to attack them, in case he was lying about who he was.

A door from upstairs opened and her aunt's feet scuffed across the floor.

The wait was agonizing, but Julia managed to stand in place and patiently wait until Erin finally came into view. From the looks of it, her aunt had been taking a nap, and upon further inspection, Julia realized that she'd been crying. "Aunt Erin, who is he?" She pointed to the Indian.

Her aunt came down the steps. Her lips quivered and tears filled her eyes. "Oh, dear God, don't tell me something happened to Woape too."

Julia placed the knife on a step and gently took her aunt by the shoulders so she'd focus on her. "Who is he?"

Sniffling, Erin answered, "He's the one who came with Woape. He's part of her tribe. Chogan." She looked at him. "That is your name?"

He nodded. "Yes. I lose Woape in other town. Sioux Indians came. She afraid and ran."

Julia nearly cried with relief. Now they could get somewhere! She let go of her aunt and walked up to him. "Did you bury a man...when you found Woape here?"

"Two men dead. One Sioux. Other white. I burn white man. Woape bury him."

"No one else was there?"

"No."

By now, she was getting so excited, she could hardly stand still. "What did the white man look like?"

"He white. Not Indian."

"Julia, where are you going with this?" her aunt asked.

Julia glanced at her. "If I'm right, and I hope I am, then Gary may be alive."

Erin's eyes widened—in surprise and in hope.

"Hair?" Julia took off her bonnet and pointed to her hair. "Yellow like this?"

Chogan shook his head. "Not dark. Hair like..." He scanned the entryway. "Like that color." He pointed to Erin's white apron which was wrapped around her waist.

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“Did he have hair on his face? Right here?” Julia patted her cheeks and chin.

“Yes.”

“Julia, can it be—”

This time when Julia cried, it was with joy. “Woape didn’t bury Gary. She buried Matthew.” She quickly sobered. “Not that losing Matthew is a good thing. He must have noticed something happening at his property and went to investigate.”

Her aunt wiped her eyes. “He would’ve been at the wrong place at the wrong time. But maybe he gave Gary a chance to escape. Woape said Gary hid her in the attic, so he knew she was safe. What if he ran and hid?”

“We have to find him and Woape.” Julia turned and raced up the stairs.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going with Chogan so we can look for them.”

“Stay here,” Erin told Chogan before she ran after Julia.

Julia burst into her room and grabbed a carpet bag. Who knew how long the journey would take? She wasn’t sure where to even start looking, but there was no way she was going to stay in this house and wait for something to happen.

“You can’t just head off with a stranger,” her aunt whispered as she approached the bed where Julia threw a spare dress into the carpet bag.

“Why not? Gary and Woape might need help.”

“Yes, but you don’t know him.”

“Woape trusted him, and if she trusted him, then I can too.” Julia threw some coins she’d saved over the years into the bag. “You keep telling me that I need to stop complaining and start living life. Well, this is the time to do that, and I can’t think of a better reason to venture into the unknown than this. Can you?”

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Erin's lips turned up into a smile. "You're right. But you're not going alone with him. I'm coming with you." Then she left for her room to pack.

Chapter Seventeen

Woape clung to the bed sheets as she slept. She knew she was dreaming. And even though she struggled to wake up, she couldn't. She was trapped in her nightmare. A nightmare where the question haunted her ever since she realized she was pregnant: who was the father? It was easy to push her fears aside during the day, when the sun shone bright and people surrounded her. But in the heart of night where the moon reined and dreams ran rampant, she couldn't escape it.

She dreamt the time had come to give birth. She was alone and it was dark, so she couldn't tell where she was. The only sound audible was her screaming in pain. She squatted and pushed. The baby crowned and then the body slid out. As soon as the baby cried, a figure stepped into view. With her remaining strength, Woape looked up.

Hothlepoya knelt down and took the crying child into his hands. "Ah, a remarkable resemblance." Then he turned the baby so she could see for herself who the child belonged to.

"No!" She scrambled away from both of them.

"Hold him. Hold my son." He held the wailing child out to her.

“He’s not mine.” She huddled in the corner of the teepee. “He’s not mine!”

Woape finally broke out of her nightmare and bolted straight up in bed. “He’s not mine,” she squeaked.

Her heart pounding frantically in her chest, she quickly scanned the room. Where was she? It took her mind a moment to sort through the fog of the dream. She was at the preacher’s house, staying with him and his wife. Gasping, she collapsed on the bed, sweat sticking to her nightgown and sheets.

Oh God, please let this child be Gary’s. She choked on a sob and resisted the urge to place her hand over her belly as the baby squirmed. What was she going to do if this wasn’t Gary’s child? She tried to tell herself she could love him anyway, but could she really? Would she remember Hothlepoya every time she looked at him? It was just a matter of weeks before the duration of her pregnancy came to an end. It was too soon. Much too soon.

She turned over and stared at the empty space next to her. Her heart hurt whenever she rested in bed and thought of how safe she’d felt next to Gary. She didn’t know how she was supposed to continue on without him...or his love. One thing seemed certain. She was stuck in the white man’s world. She didn’t mind it when Gary was with her. But being here, alone, and knowing she was never going to see him again made her cry.

She thought she’d cried enough already to last a lifetime. The preacher’s wife would give her a handkerchief and hold her while she cried during the day. Woape hadn’t told the woman the truth behind her grief. She decided to let the people think whatever they wanted and kept quiet.

She realized this was a temporary stay. Where would she go next? She didn’t know and she didn’t care. Her only hope was that it was Gary’s child that grew inside her.

Letting her tears fall to her pillow, she prayed again to the God Gary often prayed to. It was the only time she received any comfort, and it was the only thing that warded off the nightmares.

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Gary once said that his God could work miracles. When he said that, he also said that she was his miracle. Well, she needed a miracle now, and she hoped God would deliver on it.

“Martha,” the preacher’s wife said.

It took Woape a moment to remember that the kindly old woman had given her the name Martha. Woape almost told her what her name was, but then she thought if Hothlepoya came through town and asked for “Woape”, no one would know who that was and he’d continue on his search for her. Woape closed her eyes and slowly exhaled. Why couldn’t he forget her? Why did he have to hunt her down as if she were some kind of prey?

“Martha, dear?”

Woape opened her eyes and directed her attention from the parlor window.

The woman smiled and patted her shoulder. “There’s a visitor.”

A momentary flicker of panic coursed through her until the preacher’s wife motioned to a white woman who stood just inside the threshold of the room. The blond woman looked to be in her mid-twenties, and she seemed trustworthy, if Woape could judge a person’s character based on appearance alone. Something in her eyes reminded Woape of her mother and Erin.

Woape shifted on the couch to make room for her to sit.

“This is Penelope,” the woman slowly stated. Then, as if that wasn’t enough, she repeated, “Pe-ne-lo-pe.”

Woape nodded and said, “Penelope.”

“Yes! Very good.” The woman smiled at Penelope. “She doesn’t know our language. I’ve been doing what I can to teach her words here and there. She’s a quick learner.”

Penelope sat next to Woape. “I wonder what her real name is.”

“I don’t know. Jerry and his men found her in a train car, shaking with fear. The poor thing must be running from someone.”

“You think this someone caused her pregnancy?”

She shrugged. “It’s speculation, of course, but it’s all we have to go on. She was wearing that dress.”

Penelope turned her caring eyes toward Woape. “What you must have gone through.”

An underlying thread of sorrow marked Penelope’s words, making Woape wonder if they shared something in common.

“She’s all alone in the world,” the preacher’s wife commented. “A lot like you.”

That comment caught Woape’s attention. She studied Penelope’s profile.

“I don’t wish to be presumptuous,” the woman continued, “but I thought maybe one woman who has no one might like the company of another one in a similar situation.”

“You mean, you wish for me to take her with me when I return home?”

“Like I said, it was a thought. I figured that there might be a sense of comfort in it.”

Penelope sighed but smiled at Woape. “If I were in your shoes, I’d be scared too.”

Woape wondered about Penelope. What was her story? But she couldn’t ask without letting them know she could understand them, so she didn’t. She couldn’t take that chance. She would not be to blame for someone else’s death. Already her mother and Gary had died because of their association with her. And all because she didn’t want to marry Citlali. She never should have run away from her tribe.

Penelope reached out and gave Woape’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Though we don’t know each other’s language, I think the human spirit knows when one has a connection with another, and I feel that we could be great friends.”

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Woape squeezed her hand back, allowing for one indication that she understood Penelope's words.

Penelope released her hand and stood. Looking at the preacher's wife, she said, "I should show Martha where I live. Do you have a map?"

The woman nodded and hurried out of the room.

Woape also stood.

Penelope smiled at her.

She returned her smile.

An awkward minute passed before the preacher's wife returned with a map which she laid out on the table in the center of the room. "There," she told Penelope. "Where is it you live?"

Penelope studied the map for a moment before she pointed to a spot that looked to be far from anyone or anything.

Woape leaned forward. She wondered where her tribe was. She wondered where she and Gary used to live. Bracing herself against the sorrow that wanted to emerge, she focused on the place where Penelope pointed.

Penelope looked at Woape. "I live here." She paused before pointing to the three of them. "We are here." She slid her finger to a place that looked much more populated than where Penelope said she lived.

The preacher's wife tapped Woape on the arm to get her attention. "You go here." She motioned to Penelope's home.

Woape knew what they were offering, and she considered it. Part of her wanted to return to her people, but she had no idea how to get to them. She realized she could come out and ask them. But Hothlepoya was still out there. Did she risk the journey, especially when it wasn't just her she had to think about? She absentmindedly rubbed her belly. She had to consider what was best for the baby. Even if the child was Hothlepoya's, she had to remember the child was also hers. Besides, the child did nothing wrong. It wasn't fair to not love someone who couldn't change the circumstances of his conception.

She turned her attention back to the map. The place Penelope lived at was isolated. It might be so isolated that Hothlepoya wouldn't think to go there. He'd most likely suspect that she'd be hiding in a town somewhere, which is how he came to find her and Gary.

Finally, she nodded to Penelope.

The older woman clapped her hands. "Oh, now this is wonderful! I think you two will be good for each other."

Penelope rolled up the map. "Yes. I think so too."

"It blesses my heart when things work out for the best. Now, we should get ready to eat." She took the map from Penelope and strode out of the room.

Woape turned toward the window. A part of her hated to be dependent on the good nature of others, but she didn't know what else to do.

To her surprise, Penelope said, "It'll be nice to have someone to talk to. It gets lonely out there, out in the middle of nowhere."

Woape glanced at her, wondering why she said all of this...unless she assumed that Woape could understand her. But Penelope's next words settled that question.

"I know you don't know what I'm saying. I just like to talk sometimes. You'll have to learn that about me."

Woape watched as Penelope approached the window and peered out of it. "I live in that direction. We'll head out tomorrow morning. The journey will be two days."

She gazed in the direction of the open land. She had no idea where it was in relation to her tribe, or where she'd made a home with Gary.

"It'll be nice to have a baby around," Penelope whispered. "I was married, but my husband died. I can't have children, so there's no one to remember him by. I often think it would be nice to hear the laughter only a child can bring."

Woape looked back at Penelope.

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“I hope that whoever the father is that he was good to you,” Penelope continued, her voice still soft. “I’d like to think that there might be something good that can happen to one of us.”

Woape debated the wisdom of talking to Penelope, especially since she realized they were going through similar heartaches. No wonder she sensed a connection between them. Sorrow, it seemed, was a universal language.

The preacher’s wife returned and clapped her hands. “I just know that things will start getting better for the both of you! Now, come and eat.”

Woape watched Penelope as she passed her. There was more to the story than Penelope told her, but she figured that maybe, in time, she would find out what it was, and maybe she’d be able to tell her new friend her story as well.

Gary slowly stood from the spare bed and gingerly made his way to the dresser. He checked the bandages wrapped around his shoulder and the side of his neck. As long as he lived, he didn’t think he’d forget the way that axe looked as it came down toward him. Had it not been for Matthew riding up on the property, the Indian wouldn’t have missed his aim. But poor Matthew...

Gary turned from the mirror as he recalled Matthew’s slaughter. He shivered. He knew those Indians meant Woape harm—that they were bad men, but it never occurred to him just how much they delighted in the hunt...and the kill. The leader actually looked excited as he threw the axe at Matthew.

But at least they hadn’t found Woape. Gary had led them out of the house and away from her. One was dead. The other had pursued him while the leader went after Matthew. Gary wanted to stay and defend Matthew, but he’d dropped his gun in the grass and couldn’t find it. His only option was jump on the

nearby horse and ride off, even as the muscles in his neck and shoulder screamed at him, even as his blood ran down his body.

Gary glanced at his other side where the arrow had skimmed his skin. It was a close call. But still, he fared better than Matthew. The Indian had chased Gary until the sun marked the nine o'clock hour when a rancher found him and the Indian—and realizing what was going on—intervened. The Indian retreated and headed back toward the south, and Gary was so relieved that the remaining adrenaline he'd been relying on to get him through the ordeal left him. He fell off the horse and landed in the grass. And the man and his two sons brought him back where they worked to heal him.

An infection set into the wound along his neck, so Gary stayed to recover. He knew he'd be of little use to Woape in his condition. He just hoped she stayed in the attic until the remaining Indian departed. She was smart. She wouldn't come down from her hiding place until it was safe.

Cautious, he moved his arms. The wounds hurt, but he might be able to ride a horse. He was anxious to get back to Woape. Turning to the chair in the small bedroom, he picked up his shirt and slipped it on, careful not to aggravate the bandages. Then he sat down on the bed and put his boots on. He sat still for a few moments to catch his breath.

He wasn't ready to ride a horse. Not if the simple act of getting dressed had worn him out. But he had to get to Woape. She must be scared and wondering if he'd ever return. He wondered if he could handle riding a horse if he took it easy. A simple walk might not be so strenuous if he took frequent breaks. He had to leave today. Even if he made slow progress getting back to his home, he'd still be on his way to seeing her again.

He wanted to see her. He missed her. He hoped she realized he had to run that night. He hoped she didn't think he left her just because those men showed up. And that uncertainty made him anxious too. He couldn't stay here in this cabin for

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another day. The man and his sons had been hospitable to him, so he'd let them know he appreciated it. But he had to get back.

After all the time he'd spent looking for a place to belong, he finally found it with her. Maybe this whole thing served as a reminder that his aunt had been right—that a man wasn't truly fulfilled until he had a good woman by his side...and a child on the way.

He eased off the bed. He just had to take things slow. Then he wouldn't strain himself. Sure, it might prolong his healing, but he'd rather heal with her tending to him than the man and the two sons, even if they were nice. Gary couldn't wait to see Woape again and hold her in his arms. He smiled. *I'll be home soon, my shadow.*

Chapter Eighteen

Woape turned her gaze from Penelope. It didn't seem right to watch another woman mourn the death of her husband. Penelope had pulled up to the cemetery and told her that her husband was buried there. Woape understood her pain, and as her new friend grieved, Woape also cried.

It didn't seem fair that people should die so young, that wives had to be separated from their husbands or that parents should lose their children. Death, she supposed, was part of the cycle of life, for as soon as life was granted to someone, the minutes of time were already working to take it away. And in the process, the loved ones were left behind to grieve.

The baby stirred in her womb, a reminder that life would continue. How she prayed it was Gary's. Somehow the hat and pocket watch next to her weren't enough. It'd be a greater consolation if she could have something that was truly his, something that he didn't purchase long ago.

Penelope stood from the grave, adjusted her hat and returned to the wagon. She got in beside Woape and picked up a container. "Water?"

"Water?"

Penelope pretended to drink from the canister.

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Of course, Woape knew what water was, but she didn't feel like revealing the truth. Not yet. Not when she needed the silence and space to mourn. In time, she'd probably let Penelope know. But for now, she didn't want to explain everything. Woape accepted the canister before she pointed to the grave.

"Husband," Penelope softly said. "My husband. He's dead."

Woape decided she could tell her something, to give this kind woman next to her a glimpse into what she'd been through. "My husband dead."

She looked curious. "Your husband is dead? Like that?" She pointed to the grave again.

"He dead." As painful as it was, she pretended to cut her neck with an axe.

Sympathy on her face, Penelope reached out and touched her arm. "Friend." Then she motioned to herself. "Friend."

"Fr...end," she finally replied, smiling despite the lump in her throat.

Penelope nodded. "Friend." She turned her attention to the brake and released it.

As the horses moved forward, Woape wondered about the new place she'd be staying. Would it be her permanent home, or would fate soon lead her somewhere else?

"So Gary Milton was here?" Julia asked two days later.

The middle-aged man stood on his porch and nodded. "That was his name."

She smiled at her aunt who softly wept with relief into her handkerchief. So Gary was alive! "Is he wounded?"

"Yep. He got it pretty good in the neck and shoulder and partly in the side, but he survived the Indian attack," the man said. "I was out herding our cattle when I saw the Indian chasing him."

Gary fell off the horse, so I went to his aid. The Indian left when he saw my pistol. Anyway, we brought Gary in and took care of him.”

“But he left?” her aunt asked.

The man nodded. “He wasn’t in any shape to head out, but he insisted he was well enough to go. I believe he headed in that direction.”

Julia glanced at the prairie land stretching out for miles in back of them. That was where she and Erin lived. So he went back home. What was he going to do when he realized that everyone was gone? He probably wouldn’t come back here. She turned her eyes to Chogan who waited on his horse by the buggy. Maybe Gary would go to Woape’s tribe. If so, then she and her aunt were fortunate to have Chogan with them so they knew how to get there.

But what did that matter? Her brother was alive! They’d find him soon enough.

Her aunt pressed a hand to her heart. “I thought for sure Gary was gone. Poor Woape. She had no idea what happened.”

At the reminder, Julia hid her apprehension. Was Woape on her way to her tribe? Chogan had lost her. Well, they couldn’t put all the pieces together at once. They had to take it one step at a time, and right now, they had the assurance that everyone was alive—and that’s what mattered.

“I’m all the way out in the middle of nowhere,” the man said. “It’s a long way to town. Would you like to have lunch? It’s nothing fancy mind you. We got beans and bread, but it’s enough to fill your stomach till you get to your next stop.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m too excited to eat. Julia?” Her aunt looked at her.

“We have enough food packed to last us to our destination, and I admit, now that I know for sure Gary’s alive, I want to keep looking for him.”

“Alright. I wish you God speed.”

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They nodded and returned to the buggy. The tiresome quest of asking everyone they came across if they'd seen Gary suddenly didn't matter.

Her heart light, Julia told Chogan, "Gary was here. He headed back to his home. Will you come with us? If he's not there, we'll know he went to your tribe to find Woape."

Chogan nodded. "I will."

And so, they got ready to travel south.

Woape was cutting potatoes when a contraction gripped her. All morning, she'd been having light pains that were easy to ignore, but now she couldn't. The baby was ready to be born, and as much as she was ready for the pregnancy to end, she worried whose child she'd soon be holding. It seemed like a double-edged sword.

When the pain eased, she resumed her cutting. Penelope had gone to the cellar to retrieve some meat. Woape glanced around the one room cabin. The place was peaceful. It was located as far from anyone else as she could get, and for the time being, that was what she needed. It helped to be able to go out on the prairie, a few feet from the cabin, and grieve. But she didn't want to stay here forever. She longed for home, and if she couldn't have that with Gary, then she wanted to return to her tribe. Seeing Chogan again had brought forth a sense of homesickness.

Maybe in a year, she would ask Penelope to help her return home. Until then, she would bide her time and heal. She did appreciate Penelope and all her new friend had done. It reminded her that God had not abandoned her all together. And with any luck, she might learn Gary had indeed fathered her child. This would be a further comfort to her. She didn't care what her

tribe would think if they saw her with a white man's child. They'd have to learn to welcome the child as one of their own.

The pain returned, spreading from her back and wrapping around her. She stood in an effort to walk through it, but she couldn't get her feet to move.

Penelope entered the room and quickly put the slab of meat down. "Martha?" She ran over to her and helped her sit back down.

Woape gritted her teeth and held onto her stomach. This was definitely the worse contraction yet! "Baby," she gasped.

"Baby is coming?"

She nodded. "Baby. Hurt."

Penelope gingerly took the knife out of Woape's hand and placed it on the table next to the meat.

The pain finally lessened and Woape exhaled with relief. She'd watched women give birth, but she didn't realize exactly how much they went through. She didn't think she was up to this. She wiped her forehead. Not only did she stink from not bathing in a good month but sweat stuck to her as well. No wonder men in her tribe often commented that they could smell a white man coming a mile away. White people didn't bathe much, and this is what happened to them.

Still, she couldn't deny how helpful they'd been to her. She reached out and took Penelope's hand in hers. "Happy...to be..friend," she said between gasping.

Penelope smiled and squeezed her hand. "I'm happy to be your friend too. Baby is coming. That's good."

She prayed it would be. Instead of sharing her fears, she said, "Good."

"Maybe painful but good." She pointed to Woape. "Mother." Then she motioned to Woape's belly. "Baby."

Woape suddenly understood what she meant. *Mother*. Now there was a new word. Not that Penelope hadn't taught her

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some new ones, but this one was especially helpful. Hunde meant Mother in her language. Woape was going to be a mother.

“I’ll get things ready for the birth,” Penelope said.

Woape looked out the window and noticed the position of the sun. She guessed it was six in the evening. She wondered how long it would be until the child’s was finally born. *This has to be Gary’s child. It just has to be.*

As the evening turned into night, Woape became less concerned about the parentage of the child and more concerned about the agony of labor. By the time Penelope announced it was midnight, Woape just wanted this ordeal to be over, regardless of whether the child was from Hothlepoya or Gary. She did everything she could think of to speed up the process from walking to squatting, but the baby was in no hurry to come into the world.

Finally, when it was time to deliver the baby, Penelope spread out an old blanket and laid her on the bed. Woape was only half aware of what Penelope was saying but noted the encouragement in her tone. When the urge to push came, Woape gave into it and pushed as hard as she could.

“You’re doing good, Martha,” Penelope said, her tone irritatingly calm.

Well, of course, she was calm. She wasn’t going through it! Woape screamed and pushed again. She should be squatting. Maybe lying on her back delayed her progress. But before she could get up, she felt the baby’s head coming through.

“One more push, Martha. You can do it!”

It was almost done. One more push and this awful process would be over! That realization renewed her energy, so Woape put all of her strength into the last push and was rewarded with the sudden absence of pressure. She collapsed back on the bed, out of breath but grateful it was finally over.

Then the baby cried and Woape's attention returned to her child. Was it Gary's? She debated whether she should see right away or not. But she had to know. She struggled to get up on her elbows so she could see over her deflated belly.

Penelope laughed and showed her the crying child.

Woape held out her arms and took the baby. She recognized the high earlobes and slightly crooked nose. Gary had those features. She cried with joy and cradled the child in her arms. She wiped the child's face with the blanket. Just as she thought, the skin was also lighter than hers. There was no doubt about it. This was Gary's child!

The baby settled down and snuggled against her body, probably seeking warmth. All memories of the labor quickly departed, and in its place was unbelievable love and happiness. In this child's birth, she had great comfort.

"Girl," Penelope told Woape.

Woape glanced up, her eyes glistening with more tears. So "girl" was the name for sukmihe. "Girl. Baby girl." She laughed as the child yawned. Her precious girl. Gary's precious girl. And she vowed that she would teach this child about her father. Gary would never be forgotten.

Chapter Nineteen

Julia bit back the urge to scream in frustration. How could they be lost? She scanned the prairie. Nothing. In all directions, there was nothing except the river that cut through the land. She placed her hands on her hips and glanced at the late afternoon sun. Okay. So that way was west, but that wasn't very reassuring since she didn't know where they were. She had no starting point, and the stupid horse stepped on the compass her aunt found in Gary's travel gear.

She groaned. Leave it to her absentminded brother to neglect to pack a map. She momentarily wondered if she should be so hard on her kin. But he was alive and probably back with Woape at her tribe, and since that was the case, she could be agitated at his lack of foresight.

Well, at least they had Gary's things and had enough sense to buy extra bedrolls and food. So all was not lost. She glanced at Chogan as he took care of the horses. Looking at her aunt, she saw that she stirred the beans on a skillet. Beans and jerky again. Julia fought the urge to gag. It was food. Food was a good thing, and at least Chogan was with them just in case someone showed up and thought to take advantage of them. A muscular man like him would ward off any no-gooders.

She knelt by the river and collected enough water to fill up the three canisters. Even if this wasn't quite the adventure she imagined it would be, it was nice to see some of the world. So she didn't need to be angry. She exhaled and let her agitation subside. Gary was right. She needed to enjoy life instead of whining about it. And that is what she'd start doing right now.

She sealed the canisters and walked back to the campsite.

"Supper will be ready soon," her aunt said.

She rolled her eyes but chuckled. "I can hardly wait."

The older woman stopped stirring the beans and looked up at her. "Did you just make a joke?"

"Sure. Is that a crime?"

"I can't remember the last time you made one."

She shrugged and went over to the buggy where she set the canisters down. Then she walked back to the campfire and picked up the three tin cans and a pot to get more water.

Chogan approached them. "Two rabbits there." He pointed toward the north. "Can eat them."

Erin nodded. "I can cook them up if you skin them."

He indicated his agreement and went to retrieve his bow and arrow.

It would be nice to get a break from jerky, Julia thought and headed for the river. To her surprise, Chogan approached her as she made it halfway back with the water.

"You want to hunt?" he asked.

She furrowed her eyebrows. "Why would I want to hunt?"

"If you need food."

"Isn't that what you're here for?"

A small amused smile crossed his face. "I not always here."

She didn't see why that should be amusing. "Do you plan to leave me and my aunt?"

He shook his head. "I not mean now. I mean in future."

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Her frown deepened. "I don't understand you."

"We go to my tribe. I stay. You go back to home. Correct?"

"Of course. I'm only going to make sure Woape is alright...and to make sure Gary found her."

"You need to learn hunt. My place is at tribe."

His meaning finally dawned on her and she relaxed. "I can't argue with that logic." She stepped toward the campfire but glanced his way. "But you're staying with us until I make sure my brother and his wife are together."

He nodded.

"Good. I'll be back." She completed the distance between herself and her aunt and set the cups and pot down. "Apparently, Chogan thinks it's a good idea if I learn to hunt. Once we make it to the Indian tribe, we'll be on our own to make it home."

Her aunt blinked. "You're going to hunt?"

"Why not? I can use a bow and arrow just as well as anyone else."

"I suppose. Alright. But don't get out of my sight."

"And where would 'out of sight' be?" She motioned to the open land around them. "I can't even do my personal business unless you two have your backs turned. I really do miss the outhouse."

"I'm sure we'll find a town soon enough. Then we can figure out how to get to the tribe."

Julia stood up and stretched. Her stomach reminded her that she needed to eat. "Hopefully, catching a rabbit won't take too long."

Her aunt chuckled as if she understood something that Julia didn't.

Julia gave her a questioning look.

"Go on, child. That rabbit won't be over this fire as long as you're standing here, and he doesn't look like he's going to hunt

until you're with him." She indicated to Chogan who patiently waited with a bow and a set of arrows.

She made her way to him and joined him as he headed out to a part of the land where two rabbits gathered together. Slowing her pace to match his, she realized he was trying not to startle the animals.

They were still a good distance away when he stopped. "Hold bow and arrow like this," he whispered in her ear. He slipped an arrow into the bow and drew it back.

She stopped herself from rolling her eyes. He did the motion so fast that she hardly caught the subtle details, and it was those details she needed to know. But she was too hungry to tell him this. Instead, she waited and watched as he directed the arrow at one of the rabbits and released it. The arrow reached its mark and the rabbit fell while the other fled.

"Easy," he said.

"Right," she slowly replied, not at all convinced that her efforts would result in immediate success.

"Rabbit easy. Buffalo hard."

Sure, compared to a rabbit, a buffalo *had* to be difficult. But they weren't comparing rabbits to buffalo right then. They were comparing her skill to his, and she had no skills at all while it was obvious he'd been doing this for a long time.

"Here. Try." He held the bow and arrow out to her.

She gingerly took them. She never thought she'd be doing this. But this was part of the adventure, right? Trying new things. Exploring her horizons. And she might need to know this in the future.

"I see rabbit there."

Bracing herself for the task ahead, she turned around and followed him a few paces, realizing her aunt watched from the distance. Not caring for her aunt to pick up on her hesitation, she proceeded forward and stopped when Chogan indicated to.

"You try."

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Shouldn't she practice on something like a tree? But there were no trees nearby, so that answered her question. She nodded and pulled back on the bow.

Looking amused, he reached out to stop her.

Her cheeks grew warm, and she suspected it wasn't from embarrassment.

"Hand here." He pointed to the area on the bow just above her hand.

She adjusted her grip and glanced at him as she pulled the arrow through. She frowned. The arrow wasn't cooperating very well.

Again, he seemed to think this was fun because a slight smile crossed his face. "Hold this part."

The trick worked so she pulled back the arrow and let it loose. It fell six feet from her and scared the rabbit off. It didn't even get near the rabbit.

"You need focus on rabbit."

Obviously. And she thought she was! But apparently, she wasn't. "I told you this was hard."

"No. Not hard. Easy."

"For you."

"Will be for you. Practice." He retrieved the arrow and brought it back to her. "Try again."

She didn't want to try again. She was hungry, and her stomach had no trouble letting her know that. "I need to eat."

He looked disappointed. "One more try. Then we eat?"

She nodded. It sounded like an easy enough compromise. She scanned the grass. "There?" She pointed to two rabbits toward the east.

"Good spot."

This time she crept to the animals and he followed. She took a deep breath and raised the bow and arrow, directing the arrow at the rabbit on the right. She tightened her grip and let the arrow fly. Once again, it fell short of her mark.

“Good.”

“Good? I didn’t even get it.”

“You do better.”

Better by how much? A couple inches?

“Tomorrow I teach you to aim and use pressure.”

Tomorrow? That meant she had to go through this again? Whatever did she do to deserve such torture? He took back the bow and arrow, his strong hands brushing hers, and once again she wondered if she should find the action as exciting as it was. He turned his back to her and released the arrow, expertly shooting a rabbit that she could hardly see. She rolled her eyes. Nothing should be *that* easy.

He smiled at her. “We eat better tonight. I go get rabbits.”

“I’ll get the knife so we can start skinning them.” Then she headed back to her aunt.

Gary wiped the sweat from his forehead and stuffed his bandana back into his pocket. His gaze drifted to the Mandan tribe half a mile from where he stood with the Indian, probably not much older than him, staring at him.

“You will not come here,” the man said, his arms crossed and a frown on his face.

By the amount of feathers lining his headdress, Gary gathered that this was an important man. “But I’m searching for someone. She came from this tribe. Her name is Woape, and—”

“There is no one by that name here. You will not come into village. We are peaceful.”

The horse next to him nudged him in the shoulder as if to indicate that they should take their search elsewhere. But Gary had no idea where else to look. He’d been back home, and not only was Woape gone but so were his aunt and sister. All of them

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couldn't have vanished into thin air. Taking a deep breath, he chose his words carefully. "I don't want trouble. I come in peace."

"Woape is not here. You have no reason to stay."

Gary tried to determine whether the Indian was telling him the truth or not. He didn't sense any hostility from the man or the group of onlookers who kept their distance from them. He rubbed his eyes and sighed. The task of finding his wife proved more difficult than he thought it would, and with each passing day, the pit of despair that lingered in his heart grew a little more. What if the Indians who had come for her found her in the attic? He thought the plan was full-proof. Maybe she left her hiding spot. But that didn't seem like her. He had held out for the hope that she would have found her way back to her people.

Gary scanned what he could of the earthen lodges and the people hovering around them. If Woape was here, she'd tell them about him, even if she thought he was dead. Deciding to try again, he said, "My name is Gary Milton. Woape is my—"

"Citlali, I talk with him," an older man yelled out as he approached them.

The young Indian nodded toward Gary. "You do not believe me. Believe the chief."

Gary waited until the chief caught up to them, hoping his apprehension didn't show. The chief had a formidable look about him that left little room for argument. "Woape is very important to me, and I'm important to her. If she's here, she'll want to see me."

"But she is not here," the chief answered. "Citlali has told you the truth. Her father, brother and a couple of others have been searching. Even we searched." He motioned to himself and the other Indian.

All hopes that they had been lying faded. Gary wasn't a mind reader, but there was no mistaking the sorrow in the chief's eyes. Gary turned back in the direction that would lead him north

of the Mandan tribe. Maybe those men who'd snuck into their house had found her after all. But she had to be alive. Their child had to be alive.

The chief drew himself to his full height. "We suggest you leave."

Gary blinked for a moment when he realized that even if they told him the truth, they were wary of him. Did they think Gary had something to do with her disappearance? He debated whether it would be wise to press the issue, to let them know he wasn't a threat, but then he realized that only Woape could settle the matter. And since she wasn't there, it was pointless to stick around. Finally, he thanked them and hopped back on the horse. As he headed back north, he determined that he wouldn't give up. Not until the Lord made it clear to him that he should. As long as there was the spark of hope, he had to keep looking.

Chapter Twenty

Woape gathered her sleeping child and stood from the chair at the table. “I want to take a nap.”

Penelope smiled and also stood with a cup in her hand. “Tell me the truth, how well am I learning your language?”

“You’re doing very well.” She glanced at her daughter. After her birth, Woape decided to tell Penelope what had happened and confessed that she knew how to speak English. From there, she’d taken to the task of teaching her friend her language. She’d like to think it was a thank you for all Penelope had done for her and her child, but she doubted she could ever adequately thank Penelope. She returned her gaze to Penelope who was putting the cup into the sink. “I pray that Cole will return.”

Penelope looked over her shoulder, seeming surprised.

Woape shrugged. “I’d like to see good happen for you.”

Woape had her child—Gary’s child. If Cole did come back for Penelope, then Penelope could find happiness again. Woape could almost hear her mother now: *No one is guaranteed a happy ending, Woape. We learn to be content with whatever happens.* Maybe her mother was right, but Woape still couldn’t help but hope. Maybe that meant she was still young.

“It’s been nice having you here,” Penelope softly said.

Yes, but Woape wasn’t planning to stay forever. Sooner or later, she’d have to go back to her tribe.

Penelope grabbed a hat and work gloves. “I’m going to weed the garden.”

She nodded and carried the baby to the bed. “What day is it?”

“July 9th, I believe.”

“My daughter is not a month old and she already looks big.”

Penelope grinned as she slipped on the gloves. “I suppose that is the nature of babies. You blink and they’re all grown up. Sleep well.”

Woape settled onto the bed as Penelope shut the door. She turned onto her side so that she could watch the child as she slept. She didn’t think it was possible to have such comfort in Gary’s absence, but with this child, she knew a part of him remained with her.

“Your father was a good man,” she whispered, chuckling as the baby scrunched her eyebrows.

Closing her eyes, she drifted off to sleep. In the span of her sleep, she didn’t know how much time passed until she heard the sound of laughter. At first, she thought she was dreaming but soon realized the laughter was coming from Penelope. Surprised, since in the time she’d known her, Penelope rarely laughed, she opened her eyes.

Penelope was excitedly whispering to someone who stood in the doorway, slightly out of Woape’s view. The man was white, and for a split second, Woape thought it was Gary. She bolted up, her heart hammering with excitement. But it couldn’t be Gary.

When Penelope glanced at her, Woape’s hope plummeted. No. It wasn’t Gary. But if it wasn’t Gary, then...

“This is Cole Hunter,” Penelope told her, her face flushed with joy. She turned back to him. “Would you believe my friend

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has been praying you'd come back?" Without waiting for him to respond, she said, "Martha is from the Mandan tribe. She's a good friend, and she has a baby girl."

"Hello, Martha," he said. "It's nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you too," Woape replied. One thing she didn't tell Penelope was her real name. She worried that Hothlepoya would make the connection if he heard anyone mention that "Woape" lived out there with Penelope. But if "Martha" was here, then he had no reason to connect those dots, especially since "Martha" was a white woman's name.

Penelope turned to Cole. "Why don't you get the wagon ready?"

He nodded and left.

Woape couldn't help but smile. Penelope's face glowed, and Woape was glad her friend's happy ending came after all.

Penelope rushed over to her. "I can't believe it. Pinch me. Am I dreaming?"

Maybe she should ask if Woape was still dreaming, for it was Woape who fell asleep. But Woape knew they were both awake. "He loves you. I can tell by the way he looks at you."

Gary used to look at her that way. Citlali never did. There was a big difference in the way a man looked at a woman when he was with her for duty's sake and when he was with her because he loved her. And Cole came back because he loved Penelope. A woman was fortunate to have the pleasure of a man's love, even if the time had been cut short.

Woape picked up the baby. "We both have things to rejoice for. We're blessed."

Penelope wiped some tears from her eyes, but at least this time, there was happiness on her face. "You're right. Cole wants to marry me, so we want to go to town. We thought we'd build you and your child a cabin of your own in that direction." She pointed northwest. "You'll only be a few yards away."

“You do not need to go through all that trouble for me.” Woape glanced at her child. She slept well and didn’t fuss much. Just like her father, she seemed to be content no matter what. “I was thinking of returning home—back to my people. She might be up for the trip. Do you think I could go on the train?” As long as she stayed around a lot of people, her journey might be safe.

“You don’t have to leave. I like having you around.”

“I like being here too, but I don’t belong here. You’ve been wonderful to me. I sense that God has something else for me.” And that might be going to her tribe and marrying Citlali.

“Well, you have friends here.”

“The same is true for you, should you ever come to my tribe.”

Penelope hugged her, careful not to squeeze the baby. “Let me arrange for your train ticket and see to it that someone takes you to your tribe.”

Woape realized this was doing more than could ever be expected of a person, but it would solve her problems—and she did want to return home. “Thank you.” That was all she could offer.

“You’re welcome. And thank you for praying. You know, I believe it worked.” She stood up and glanced around the cabin. “I suppose I should get things ready. It’ll be a two day trip.”

With a mixture of apprehension and excitement, Woape went to help her. She wondered if her people would welcome Gary’s child. She recalled how Chogan reacted. But that was Chogan, and Chogan was set in his ways. He thought the greatest travesty that could befall their people was to have children with white people. Others in her tribe didn’t share the same mentality—at least not to the degree he did.

Well, if they couldn’t welcome Gary’s child, then they couldn’t welcome her. And if that was the case, maybe she’d come back here. But she had to try going back first.

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Another arrow landed so far off her mark that Julia had to fight the urge to break the stupid bow. “This is pointless. My aunt and I will just eat jerky on our way back home,” she told Chogan before she held the bow out to him. “I’m done.”

He refused to take it. “You improve. Did better.”

“Better isn’t good enough.” She didn’t want to snap but her sharp tone came out anyway. Did he really enjoy watching her fail day after day of doing this? “There are some things I’m good at, but this isn’t one of them.” She thrust the bow in his direction.

“You need patience.”

She grunted and released the bow so it fell to the grass. As she hastened toward the campfire where her aunt made lunch, he jumped in front of her. She shrieked and almost tripped on her skirt.

“You give up too fast,” he said.

Gritting her teeth, she glared at him, her fists clenched at her sides. What did he care? She had no intention of being a hunter.

“You impatient.”

“You are impatient,” she corrected.

“No. I not lose patience. You do.”

She rolled her eyes. “I meant that you need to put your verb in your sentences when you speak. You don’t say, ‘You impatient.’ You say, ‘You are impatient.’”

“If I say that, will you try again?”

He had to be crazy! “No.”

Shrugging, he replied, “I not say it.”

She stood there for a moment, staring at him in disbelief. Why that should startle her as much as it did, she didn’t understand, but for some reason, she hadn’t expected it. “You are a stubborn man.”

“And you stubborn woman.”

“Me? I’m not stubborn. I went along with this whole thing and tried shooting rabbits.”

“You not put your heart into it.”

“Because I don’t want to do it. If I were a man, I could see the point, but I’m not a man.”

An amused smile crossed his face. “That is good thing.”

She didn’t know what to make of that comment so she just stared at him.

“I use word ‘is’. Happy?”

When she could finally speak, she crossed her arms and said, “Yes. You should take this chance to fine tune the English language.”

“I fine tune English language. You fine tune hunting rabbits. Deal?”

Sighing, she remarked, “You had to slip that one in, didn’t you?”

“It is your choice. You can shoot rabbit or other animal. You need patience. Learning takes time. I not learn your language right away.”

So he had a point...and a good one too. She didn’t know if that should annoy her or not.

He motioned to the bow still lying in the grass. “Come. Try two more times. Then we eat. Then we find Woape and Gary.”

“Just two times? You won’t try to talk me into more than that?”

“Two times until we stop for the night. Then we practice again before supper.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I thought you said we were going to find Woape and Gary.”

A chuckle escaped his throat. “You make joke.”

She was surprised he caught onto that. Most people seemed to miss it when she did, so she long ago gave up trying. “A small one,” she admitted, relaxing. “But we could find them.”

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That would be good.” And her nagging guilt could finally leave because she could apologize for what she’d done.

“We might. That would be good.”

She nodded.

“So try again?”

“You probably won’t leave me alone until I do anyway.”

She turned around and headed back to the bow and picked it up. “If I really do shoot one, you have to skin it and cook it.” She retrieved an arrow from the pile between them.

He grimaced. “I think I get the bad part of the deal.”

She laughed to herself as she made another failed attempt at shooting a rabbit. “I don’t think you’re in any danger of cooking.”

“You need to focus on rabbit.”

“I do.”

“You focus too much on me. I make you...nervous?”

“Of course, you make me nervous. You know what you’re doing, and you’re watching me.”

“I try to help.”

Well, maybe that was true, but still, he was watching her with keen interest. “Maybe if you didn’t stare, then it would help.”

“I watch your technique.”

“Couldn’t you take a break and look at the rabbits?”

“But I not make them stay still. They move as they will. I can help you.”

“It’s just unnerving, that’s all. I do better if I’m not being stared at all the time.”

“But it is nice to look at you.”

Her jaw nearly dropped and her face grew warm. Did he mean that the way she thought he did?

He picked up another arrow and stepped up behind her. “I make it better then.” He gently took her arms and lifted them so that she was holding the bow up. With a nudge, he directed

the arrow to the right where a solitary rabbit rested. “Put arrow in,” he whispered in her ear.

A shiver of delight raced down her spine. Oh, he had to be kidding if he thought this was going to help her concentrate! This was worse. Much worse! She looked over her shoulder.

“What is wrong?”

“Well...” Seriously, how was she supposed to explain it to him?

“I watch rabbit. You watch rabbit also.” He turned her head so that she had to look in front of her. “I not watch you.”

There was no way she was going to be able to concentrate. Not when he stood so close to her that she could practically feel his body. Not when his hand covered hers as she positioned the arrow in the right spot on the bow. Not when he lifted her arms so she was aiming the arrow at the rabbit.

“Take your time,” he whispered. “Patience.”

Fine. So he wasn’t going to step away from her. And there was no way she was going to tell him how distracting it was either. She gripped the bow and bit her lower lip. His hands were still resting on her elbows. Her skin tingled and heart raced with unabashed excitement. She wished her body would calm down. It’d be much easier to release the arrow if she could just take a deep breath. Finally, she exhaled and let the arrow go.

This time, she got within a few inches of the animal. Excited, she clapped her hands. “I almost did it!”

Grinning, he returned to her side and nodded. “You focused.”

She hid her disappointment that he was no longer close to her and turned her attention to her victory. Sure, she didn’t actually succeed, but she was within inches of her mark—which was much better than how she’d done any of the other times she’d tried this. So yes, it was a victory.

“Now we eat lunch.”

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As he went to gather the arrows, she called out, “You don’t want me to try again?”

“No. I do not want to cook.”

Oh, right. She had forgotten that part of the equation. Blushing from where her thoughts had been, she quickly returned to her aunt.

Chapter Twenty-One

It was the second day on Woape's trip to town when Penelope slowed the wagon. Woape turned from staring at her sleeping daughter to see what caught Penelope's attention. Her breath caught in her throat. From the distance, she couldn't tell who the three men on horseback were, except that they were Indian. It could be Hothlepoya.

"Is something wrong with the wagon?" Cole called out.

Woape glanced at Cole who stopped his horse.

"Are they the ones who killed your husband?" Penelope asked her.

Woape looked at her child. If Hothlepoya found her and the people who had taken care of her... She didn't want to think about it. "I don't know. They could be."

Penelope quickly turned to Cole to motion to the Indians heading in their direction before she told Woape, "Here. Hide under this cover." She scrambled to the back of the wagon and raised a large blanket.

Woape obeyed. If Hothlepoya didn't see her, they might make it! As soon as she got settled with the child at her bosom, Penelope covered her. Her heart pounded with dread. Is this what the rest of her life would be like? Would she always be

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running from Hothlepoya? She made one mistake. She didn't want to marry Citlali so she ran away on the night before her wedding.

Tears fell from her eyes. She didn't want to remember what Hothlepoya did to her mother before he killed her. Her mother loved her so much she came after her. At the time, she didn't understand how a woman would leave the safety of her tribe to look for a wayward child, but now that she was a mother, she did. If Woape woke up in the middle of the night and realized her child was missing, she'd do whatever she could to find her. She probably wouldn't have the sense to wake up the men.

Most likely, her mother assumed she'd find Woape alone on the prairie and talk sense into her. She had no idea Hothlepoya had pitched his teepee nearby the Mandan tribe. He was passing by. Usually, no one inhabited the area. It wasn't like her mother suspected danger might be lurking nearby.

Woape heard Penelope and Cole debating what to do as the men came closer. The baby stirred and Woape snuggled her closer, hoping to calm her back to sleep. It worked. She yawned, stretched, and settled back down.

“Woape!”

Woape stilled and waited. Was that her father?

“Woape!”

It was her father. She was ready to pull off her blanket when he continued talking in English.

“I search for my daughter. I thought I saw someone with you. Her name is Woape. I search for her for ten months. I fear she is dead.”

“Which tribe are you from?” Penelope asked.

“Mandan.”

“Does she have any brothers or sisters?”

“One brother. One sister. Brother is Achai. He is with me. Sister is Onawa. She is at tribe. To my other side is Citlali.”

Woape should have expected Citlali to come. Honor would prompt him to search for her. Not love. She glanced at her child.

“What are you doing?” Cole asked Penelope, breaking Woape from her thoughts.

“I think it’s alright,” Penelope replied. “I’m going to talk to them.”

“But...” He paused for a long moment. “But they have weapons.”

“I don’t think they mean us any harm.”

“Fine. But I’m going with you.”

Woape thought she should show herself. She was safe with her father, brother, and Citlali, but then Penelope told her father about the baby and Woape hesitated. As she suspected, Penelope told them that Woape’s child had a white father. Woape held her breath and waited, wondering if they would welcome Gary’s child or not.

“Sioux come to our village and attack,” her father replied. “We caught one and learned they had Woape. We search for her. But we cannot find either the Sioux or her. If she is here, we want her and her child home.”

Woape’s heart constricted at the thought of Hothlepoya invading her tribe. She gulped, willing away the urge to cry. She was tired of crying. She was tired of pain. She just wanted to be with Gary’s child and enjoy the blessing she’d been allowed.

Penelope lifted the blanket.

Woape squinted in the sudden burst of sunlight.

“Did you hear what he said?” Penelope asked.

“Yes. He is my father. I will talk to him.” She handed the baby to Penelope so she could get out of the wagon. Glancing at her father, brother and Citlali, she made her way to the ground. After being gone for nearly a year, she didn’t know exactly what to say. With slight trembling, she lowered her head and approached

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them, suddenly feeling like a child again instead of a woman who had a child of her own.

“Woape?”

Her father’s gentle tone gave her enough courage to speak. “Mother is dead because of me. I got up in the middle of the night.” She couldn’t say why. Not with Citlali there—watching her. She cleared her throat and took a deep breath. “Hothlepoya, a Sioux, found me and kept me prisoner. Mother searched for me. He...” She shivered at the memory of how her mother died. In the debate on how much to tell him, she decided they were better off not knowing the details. “He killed her to add another scalp to his collection.” Tears filled her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“It was not your fault,” he softly said.

“She came for me.”

“You did not know the Sioux were there. You often went to the river to spend time there. Your mother told me she wished to talk to you. Had I known danger was near, I would have gone too.”

She noted the pain in his voice and lifted her head. Did he blame himself for her death too? Her eyes met his and she realized that he did. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“It wasn’t yours either.”

She sighed, feeling as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She’d been forgiven, and now she could move forward. She turned to Penelope. “I go.”

Penelope nodded and came up to her.

As Woape took her child, she thought it was time to give her a name, and she thought the name Penelope was a beautiful one. “Name of baby. Penelope.”

A smile crossed Penelope’s face as she brushed some tears from her eyes. “Thank you, Woape. Friend.”

“Friend.” She hugged her before she went over to her father and got on the horse. As soon as she settled into place and

the baby nestled against her chest, she relaxed. She always felt safe with her father, just as she had felt safe with Gary.

“Friend,” her father told Penelope and Cole.

“Friend,” Penelope replied, and Cole gave a surprised nod.

As the men turned their horses, she caught a glance from Citlali. She had no idea what he was thinking. Thankfully, she ended up facing her brother so she didn’t have to look at Citlali on the way home. She would marry him. If he came, that meant he wasn’t married to another. As duty prompted him to continue through with the marriage, she would too. At least she had Gary’s child with her. And that would be enough.

Julia glanced at Chogan who happened to glance her way at the same moment. Blushing, she turned her attention back to her aunt who steered the horses.

“At least we’re heading southeast,” her aunt rambled. “Had I known we were that close to Montana...” She sighed and shrugged. “Well, there’s nothing to be done about it now.”

“Who would have thought we were that bad at navigating our way through the state?”

“Thankfully, that couple was a nice one.”

“Yes.” Julia shifted in the buggy, noting that her backside was sore from the day spent traveling. “Hopefully, we won’t get off course this time.”

“From your lips to God’s ears, though I wonder if there was reason for the delay.”

Julia shifted her gaze back to Chogan, not intending to. She never meant to keep looking his way, but for some reason, she couldn’t seem to help herself. She’d grown up thinking all Indians were savage warriors who ran through the countryside seeking out white people to kill. However, she’d learned her assumption had been wrong. Perhaps there were some who fit

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that description. But weren't there also white people who were violent as well?

"Are you going to hunt for rabbits again tonight?"

Julia gave a slight jerk.

Her aunt chuckled. "Something has your interest, and it's not me."

Julia's face grew warmer than the early evening sun that beat on her back. "No. I'm tired, that's all."

"Of course."

The woman didn't sound convinced, but since she wasn't going to press Julia on the issue, Julia decided to let the matter go. When she realized that she'd started turning her gaze back to Chogan, she stopped herself and stared at the grasslands. Up ahead, still a ways out in the distance, she saw what looked like a man riding a horse.

"Chogan?" Julia called out. "Do you see a man up there?"

Erin pulled on the reins, slowing the horses down.

Chogan also slowed his steed and squinted. "Where?"

"Coming up from the south."

He turned his head and nodded. "Looks like a lone rider. Not Indian."

Julia's heart skipped a beat. It was a long shot. Oh, such a long shot! But what if...? She turned to her aunt. "Do you think it could be Gary?"

"Child, don't give me ideas."

"I'm not trying to give you ideas. It's just that... Well, what are the chances that another white man would be traveling this isolated place alone?"

Her aunt stopped the horses and stared at the man who seemed to be making his way to them. "It's not good to get one's hopes up."

"But we know he's alive and searching for Woape."

"Yes, but he doesn't get lost like we do."

“I find out,” Chogan suddenly said. He nudged his horse in the side and rode forward.

While her aunt closed her eyes to say a silent prayer, Julia watched Chogan as he approached the rider. It had to be Gary! There was no one else it could possibly be. Not this far out from town. And not all by himself.

“It has to be him,” Julia whispered.

The lone rider stopped and waited for Chogan to catch up to him.

Her aunt opened her eyes. “What would Gary be doing this far out west. He knows better than to get lost.”

“Maybe he’s not as good as we thought.”

“Oh, he is. Ever since you two came to live with me, that boy would run off all over the place and find his way home by supper.”

Julia couldn’t take the wait any more. “Please take us over there.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Erin lifted the reins and instructed the horses to move.

By the time they had crossed half the distance toward the men, there was no doubt about it. Julia clutched her aunt’s arm. “It is him! It’s him, Aunt Erin!”

The older woman laughed as tears trickled down her cheeks. “Bless my soul, so it is.”

Chogan and Gary turned to them, and a wide smile crossed Gary’s face as he urged the horse to trot forward.

As soon as Erin stopped the buggy, Julia hopped out of it and ran to meet him. By the time his feet reached the ground, she flung her arms around his neck and gave him a strong hug. “I’m sorry, Gary. I’m so sorry. I told those Indians where Woape was because I wanted her to leave. It’s all my fault. Can you forgive me?”

He didn’t return her hug. “What happened to her? I can’t find her.”

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“Well, she thought you died. We all did.” Julia finally released him so their aunt could hug him. “Chogan here,” she pointed to the Indian who stood beside her, “came to take her back home, but then a group of Sioux Indians chased her. We don’t know where she is.”

“I see her go on train,” Chogan added. “Train take off before Sioux get her.”

“Which way did the train go?” Gary asked.

“East.”

“I’ve looked everywhere. It’s like she disappeared.”

Julia winced at the pain in her brother’s voice. Once again, she wished she had done things differently. “I’m sorry, Gary.” She wished she could say more or do something to solve the problem, but she knew she couldn’t. Short of finding Woape, she couldn’t make up for her sins.

“Others from tribe go search for her,” Chogan said. “She may be at tribe.”

“I’ve been to all the Mandan tribes in this state. I just left the one south of here.”

“We not live this far to Montana. We live close to Bismarck.”

“I was there a month ago, but they hadn’t found her. I thought she might have gone to another one for refuge, but they’ve never heard of her.”

“We go to my people. Maybe she is there.”

Gary glanced back at the path he’d just traveled. “She really is a part of your tribe? And she’s on her way there?”

“Yes to both questions.”

He swallowed and turned back to them. Looking at Erin, he said, “She’s given birth by now, you know.”

Their aunt nodded. “I’ve been praying the two managed safely.”

Great. As if Julia didn’t feel bad enough! She’d forgotten when Woape was due to have her child. She resisted the urge to

apologize again. She'd already said she was sorry and one more time wouldn't take them to Woape.

As if she understood Julia's remorse, Erin rubbed her hand up and down Julia's back, like she used to when Julia was younger and needed comforting. "Julia was the one who figured out you weren't dead, and it was her idea to look for you and Woape."

Though Gary nodded, he didn't make eye contact with Julia, and who could blame him? "It's alright," she softly told her aunt. She couldn't expect Gary to welcome her with open arms. The fact that he hadn't pushed her away was more than she deserved.

"I better go back to that tribe," Gary finally said as he got back on his horse.

Erin let go of Julia and approached him. "But you need to eat. It's close to supper time."

He shook his head. "I have jerky and water. I'm fine." There was no mistaking the impatience in his tone.

"I suppose we would only slow you down," their aunt replied. "You need to find your wife and child."

"Yes, I do."

Julia watched as her brother got back up on his horse. She joined her aunt in saying good-bye and promising to pray that he'd find Woape, but he only gave a stiff indication that he heard her before he headed off. Pushing aside the sting in her heart, she turned back to the buggy, "We might as well keep going until we find a water source to camp by."

"He'll come around," Erin softly said. "Give him time."

Nodding, she continued on toward the buggy. She didn't feel like being comforted. Gary was right to act the way he did. She was lucky he even acknowledged her. Sitting in the buggy, she waited for her aunt to join her. Further along the prairie, she spotted Gary's retreating form. He wasn't wasting any time in finding Woape, and she didn't know which thought pained her

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more: the fact that it was her who made the division between them or that a man could love a woman so much that he'd race across the land to get to her. A woman would be fortunate to be loved that well.

Lost in her thoughts, she barely noticed the passing landscape or Chogan who rode close by. She closed her eyes and once again imagined that she could go back in time. The three Indians would approach. She'd say she never heard of Woape and quickly return to the church where she'd warn her brother that someone was looking for his wife. She wiped the tear that fell down her cheek. She hated this. Hated going over the past and replaying it in her mind. Wasn't it good enough to know that Gary and Woape were alive? Those three men had failed. That was good. Despite what she had done, Gary and Woape had survived. Now it was a matter of getting them back together. Surely, that was bound to happen.

Chogan found a creek so they pulled up to a stop.

As Julia got out of the buggy to help set up the camp with her aunt, he approached her. "We hunt?"

"No. I don't feel like it tonight." She gathered the cookware and stood up straight.

"But I am wanting to cook."

She looked at him, her eyebrows furrowed.

"You will shoot rabbit tonight. You are good."

"Oh, right. As soon as I succeed, you have to cook it." Sighing, she shook her head. "Maybe tomorrow. I don't want to hunt tonight."

He looked disappointed as he turned the bow over in his hands. "You are too hard on yourself."

Glancing at her aunt who was already making a campfire, she replied, "No. I deserve what I got."

"But you apologize."

"You weren't there. You didn't see how I behaved." Great. More tears. She didn't want to cry—not in front of him.

She quickly turned from him and strode toward the fire, blinking away the tears so no one would feel the need to comfort her. She set the pot, cups, and plates out.

“Aren’t you going to try to get that rabbit tonight?” her aunt asked.

“No.”

“It’d be a shame not to, especially since you have someone who’s eager to help you.”

What was her aunt getting at? She looked up at the older woman who motioned to Chogan who seemed reluctant to gather the bedrolls. Julia shrugged. “I’ve left you to make supper too many times. It’s time I did my part.”

“You’ve spent all of your life making meals.”

“So what’s one more?” She placed the utensils out and grabbed the pot to gather the water.

Her aunt placed her hand over Julia’s. “Or what’s one less? The meal is simple. I can handle it.”

Chogan came within hearing distance so the women quietly returned to their tasks. He laid the bedrolls on the grass.

Julia tried not to think of him. It was hard to serve her penance when he was near. “I’m going to get water. I need some time alone.” She said it loud enough for him to hear so he wouldn’t follow. She didn’t feel like discussing anything with anyone. Without a glance in either her aunt’s or his direction, she took the pot down to the creek.

Chapter Twenty-Two

After the week of traveling, Woape was glad to be home. Fortunately, caring for her child meant she didn't have to deal with Citlali or any questions he might have, but she knew as soon as they were back, she'd have to face him.

She returned to her people with tears and hugs. For some reason, everything looked different. Nothing had changed. The earthen lodges formed the same circle around their village. The same Missouri River flowed nearby. The same rows of corn grew in the sunlight.

But she wasn't the same Woape who left. And now she had a child. For her, everything had changed. She'd learned to live in the white man's world. She spoke their language, had dressed as the white women did, and had a white man's child. The curious stares from those in her tribe did not go unnoticed. They wondered how she came to be with a child—and a white man's for that matter.

Fortunately, her father gave her a reprieve and told everyone she needed to rest. So she slipped into her family's lodge and went to the animal hide that marked her room. She pushed the door in and the buffalo hoofs attached to the rawhide announced her entrance as it brushed along the dirt floor. She

glanced back at the circular dwelling with the fire-pit in the center and sunlight streaming in from the hole in the top of the roof. Somehow, even this didn't seem familiar to her. How often had she laughed with her family members in this place? Why couldn't she bring back that feeling of warmth and home?

Because my home will always be with Gary. Sighing, she stepped into her small room and set the bar into the two small posts that stuck out of the ground to secure the door. There. No one would disturb her. She needed to be alone with her child.

Thankful that the place was cool despite the hot summer day, she laid down on the furs that covered her bed and kissed Penelope's forehead. The name 'Penelope' fit the child very well, and when she called her child by name, she would remember the kindness of the woman who helped her.

Her child began to squirm and seek food, so Woape quickly undressed enough so she could breastfeed. She enjoyed the quiet moments with Penelope. It was the only time she experienced a sense of peace, even as she still mourned for Gary.

But she didn't belong to Gary anymore. Now she would be Citlali's wife. It wasn't something she particularly looked forward to. He wasn't a bad man. He performed notable deeds of valor that led to great honor among their people. He'd hunted more buffalo than other men his age, and the animal hide she rested on was one of his gifts to her. He would, no doubt, make a good husband. So why did she dread the marriage?

No. It was time to grow up. She needed to do the right thing instead of focusing on her feelings. She wouldn't make that mistake again. So she didn't love him. So he didn't love her. Maybe, in due time, they would be content with each other.

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The next day, Woape went out to her family's garden to check on the crops. She brushed off any bugs she found, mindful of the baby strapped to her back.

Her fourteen-year-old sister glanced at her from her row of corn. "Are you glad to be back?"

Woape paused and looked at her. "Yes." In some ways. Not in others. But she didn't feel like making the distinction to her.

Her sister scanned the garden for their aunts and grandmother before she approached her. "Was he mean to you?"

"Who?" Woape asked.

"The father of your baby," she whispered.

"No, Onawa. He was very kind."

"So you really married him?"

"I asked Achai to let me explain it when I was ready." She forced aside her irritation with her brother for being a loud mouth. "I need time before I'm ready to talk."

"You were always a puzzle no one could figure out."

She shrugged and went to another cornstalk. "I like to be alone with my thoughts."

She groaned and returned to her row.

Woape considered calling her sister back, but then she decided she didn't wish to tell anyone what happened—at least none of the details—until she could think of Gary without crying. The wounds were still too fresh. Finally, she said, "I'll tell you when I'm ready."

Onawa nodded, looking as if she felt better about that.

Woape couldn't blame her for being hurt. They'd been close. She'd shared her misgivings about marrying Citlali, and her sister had kept her secrets. But her relationship to her sister had changed, just as everything else had. And she knew it was because she, herself, had changed. Woape was no longer the same person she'd been when she ran away. Short of going back in time and

redoing the past, she was stuck with things the way they were—for better or worse.

As she left her row of corn and headed for the squash, someone called her name. She turned and fought the urge to flee back into the cornstalks.

Citlali approached, appearing as serious as she remembered him to be.

At least that was still the same. She took small comfort in that. “You wish to speak to me?” That was a stupid question. Of course he did.

“I thought we might discuss the wedding. You said your husband is dead, correct?”

“Yes.”

“You are certain of this?”

“Of course, I’m certain. I saw Hothlepoya kill him.”

He nodded. “I had to be sure. Someone came by, not too long ago...” He waved his hand. “That doesn’t matter. We should discuss the marriage.”

She took a deep breath and waited for him to continue.

“I see no reason to delay it. We’ve been through the preliminaries. Our families are anxious for the wedding.”

Yes, they were. After all, they arranged the marriage. But first... “Will you accept my child?” She glanced over her shoulder at a sleeping Penelope before she looked back at him.

“Yes. We’ll raise her as one of our own.”

“I want to tell her about her father.”

He indicated his acceptance.

She didn’t know what else to say. Her one reason for avoiding the marriage was to protect Penelope. Shifting from one foot to the other, she tried to think of what she might say to ease the tension. Her gaze turned to the crops where her sister glanced her way. She tried to look at him but found that she couldn’t. He must suspect that she didn’t want to marry him and had run off.

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Or maybe not. She didn't know what he thought, nor did she care to ask. Some things were better left unsaid.

"I thought a week from now might be a good time for the wedding," he finally said.

She gulped. That soon? A breeze blew a stray strand of her hair into her eyes, so she quickly brushed it away. As she did, she chanced a glance in his direction. She couldn't read his expression. He didn't seem to be mad at her. That was good. She had no doubt he'd be nice to her, even if he didn't love her. He'd make a good son-in-law, which would make her father happy. And he'd be good to Penelope. Few men in her tribe would be willing to raise a white man's child. "A week will be fine," she managed to say.

"I'll tell the chief," he replied.

She nodded and watched as he returned to the lodges. For a moment, she recalled the day she and Gary married. Her lips tingled from the memory of the kiss he gave her before he brought her back to town. No such kiss came from Citlali, and she doubted that it ever would. With a heavy heart, she turned back to the garden to continue her work.

Five days later, Julia left the camp after supper so she could wash up in the river. When she finished, she returned to the campfire and noticed that her aunt wasn't there.

"Where did Erin go?" she asked Chogan as she sat across from him.

"She went to take care of personal business."

Nodding, she held her hands out in front of the fire to warm them up. Though it was August, the wind had a chill in it.

He stood up and went to the buggy.

She wondered what he was doing but then decided it wasn't any of her business. Her gaze traveled the length of the

prairie, noting the beautiful shades of pinks that stroked the sky. She caught sight of a rabbit hopping along the land and instantly thought of the times she spent with Chogan trying to master the bow and arrow. She hadn't bothered since she saw her brother again. If they reached the Mandan tribe and if Woape was there and if she apologized to her and Woape forgave her, maybe Gary would too.

When Chogan returned, he brought a blanket with him and draped it over her shoulders. "You look cold." He sat close to her.

"Thank you," she softly spoke and pulled the blanket tight around her despite the sudden heat rushing through her.

"You do not want to hunt?"

He asked her this every evening, and she wondered why he continued to when he already knew she'd say no. She shook her head and stared at the dancing flames in front of her.

"Why?"

Shrugging, she mumbled, "I just don't feel like it."

"You did before we saw your brother."

She noted that he'd made a concentrated effort at saying all the words neatly in the sentence, and she realized he did that to please her, though why he should bother, she didn't know.

"Julia?"

"I'm tired of it."

"That is not true."

A different kind of heat rose up from her neck and into her cheeks. "Then you tell me why," she snapped, giving him a sharp look.

A slight grin crossed his face. "You have much fire in you."

Surprised that he'd say that, she blinked several times and finally turned her attention back to where it had been moments before.

"You are too hard on yourself."

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“How would you know?”

“I can see it...in your eyes. You bear guilt.”

“Yeah well, my brother has a right to hate me. If you knew what I did, you wouldn’t want to talk to me either.”

“You might be surprised.”

She shook her head and closed her eyes. How easy it was for him to say. How easy it was for her aunt to say. But they weren’t there that day when she told those Indians where Woape was—nor did they know the intention in her heart to break up a marriage.

Growing serious, he said, “We all have things we regret.”

She glanced at him in interest. “Do we?”

“I was responsible for the death of my wife.”

Stunned didn’t even begin to explain how she felt at that announcement. All she could do was stare at him and wait for him to continue.

Now he was the one who looked away from her. “We grew up together. As a child, she said she was sick. The medicine man never found the reason. So everyone thought she made it up. She and I married. After two years, I got tired of it. I always went to get medicine man. Each time he said she was not sick. I told her I would not go this time. She said she was in great pain. She said she was going to die if I did not get medicine man. I tell her to go to sleep.” He sighed and swallowed. “She would not be quiet so I yelled at her. Then I left to sleep somewhere else. Next morning, she did not come to make breakfast. I go check on her, and she was dead.” He looked over at her and she caught the hint of regret in his eyes. “The worst part is that I told her I wished I had not married her. I told her I wish she would die. Then I could have a good night’s sleep.”

Julia turned her gaze from him then, unsure of what to say.

“Many nights I wish I could take back my words. I wish I could go and get the medicine man. Maybe she would have died

anyway. But I would have gotten him. I did not like myself. Her family told me I could not have known. They had lost their patience too.”

“So did you forgive yourself?” she whispered.

“In time. But it was not easy.”

She nodded. She could understand that.

“You can’t change the past.”

She looked at her hands as she lightly traced the design on the part of the blanket that rested on her lap. “I’m the one who told those Sioux Indians where Woape was.” She gave a hesitant glance in his direction.

He just sat there and watched her, as if waiting for more.

Taking a deep breath, she finally decided to get it all out. “I knew they wanted her. They asked about her. I told them where she lived. I didn’t like that she was married to my brother. In fact, I hated it. Ever since our parents died, my brother never paid me much attention, and I sacrificed a lot for him. At least, that’s the way I saw it at the time. I just wanted him to like me. It didn’t seem like he ever did. Our parents expected me to take care of him because he’s seven years younger than me. And I did my part. Only, I tried to make him dependent on me. I see now that I was afraid to let him go.”

“Why?” he gently pressed.

“Because I had nothing else in my life to give me meaning. Sure, our aunt took us in, but in a lot of ways, it didn’t feel like he was my brother. I felt as if I stepped in as his mother. I was ten. I was there when the accident happened and the doctor took me in to see her. Our father was already dead. Gary was three, so he was too young to remember. But I saw her and talked to her. Ma told me to take care of Gary. I did the best I could, and as soon as he turned eighteen, he ran off. He didn’t even say he was leaving. He just left a note.”

She clenched the blanket and sniffed back her tears. “He didn’t say where he was going. He just said that he needed to get

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out and find out who he was. He didn't even say he loved me or that he was thankful I did my best to care for him. I hated him after that. And then he returned, out of the blue one day, and he tried to dump a stranger on us. That was Woape. Then I saw that he was treating her better than he ever treated me. It didn't seem fair. I'd spent my entire life trying to take care of him, and he'd just met her."

She let out a low sigh and grew silent for a moment to listen to the crickets. Ever since she was a little girl, she'd sit on the front porch in the evenings, watch the sun go down, and listen to the crickets. And now, more than ever, the sound soothed her swirling emotions. She'd had no such peace after Gary returned home after being gone, but she felt a small part of it returning—probably because someone was actually listening to her instead of telling her what she must feel. And Chogan didn't push her to continue. Even as she noted him watching her out of the corner of her eye, he kept his patience.

Finally, she continued, "They married about a week after they arrived. He couldn't move out fast enough, and I knew it was because he didn't want to be near me. Woape didn't like me either, but who can blame her? I searched for reasons to hate her and found them. I even accused her of trying to poison everyone. But it wasn't poison. As it turns out, it was ground ginger."

He chuckled.

A small smile formed on her lips. "Before I realized that, I slapped her. But she got me good. She shoved my face into a pie." The memory suddenly seemed funny, though it hadn't been at the time. She saw his amused expression and laughed. It felt good to laugh.

"You have fire in you," he softly said.

"So does Woape."

"Not like you."

"Well, you weren't there that day."

“I grew up in same tribe. She has some fire but not like you.”

She shrugged. “Well, she wanted the ginger because she was expecting. I hated her even more for that because suddenly, my aunt was fawning all over her like a mother hen. And I didn’t have a child on the way who would be a new member of the family. How can a woman compete with that? So, when I saw the Indians, I told them where Woape was. All I could think of was how much I wanted to get rid of her. I thought if she wasn’t in our lives any more, then maybe Gary would finally...” She paused and looked at the ascending moon. “I thought he would love me, or at least need me. It was selfishness on my part.”

Venturing another glance in his direction, she added, “I didn’t think they’d try to kill him. But I knew they weren’t nice men. It was the way they talked about Woape. One said she was his property. And I didn’t bother warning anyone. I just went about the day as if nothing unusual happened. Then my aunt said Gary was dead and Woape was going back to her tribe with you, and...” She brushed her tears with the blanket. “It was then I realized the extent of what I’d done. All of my life, I’d gone to church and did as I was told. I prided myself on being a good person. But that day, I saw myself for what I really was, and it wasn’t a pretty sight.”

She put her face in her hands to hide her tears from him. She didn’t like being vulnerable. Bearing her soul was requiring much more of herself than she cared to admit.

He closed the distance between them and placed a comforting hand on her back.

The simple action was intended to make her feel better, and in some ways it did, but it also made her cry harder.

“We all have moments of weakness...where we choose the wrong path.”

“But Gary won’t forgive me.”

Restoring Hope

“Then that is his path. You cannot choose his path. You can only choose yours.”

He was right, of course. It was logical. “But it hurts.”

“Yes. A part will always hurt.”

Wiping her face, she peeked at him from her blanket. “Didn’t you forgive yourself?”

“I did. Forgiveness does not mean pain goes away completely. It means pain is less and joy is more. All of life is a cycle of joy and pain.”

She realized what he meant, and he was right. The damage had been done. She’d have to deal with whatever consequences came from her choices. But, at the same time, she could start making the right decisions. The first thing she needed to do was let Gary go. If he never loved her, then she couldn’t make him. As painful as that was, she would do it.

The familiar steps of her aunt approached.

Julia looked over her shoulder.

Erin smiled. “Dawn comes soon. We better get some sleep.”

After Chogan helped Julia stand, he went to his bedroll.

Erin took Julia by the arm and whispered, “Will you hunt for rabbits tomorrow?”

Despite the cool breeze, her cheeks grew warm. “Maybe.”

“Well, it would be nice to get a break from the jerky.”

Patting her hand, she turned to her own bedroll.

Julia thought to look at Chogan, but then, she decided she’d had enough of her tumbling emotions for one night and got ready for bed.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Woaape took a bath with her child in a secluded spot along the river. The water felt refreshingly cool in the hot August day. She held Penelope and dipped into the gentle current until it reached her chest.

“Now I rinse us off,” she told Penelope.

With her free hand, she cupped a handful of water and poured it over her baby’s thin dark hair. After spending months without regular bathing, it felt like heaven to be clean again. She made sure to come out every day since her return. The simple action of doing this—something she’d done every day before she ran away—was soothing. There was still peace at the river.

Once Woaape finished, she came out of the water and settled Penelope on the blanket so she could dry her off. She took a moment to watch the child who gurgled. Every time she looked at her daughter, she felt as if she still had a direct link to Gary. She leaned forward and kissed Penelope’s forehead. The baby waved her arms and caught Woaape’s hair.

Laughing, Woaape gently pried her fingers away. “You’re stronger than you look.”

Her baby grunted and kicked her legs.

“Yes. You will be a strong one, won’t you?”

Restoring Hope

She slipped a light dress over Penelope before she stood up to put on her own clothes. She recalled the feel of the cotton fabric the white women wore, but she was no longer a part of that world so she donned on her deerskin dress.

When she finished braiding her hair, she gathered her child into her arms, picked up the blanket and comb, and went up the bank until her feet hit the grass. She paused and thought to run back to the safety of the river when she spotted a lone horse rider making his way across the land. Frowning, she wondered why a white man would be going to her tribe.

As he progressed, he slowed his horse. He was a good way off, but not so far that she couldn't call out to him. He wasn't looking in her direction which allowed her the freedom to stare at him. There was something familiar in his stature. If she didn't know better, she think it was...

She couldn't breathe. No, it couldn't be. The dead didn't come back to life. She was seeing things. She wanted so much for Gary to be alive, she was imagining things. Her heart leapt in a mixture of hope and dread.

Penelope wiggled in her arms, but she ignored the child.

What if it's him?

But it can't be!

But what if it is?

It's absurd.

Would it hurt to find out?

Adrenaline shot through her and prompted her to action before she could stop herself. She took a deep breath and yelled, "Gary?" Oh, it was foolish! It wasn't him. It couldn't be him! It was wishful thinking that made her see things. But even as she tried to talk herself out of calling out to him again, she yelled his name a second time. "Gary!"

And he stopped.

She held onto Penelope, absentmindedly stroking the child's head and back. *I'm seeing things. I have to be seeing things.* Her

mother believed in spirits walking around, but Woape hadn't—at least she hadn't considered it until that moment. But no. The man who looked in her direction wasn't a ghost. He was too real to be a ghost.

“Woape?” he called out.

She cried out, tears immediately tracing her cheeks. That voice. She knew that voice! “Gary!”

One second, she was standing still, and in the next, she was running as fast as her feet could take her. She clutched the child to her and pressed forward. He was alive! She didn't know how but he was! He rode in her direction, quickly closing the gap between them, and when their paths intersected, he jumped off the horse and opened his arms to her. She ran into them. He hugged her and kissed her. Though she couldn't stop crying, she returned his kisses. Her husband...her Gary...was here!

“I thought you were dead,” she said once she could speak.

He cupped her face in his hands and smiled at her. “Almost but not quite.”

She laughed and wiped the tears from his face. “It is good to see you. I love you.”

“I love you too, my shadow.”

She didn't know why his nickname for her should make her laugh harder, but it did. The bundle in her arm squirmed. She quickly turned her attention back to their child. “This is your daughter. Her name is Penelope.”

“She's beautiful,” he whispered. “Just like her mother.”

She lifted the child and placed her in his arms. Woape leaned against him, unwilling to break any physical contact with him. Now that he was really here...and alive, she didn't want to be away from him ever again.

“She's tiny,” he said as he studied the baby who stared at him in open wonder.

“You should have seen her when she was born. She was smaller.”

Restoring Hope

“That’s impossible.”

“It’s very possible.”

“I wish I had been there when she was born.”

She wrapped an arm around his waist and caressed their daughter’s cheek. “You’re here now. That’s all that matters. My joy has returned and my life is complete.”

He glanced at her. “Mine is too.”

They stood there for a couple of minutes, and even as she felt him and saw him, she was afraid it was all a dream. She’d been used to nightmares. Though they had decreased in frequency, she still had them from time to time. But she hadn’t once dreamt that Gary would ever be with her again. She tried to shake herself awake, just to be sure this wasn’t a dream, and when her attempts failed, her heart settled. No. It wasn’t a dream. Thankfully, she was wide awake.

“You must be tired and hungry,” Woape said, reluctant to break the comfortable silence. “I’ll fix you something to eat.”

“How long have you been here, back at your tribe?”

Surprised at his question, she replied, “About a week.” Noting the relief on his face, she asked, “Why do you ask?”

“I’ve been here earlier this summer, and the men I talked to said that they didn’t know where you were. For a moment, I thought maybe they were lying.”

“They told you the truth. After I thought Hothlepoya killed you, one from my tribe came and tried to bring me back here, but Hothlepoya found us so I had to run. I did a lot of running until my father found me. Then he brought me and Penelope here.”

“A man named Chogan said he lost you when some Sioux Indians chased you onto a train.”

“Is Chogan alright then?”

“He is. He’s with Julia and Erin.”

She frowned. “But I left your sister and aunt back where we lived.”

“Julia figured out I wasn’t dead, so she joined Chogan and Erin in looking for you and me.”

She didn’t know why Julia should care. She thought Julia would be glad to have her gone, but she gave the matter no more thought. What did it matter now that Gary was here? And at least she could tell everyone that Chogan was safe and on his way home. Chogan’s family would be relieved. They feared Hothlepoya had harmed him.

Gary handed Penelope to her so she took the child in her arms. He wrapped one arm around her waist and led the horse to walk with them. “It sure does feel good to have you back by my side.”

She leaned into him, not in any hurry to get back to her tribe. She wanted to enjoy this moment where she was alone with her husband before they were surrounded by curious family members and friends who’d want all the details on everything that had occurred. Up until then, she hadn’t had the strength to explain it, and they had honored her request to wait. But now that Gary was with her, the heavy burden had been lifted from her shoulders. And she could rejoice in the retelling of the events. The season of tears was finally at an end.

That night, after Woape settled Penelope to sleep, she slipped into bed with Gary. Due to his arrival, her father had given them a bigger room to share. It was meant for her and Citlali, but thankfully, it was for her and Gary instead. And there was nowhere else she’d rather be than with Gary. This was much better than being with Citlali. She couldn’t imagine coming to him with a sense of anticipation. She didn’t realize how much she missed lovemaking until she felt Gary’s naked body press against hers.

Restoring Hope

She never thought she could enjoy a man touching her after Hothlepoya had been with her, but Gary had eased those wounds so they no longer held any power over her. Now, she had the freedom to enjoy the pleasures meant for this moment.

“I missed you,” Gary whispered.

“I missed you too,” she replied.

He brought her closer to him and kissed her.

She let out a soft moan, aware that her body was already ready for him. It seemed the length of time since they’d last been together heightened her awareness of him and made her that much more eager to feel him inside of her. She didn’t think such a sensation would be so overpowering, but it was and she didn’t have the kind of patience required for her to take things slow. Besides, she reasoned, there were going to be more times—many more—so it didn’t matter whether they rushed this one or not.

Careful to keep quiet, she rolled on top of him. She took him inside her and bit her lip, trying not to groan too loud. She didn’t remember it feeling this good.

“Woape.”

His voice almost sounded like a sigh of contentment, but his hands which cupped her breasts and the urgent movement from his hips told her he felt the driving need to continue as well. She took his cue and moved with him, surprised that the tension should mount so quickly and that her release should be as intense as it was. Before the sensations had time to ebb, he gasped and she knew he had joined her in sharing this moment. Her body responded to him in another wave of pleasure.

In slow increments, her body relaxed. Satisfied, she got off of him and snuggled against him. He put his arm around her and kissed the top of her head. He took her hand and pressed it against his heart. She smiled. His heartbeat was sure and strong. Just the way she liked it.

Soon, he fell asleep, but she was too excited to sleep. She wanted to stay awake and enjoy being with her husband again.

She realized that Penelope would wake up in a couple of hours and want to be fed, but what did losing sleep matter? Gary survived Hothlepoya's attack. He'd managed to escape. And now he was with her, loving her in a way no other man could. All she wanted to do was savor this moment in time—and so that is what she did.

Woape knew she'd have to speak with Citlali. He'd been there when she returned with Gary, but they were surrounded by so many people there hadn't been a chance to explain things to him. And as much as she dreaded this, she knew she had to do it. She owed him that much, especially after she ran off the first time they were supposed to wed.

As she left her family's lodge that morning after breakfast so she could take care of the crops with her female relatives, she saw Citlali collecting his bow and arrows, probably getting ready for the hunt. She glanced at Gary and her father who remained seated in the center of the lodge, talking and getting to know each other. Her father cradled the baby and spoke in broken English. The two men seemed to be having a good time, and that made her happy.

“They said you can stay with your husband today.”

Woape turned to her younger sister who came around the side of the lodge, carrying a small basket. “Are you upset with me?” she asked.

Onawa seemed surprised by the question. “No. Your husband is alive and has found you. It's a good thing.”

“That's not what I meant. I meant the decision our father made with Citlali's father, that you will marry Citlali when you turn sixteen.”

Her cheeks grew pink as she broke eye contact with Woape. “I do not oppose the agreement.”

Restoring Hope

“You want to marry him?”

She shrugged. “I can’t think of anyone I’d rather be with.”

Woape breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe things worked out for the best after all. “That’s good. I thought you might think of him the same way I do.”

Her sister looked up at her. “No. But I may not be to his liking.”

“He doesn’t love me. You have nothing to worry about.”

“There isn’t someone else he’d rather marry?”

“I don’t think so. Both he and I grew up being told we would marry. I never heard him talk about wanting to marry anyone else. I think he’s been too involved in hunting to think of other matters, and since he was promised to me, why should he take note of the other young women?”

“I hope he’s not disappointed.”

“Do you want me to ask him? I’m about to go over and talk to him.”

Her eyes grew wide. “No!”

Startled, Woape blinked at the fervent tone in her sister’s voice. “Alright. I won’t.”

She relaxed. “I’d rather think he’s looking forward to it.” Motioning to her empty basket, she said, “I should go. I need to gather some buffalo berries for the meal tonight.”

“I’ll join you soon.”

Nodding, she headed for the shrubs lining the stream close by.

Woape gathered her courage and strode toward Citlali before she lost her nerve. He’d just turned to get his horse ready when she reached him. “May I speak with you for a moment?” She cleared her throat to ward off the shaky tone.

“Yes.”

Again, she couldn’t tell what he was thinking. She hated that. Citlali was never one to show his emotions, and it was hard to decide how she should proceed. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s no reason to be sorry. Your husband is alive. He was the white man who came here, but we didn’t know he was married to you. We didn’t give him much of a chance to talk either. We thought he might mean you harm, as the Sioux did when they came through here looking for you.”

“Yes. About the Sioux...” She picked at the beads around her neck. Should she tell him everything?

“You did not wish to marry me, so you left.”

For a moment, she couldn’t think of how to respond. She hadn’t expected him to come out and say it, nor did she know what to do with his stoic expression. Was he upset, relieved, angry, or happy?

“He makes you happy. You belong to him.”

She didn’t know what else to say, but then again, she rarely knew how to talk to him. At least he accepted it. That was all she could hope for. “Thank you, Citlali. I hope my sister will make you happy.” For her sister’s sake, she didn’t tell him that her sister loved him. Sure, it was more of a childhood crush, but in time, Woape knew it would grow into something more.

“I’m sure she will,” he replied.

Still, Woape could not decipher his feelings. She hoped her sister would be happy with him. “Good luck on the hunt.”

He nodded and turned his attention back to the horse.

As soon as she stepped away from him, she breathed a sigh of relief. It was over. Now she could truly get on with her life.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Three days later, Gary found a spot near the campfire in the center of the tribe and laid out the blanket so Woape could sit. He sat next to her and put his arm around her. Penelope yawned and settled in her arms.

He grinned at Woape. "I think our daughter purposely sleeps early so she can wake us up in the middle of the night."

She giggled and whispered, "You've also woken me up."

"Yes, but I had a good reason," he teased before he kissed her cheek.

Around them, the others found a place to sit on the ground. The air around them was festive. The hunters had returned with two buffalo, and the meal had been one of the best Gary had ever tasted. Now it was time for the hunters to receive the honors due to them.

Not surprising, Citlali seemed to be favored by the chief. In the short time Gary had been there, it occurred to him that Citlali was revered by others in the tribe. On this particular night, he received a new set of bow and arrows.

Then one of the men stood and made an announcement that excited the people.

"What did he say?" Gary whispered.

Woape looked at him. “The Okipe Ceremony will start tomorrow. For four days my people pray for many crops, good health, and an abundance of buffalo.” She smiled. “It is much different than what you’re used to.”

Before he could ask her how it was different, Woape’s brother who hadn’t been far from Citlali since he’d been among the hunters, stood up and ran to the edge of the crowd. It took Gary a moment to realize that his aunt and sister had arrived. Just as the people had surrounded him when he arrived with Woape, now they gathered around the newcomers. He remained still for a moment as he decided what to do.

Woape settled the internal debate for him when she stood up.

He joined her and got ready to lead her to them when his aunt managed to escape the crowd who excitedly asked Chogan questions. He couldn’t recall a time when he saw Aunt Erin move as fast as she did, but the woman came up to them before he had time to blink and hugged them both at once.

“You’re safe! We were so worried!” Erin took a step back and wiped the tears from her eyes. “If this doesn’t make my year, nothing will.” She patted Gary on the arm before turning her attention to Woape. “How are you doing, dear? How is your child? Did you have a girl or a boy?”

Woape laughed. “A girl. Her name is Penelope, and I am doing well. Gary’s alive.”

“Yes. Julia figured it out a few days after you left.”

At the mention of Julia’s name, Gary sensed the tension in the air. All he could think of was what she told him when he found her with their aunt and Chogan on the deserted prairie. *“I’m sorry, Gary. I’m so sorry. I told those Indians where Woape was because I wanted her to leave. It’s all my fault. Can you forgive me?”* He wanted to forgive her. It should be easy since Woape was alive and yet... He didn’t know how to let that go.

Restoring Hope

His aunt, it seemed, noticed that Julia was a sore spot for him since she hesitated a moment before changing the topic. “Your baby is beautiful. May I hold her?”

Woape nodded and gently placed the child in her arms.

Erin grinned from ear to ear as she held Penelope. “I have to admit that I never thought I’d see the day Gary settled down and had a child. He was such a free spirit.”

Gary pulled Woape close to his side and told her, “My aunt was sure that if I got married, I’d be happier than when I roamed the countryside, and I’ll be darned if she wasn’t right.”

Woape’s cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink that was almost undetectable in the firelight.

A round of laughter drifted from the spot a good twenty yards from where they stood. Gary glanced in the direction where Chogan animatedly told those around him something in the Mandan language. Gary could only pick out a few words, but nothing made sense. Chogan spoke much too fast. He also motioned to Julia who looked uncomfortable.

Gary understood why. His sister was shy in the presence of strangers, and without their aunt right there, it didn’t help matters at all. He sighed. So maybe a part of him was still angry that she told Hothlepoya where Woape was. Maybe a part of him would always be that way, but she did make an effort to make amends. The least he could do was honor that.

“I should go talk to Julia,” he told his wife and aunt.

With the baby in one arm, Erin reached out and touched his elbow before he could leave. “Go easy on her, Gary. She’s been through a lot.”

“She wouldn’t have been through it if she’d left well enough alone.” He immediately regretted the sharp tone in his voice when he saw his aunt wince. “I’m sorry. I’ll try to be nice.”

“Either be nice or don’t go over there. The poor thing’s paid her dues. She spent many nights softly crying. She doesn’t

think I know but I heard her. There's only so much guilt a person can take."

Not wishing to make what was a nice reunion with his aunt unpleasant, he gave a stiff nod. He kissed Woape before he headed over to his sister who had her arms wrapped protectively around herself. She seemed startled when she saw him coming in her direction. She even inched closer to Chogan.

The men and women quieted.

Taking that as his cue, Gary asked Julia, "May I speak to you?"

She didn't answer right away, and Chogan straightened, as if ready to protect her if she needed it, but she finally approached Gary. "Where do you want to talk?"

Glancing around, he found a vacant spot by one of the earthen lodges. "Over there?"

She swallowed but nodded.

The walk to the private area was awkward. He realized that she was just as uncertain as him, and that surprisingly made him feel better. For the first time in his life, his older sister wasn't an authority figure. Now, she actually seemed like an equal.

He waited until she sat on the ground before joining her. After a quick internal debate on how to proceed, he ventured, "I don't want there to be any hard feelings between us. I know we've had our troubles in the past and what with Woape..." He sighed. "I understand you feel bad about what you did to her, but I don't want that to happen again."

"It won't," she quickly said. "I've learned my lesson."

"It doesn't have to be a lesson, Julia. It just has to be something someone does to protect another person. I love Woape, and I don't like knowing you wanted to get rid of her. She's done nothing to you."

"I know. I know all of this...now." She brought her knees up to her chest and hugged her legs. "It's just hard for me, that's all."

Restoring Hope

“What’s hard?”

“Seeing you with her. Seeing you with Aunt Erin. Seeing you with anyone who’s not me. You can’t stand me.”

“That’s not true.”

“No?” She glanced at him, clearly not believing him.

“No. Sure, I’m mad, but I’ll get over it. I see that you’re sorry. I know you don’t lie. I believe you won’t do anything to harm Woape again.” He paused, carefully thinking over what he needed to say. “If you want to be a part of my life, then I want to be treated like an adult. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“Yes, you are. I’m sorry about that too.”

With her soft confession, the tension lifted, and he felt much better. “Let’s make a fresh start, alright? As adults?”

She finally made eye contact with him and smiled. “I’d like that, Gary. I should apologize to Woape.”

He stood up and helped her to her feet. “I think Woape would like that, and you should see your niece.”

Her eyes grew wide. “I’m an aunt?”

A chuckle rose in his throat. “Didn’t that ever occur to you when Woape was expecting?”

“Well, no. Not really. I mean, it did to a point but I didn’t really think about it.”

“Now you know. You’re an aunt, and your niece’s name is Penelope.”

She walked beside him as they went toward the place where their aunt and Woape sat, fussing over the baby. “That’s a nice name, but why didn’t she choose an Indian one?”

“Apparently, a woman by the name of Penelope helped her and delivered the baby, so she wanted to remember her.”

When they reached the women, Woape turned her gaze to Julia—almost seeming hesitant.

“I’m sorry, Woape,” Julia said. “I’ve done and said things to you that I shouldn’t have.” She glanced at Gary, as if asking him how much he wanted her to tell Woape.

“She already knows about the Sioux. I told her,” he replied.

Julia wiped the palms of her hands on her skirt and nodded. “I’m sorry, Woape. I won’t do anything like that again. And I promise to be nice to you for now on.”

Woape patted the spot next to her. “Come and sit. We will talk.”

Looking relieved, Julia obeyed.

As Gary chose his spot to sit, he caught the unspoken ‘thank you’ in his aunt’s eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The next evening, Julia's sense of unease increased as three men covered in red paint sat before a drum covered in buffalo-hide. She glanced at Gary and Woape who sat on the other side of Erin. To her surprise, Gary didn't seem startled by the sight of three scantily clad Indians. Maybe Woape warned him about this... What did Woape call it? An Okipe Ceremony? Julia glanced at her aunt who also glanced back at her, looking equally startled. Well, at least her aunt was just as horrified as she was.

Julia didn't feel it was appropriate to look back at those men. Not with the way they were dressed. Amulets on wrists, elbows, knees, and ankles did nothing to detract from their bare chests. Why, even their legs were exposed! There was so little covering their private areas. Her face flushed with mortification. Her gaze fell to the opening of the lodge. She wondered if she could slip out unnoticed.

The three men sat in front of the drum, and she breathed a sigh of relief. At least now she couldn't see everything—or just about everything. Two men were called out from the group gathered in the lodge, and she recognized Chogan's name among them.

Chogan and another man—whom she thought was Citlali, if she remembered the name right—stood beside the singers and took a rawhide rattle. A man she'd heard someone call the "Maker" placed a pipe and a ball of pemmican in front of the roll of rawhide. Then the three barely dressed men began singing while Citlali and Chogan shook the rattles.

Julia shifted on the ground, still doing her best to avoid looking at the singers. Her gaze fell on the group of people who watched with avid interest.

After four songs, Chogan and Citlali divided the pemmican while the singers took turns smoking the pipe.

"Hoitahe, ihike kedehosh! Kamiseka, ihike kedehosh!" their leader called out.

Julia looked at Woape to see if she would give them insight into what the man was saying.

As if she understood, Woape leaned across Gary and whispered to Erin and Julia, "He says the pipe is going." After another man spoke, she added, "That one tells the Maker to get the pipe."

The Maker approached the leader of the singers and ran his hands slowly down the length of the pipe. Then he took it and refilled it before he set it on the buffalo costumes.

"The dancers will wear those," Woape whispered.

The singers picked up their own black stone pipes to smoke.

Then their leader cried out, "Numak-mahana, pke mawa-hadhata!"

"He says to move the Turtle," Woape explained.

"A turtle?" Erin quietly asked.

"Not a real turtle," Woape replied. "Tonight, the drum covered in buffalo hide represents the Turtle drums. Those drums are sacred to my people. They will use those for the next three days instead of that one."

Restoring Hope

As the man representing Numak-mahana moved the buffalo drum to the left, the singers followed. Then some of the onlookers began to vocalize strange utterances that Julia didn't understand. The effect trickled across the lodge as more and more people raised their hands toward the medicine bundles. She glanced at her aunt who looked as overwhelmed as she felt. She gripped a handful of her skirt in her hands. Just what were they going to do?

Chogan and Citlali resumed their role of shaking the rattles and the Maker laid the pipe and pemmican before the drum. The singers began a new song. While the drum got passed around, the utterances grew louder until half the people cried out in anguish and convulsed.

Oh this was it! She couldn't take any more! Bolting to her feet, she fled out of the lodge, not caring who she stumbled over along the way. She made it out into the clear night sky and kept running until she was as far from that lodge as she could get without escaping the confines of the tribe.

"Julia!" someone called after her.

She was too out of breath to answer, but she turned to see her aunt coming after her. By the time her aunt reached her, she finally managed, "I'm not going back in there, and there's nothing you can say to make me."

Her aunt gasped for air and set her hand over her heart. "Who said anything about going back?" She took a moment to inhale before adding, "I wished you waited for me."

"What are they doing in there?" She glanced back at the lodge where voices of those crying out—whether in pain or joy she couldn't tell—could be heard even from the remotest parts of the tribe.

"I think Woape said this ceremony is to ask their gods for good health and abundant crops."

What a contrast to what Julia was used to in church. Shivering, she wrapped her arms around herself.

“Are you cold?”

“No. Just spooked.”

“It looks like Chogan’s coming this way.”

Julia considered running off again. She didn’t want to deal with him right now. She didn’t want to deal with anyone, except her aunt. The kind of thing she just saw... Well, she needed time to settle her nerves. “Go over to him and tell him I’m not in the right frame of mind to talk.”

“You’re going to have to talk to him sooner or later, and it might as well be sooner. There’s no sense in giving him hope if there is none.”

“Hope?” Whatever did her aunt mean by that?

“I’m going to Woape’s lodge. My poor heart can only take so much excitement. Let me know what you decide tomorrow morning.”

An uneasy feeling welled up in Julia’s stomach. She didn’t want to go through this. It was something she feared was coming, though there had been that small chance she had misunderstood what Chogan thought of her...and what she thought of him. With a quick glance around, she was assured that there were enough Indians outside so that no one would think her meeting with Chogan would lead to anything it shouldn’t. Not that she would dream of doing anything improper, but she recalled the scandal in her town. Poor Jane never did live down that shame.

Chogan approached.

Fighting the urge to escape, she straightened her back.

“I should have told you,” he said. “Okipe Ceremony can be...loud. You not use to it?”

“No, I’m not. It’s different from what I grew up with.”

“Different can be good. You need time to be familiar with Mandan ways.”

Another round of shrieking came from the lodge. There was no way she could ever get familiar with that. “I don’t think so,” she softly said before she looked away from him.

Restoring Hope

“It is not hard. You are welcome here.”

She'd been able to avoid the decision up to this point, what with Woape and Gary and all. But she couldn't avoid it any more. “I thought about it,” she softly admitted. “Gary's staying. He fits in well here.” She took a deep breath. This was harder than the time when she told Ernest she couldn't marry him. “I don't belong here.” There. She said it. And even as she thought she should feel relieved, she didn't.

“You can. You have a place here. With me.” He stepped closer to her, and her heart sped up as it always did when he neared. “It is custom to give you gifts when I ask you to be my wife. If you wait, I get them now.”

“No!”

He stopped in mid-turn and looked at her with an apprehensive expression on his face.

She took a deep, shaky breath and wiped her sweaty palms on her skirt. Really, she didn't anticipate having to do this twice in her lifetime, and this time was much worse because a part of her wanted to throw caution to the wind and agree. But as she scanned the area and listened to the noise coming from the lodge, it dawned on her just how different their worlds were. She just couldn't be a part of this. It wasn't her. And maybe if she married him, she wouldn't mind that tomorrow or even a month from now, but someday she'd wake up and realize this was a big mistake.

“I'm going to leave in a week with my aunt,” she finally said, crossing her arms and staring at the ground.

For the longest time, neither of them spoke, and she wondered if she should walk back to Woape's lodge or wait for him to respond. She didn't really want to stand there and wait, but a part of her couldn't bear to leave him either. Oh, she hated this! Why did he have to live here? Then an idea came to her.

Daring a tentative look in his direction, she said, “You could come with us.”

He winced. “No. My place is here. There are few Mandan left. We cannot afford to lose more.”

Her heart plummeted. And so that was it. She didn’t belong in his world any more than he belonged in hers. They’d crossed paths for a moment in time, and now it was time to separate. She turned from him, unwilling for him to see how much this affected her. Not everything worked out. There were no promises of happy endings in this life. Her aunt, after all, had had her share of heartache. And now, it seemed, that it was her turn. Julia closed her eyes. Even the night breeze couldn’t cool the sting of the hot tears that made their way down her face.

When he spoke, she noted the hint of regret in his voice. “I hope you say good-bye before you leave.”

His footsteps receded, but she didn’t dare look back. No. She had to keep her focus on what was in front of her. Just as she had with Ernest. She gritted her teeth and fought for the strength to stop crying. No, this wasn’t like the time with Ernest. She’d been fond of Ernest. He’d been a fleeting passion. But after the times she’d shared with Chogan, she suspected she’d never be the same again. And that made this much, much worse.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It was five days later when Woape heard the war cry echo through her tribe. She bolted up in bed and lifted Penelope who'd fallen asleep while nursing. The child stirred but didn't wake.

Gary sat up and grabbed his clothes.

"You're not going," she whispered.

"I have to," he quietly said as he slipped into his pants.

"No! I don't want to lose you again."

As he shrugged into his shirt, he replied, "This is my home now. I have to do what I can to protect it."

Her stomach tensed. He was right. She knew he was right. There was no honor in a man hiding when the tribe needed him, but it pained her to watch as he gathered his gun and checked the chamber for bullets. The night when Hothlepoya came to their home came to the forefront of her mind. It seemed like a lifetime ago, considering everything that had happened since, and yet, it hadn't been that far in the past—not even a year ago.

Fear gripped her heart. What if Hothlepoya had returned? She recalled how he said that everything he acquired would always belong to him, even if he had to track it down for the rest of his life. Bile rose in her throat. God, no. It couldn't be Hothlepoya.

But who else could it be? Her people were at peace with the other two tribes in the area.

She quickly swaddled Penelope into a blanket in hopes the child wouldn't wake and cry. The last thing she needed was for Hothlepoya to find her child. He'd use Penelope against her if he could. She had to hide her. Gary removed the bar and opened the door. Her father, brother, and uncles were busy gathering their weapons. She caught sight of Erin and Julia who had left their room to see what was going on.

Gary turned to Woape and kissed her. "I love you."

"I love you too," she said, hating how final it sounded. "You come back to me."

He smiled. "I survived before, and I will again."

She hoped he was right. As he left their room, she followed him but stopped when she reached the entrance. Erin, Julia, her sister, and her aunts joined her. The sight of all able-bodied men rushing for battle was an eerie one.

"I think Hothlepoya's coming for me," she tentatively told the women. "He's marked me as his property, and he hates that I escaped."

The shrieks coming from the invading tribe as they moved into the fence protecting the tribe were all too familiar. Sioux. And the high pitch was Hothlepoya's trademark.

Penelope squirmed in her arms, and in that instant, Woape turned to one of her aunts. "Take her. If he finds me, he won't know she's mine."

"You're not going out there to him," Julia insisted.

"No, but I can't risk my daughter's life," she replied.

An old man hurried over to them. "There's a good twenty of them. Go to the main lodge. The men can't keep the invaders back much longer."

Her aunts and Erin obeyed but Woape noticed that Julia stayed behind with her. "What are you doing?"

Restoring Hope

Julia watched as the women met up with the other women, children and elderly who were assembling into the lodge where their chances for safety were better. Julia looked over her shoulder and darted to the stall which held the horses. She picked up a bow and arrow that had fallen to the floor. Julia glanced at Woape. “I handed you over to him before. I won’t do that again.”

“You don’t know how bad things can get with Hothlepoya.”

“Maybe not. I have an idea though, and that counts for something.”

“You should hide.”

“I was going to tell you the same thing. He’s coming for you, not me.”

“We both hide.”

While Julia ran to huddle behind the edge of the stall, Woape found a new buffalo hide hanging along the wall. She couldn’t hide under a bed. Hothlepoya found her there once, so he’d look there first. The area was dark but she worried he’d detect her figure. Maybe if she held her breath and stayed still, he’d scan her over and miss her.

She closed her eyes and focused on slowing her breathing. The lodge muffled most of the war cries, but she could envision it vividly in her mind. Arrows and spears reaching their mark and wounding or killing the intended victims. The invaders taking enough time to scalp the fallen before they moved onto their next prey. The less able-bodied men surrounding the entrance of the central lodge, ready to defend those inside.

Even if Hothlepoya made it a habit of invading every tribe he came across, she couldn’t help but think this particular night was her fault. She never should have run away. She’d brought too much destruction upon others through her careless actions. If she could go back... But then, what of Gary and Penelope?

Someone stepped into the lodge. Woape tensed and held her breath. The person moved slowly. From where she stood, she could only see through a thin opening where the hide rested against the wall. And that didn't show her anything except a trace of moonlight shining through the hole in the ceiling.

The person didn't say anything as he checked the divided rooms. His movements were purposeful and quiet—a classic Hothlepoya technique. He could search while hearing everything that happened in the lodge, and he must have suspected that someone was hiding. The buffalo hoofs rattled from the door as he departed from another empty bedroom. He was close to the horse which neighed.

“A fine horse,” he mumbled. “A good prize.”

The door to the stall opened and the horse departed from it.

“Akash,” he called out. “Take this animal. Mark it as mine.”

“Yes, Hothlepoya,” the man replied as he ran into the lodge.

“Take it to the other horses when you're done.”

“Yes.” Then he took the horse out of the lodge.

A moment of dreaded silence passed before a low chuckle rose from Hothlepoya's throat. “What do we have here?”

Woape recognized Julia's startled gasp. She dared a peek around the edge of the hide and saw Hothlepoya snatch the bow and arrow from Julia and toss them aside.

He leaned forward and lifted her by the throat so that her feet couldn't touch the ground. “White woman,” he snarled. “Filthy.”

Julia dug her fingernails into his wrist and kicked at him, but he tightened his hold on her neck.

“Behave,” he warned in a cold voice. “I did not come for a filthy white woman. I came for Woape. Where is she?”

Restoring Hope

She struggled to breathe so the muscles in his hand relaxed. After a cough, she squeaked out, "I don't know."

"You lie." Then he threw her to the ground.

She tumbled toward the center of the lodge and coughed.

When Woape saw him pull out the axe hanging around his waist and approach Julia, she decided this had gone far enough. She refused to let someone else die because of her. "Don't!" Even though her voice shook, it rang clear in the lodge.

Hothlepoya stopped and glanced over his shoulder.

With a hard swallow, Woape emerged from her hiding place, feeling small and weak. The week she'd spent with him came rushing back to her. The whip and rope... The dread she felt that night he chose to have her go to his teepee... Foraging for food without being able to rest... The time she'd spent with Gary had eased those painful memories which now came crashing down on her like a heavy weight.

"Where's the child?" he demanded in a low voice.

Taking a deep breath, she said, "There is no child."

He neared her and she instinctively stepped back, but he reached out and grabbed her by the arm. "Don't play games with me. I saw that you were carrying a child before you escaped on the train."

Despite her trembling, she shook her head. "The child didn't make it. He died in childbirth."

He narrowed his eyes at her as if studying her for any sign that she might be lying. Then he slowly scanned the circumference of the lodge.

Julia sat on the floor further from where she had landed and watched them. Under her skirt was something she was trying to hide.

Woape's gaze focused in on the edge of the bow. She could only guess that an arrow was behind Julia's back. Before Hothlepoya looked in Julia's direction, Woape said, "He is not here! A baby will not stay silent for this long."

As she hoped, that got his attention.

He tightened his hold on her, making her grit her teeth. “I saw the baby items by your bed.”

“That’s not my bed,” she lied, wincing as he applied more pressure. Her arm started to go numb. “That is my sister’s child.”

“You lie!” He grabbed her other arm and shook her. “No women were with child when I came here before. I thought you had learned by now that it’s dangerous to lie to me.” He released one of her arms and drew back his hand to slap her when he froze.

It took her a moment to realize he wasn’t going to strike her after all. Trembling, she lifted her eyes to his and saw the life force in them fading. Then he crumpled to the floor on his side. Gasping for breath, Woape glanced from the arrow sticking out of his back and to Julia who stood with the bow in her hand, standing there as if she expected him to jump back up. But he didn’t, and he wouldn’t.

Woape’s eyes met Julia’s. “He’s dead.” Even as she said it, tears of relief sprang to her eyes. Hothlepoya was dead! He would no longer be a threat to her or her child.

“I...I can’t believe I actually did it,” Julia stammered, her eyes still wide with shock.

Woape gingerly walked over his body and ran up to Julia so she could hug her. “Thank you,” she whispered, blinking as more tears found their way down her cheeks. “Thank you.”

Julia returned her hug.

Gary rushed into the lodge, out of breath but looking happy. “We won! They’re retreating.” He stopped when he reached them. “Am I dreaming?”

Woape laughed and released Julia. “Your sister protected me and killed Hothlepoya.” She pointed to the Sioux’s dead body.

“It was a lucky shot,” Julia said with a shrug.

“Is that what you call ‘lucky?’” Gary chuckled and shook his head. “Who knew that you had it in you to be a warrior?”

Restoring Hope

She blushed. "I wouldn't exactly call myself a warrior."

Woape smiled. "A warrior does not have to be a man. Those who risk their lives for the sake of others are warriors."

Cheers from outside the lodge interrupted them.

"I think there will be a celebration tonight," Woape said. She wouldn't have to worry about Hothlepoya anymore. Now, they would burn his body and put to rest all the bad memories associated with him. And finally, she didn't have to live with that lingering fear that had haunted her for the past year.

Gary wrapped one arm around Woape's shoulders and the other around Julia's shoulders. "Let's tell them we got Hothlepoya in here. And," he added, looking at his sister, "I'm sure they'll want to give you something for killing him. There'll be no hiding from this celebration, no matter how loud things get."

Julia seemed uneasy, so Woape said, "I'm surprised that worries you when you can kill a Sioux."

"Well," Julia began, "it was just you and me."

Gary rolled his eyes but grinned. "Julia's never been much for a crowd. Even if that's the case, you deserve to receive your very first feather."

In good spirits, Woape joined them and left the lodge to enjoy the rest of the celebration.

Woape watched as Julia tucked her feather into her travel bag which rested on the bed. "Chogan will miss you," she softly said.

She glanced away before she picked up the bag. "I'll miss him too."

"So, you will not stay?"

She shook her head.

There didn't seem to be anything left to say on that matter, so Woape left it alone. Instead, she approached Julia. "I'd like to give you this." She opened her hand and showed her sister-

in-law the necklace. “In my culture, glass beads are highly esteemed. I made this for you to represent our friendship.”

A smile spread across Julia’s face as she took it. “Thank you. It’s beautiful.”

“Let me put it on.”

Julia handed it back to her and turned so Woape could fasten it around her neck. “It is custom among my people that a father who is proud of his daughter will take an ornament made of these beads and have the medicine man place them in her hair until she’s given in marriage. Then it is removed.” She finished the task and waited for Julia to face her before she continued. “I thought I’d make my own custom for you. I’m happy to have you as my friend, and it is my prayer you find love.”

“Thank you, Woape. It’s lovely.” She touched her necklace.

“You are always welcome here.”

“And you are always welcome in my home.”

The women smiled at each other before they departed from the small bedroom. Erin held Penelope and talked to Gary. As soon as they approached the entrance, Erin handed Penelope back to Woape.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to take you two back home?” Gary asked Erin.

“No,” she replied. “That buggy is worn out from the trek down here. Besides, we were due for a new one anyway. A ride to the train station is all we need.”

He shrugged. “Alright. It’s up to you.”

They departed for the buggy that was ready for them, and Woape’s father walked up to them and handed Erin a rolled up package of food. “For the trip,” he explained.

One by one, the people surrounded them to wish Erin and Julia a safe trip back. All but one. Woape noticed Chogan standing off to the side, just watching everything—and probably wondering if he made the right choice.

Restoring Hope

Maybe it was superstitious on her part, but Woape had taken some of those beads from Chogan's mother, thinking maybe it would somehow bring him and Julia back together someday. But that day was not today, and Woape didn't put her faith into wishful thinking so who knew what the future would hold?

Woape turned her attention to Erin and gave her a hug.

"I'm glad Gary found you," Erin whispered. "A good woman is a blessing to a man." She released her and dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. "It was good to come here and see where you grew up." She chuckled at Penelope and tapped the baby's nose. "And you be good to your parents. Don't give them a hard time."

Woape laughed, even as tears came to her own eyes. It seemed that she'd done a lot of crying over the past year, but it was nice to have tears of joy. "We'll see each other again, Erin."

"Of course, we will." She patted Woape on the shoulder and got into the buggy with Julia.

Gary came over to Woape and gave her a kiss. "I'll be back soon, my shadow."

"You better," she replied.

"Oh, I will. You should know by now that I'd defy even death itself to be with you." He leaned forward and gave Penelope a kiss on the forehead before he went to the buggy.

The sight of him squeezing into the buggy with his aunt and sister made her laugh. It definitely wasn't meant to seat three adults, but they'd manage for the short trip to town.

Woape joined the others in waving as Gary picked up the reins and the horses moved forward.

Penelope cooed.

"Your father will be back," she whispered. "He'll be back."

As soon as the buggy was out of sight, Woape turned to join her sister in handling the chores for the day.

Coming 2011

Brave Beginnings



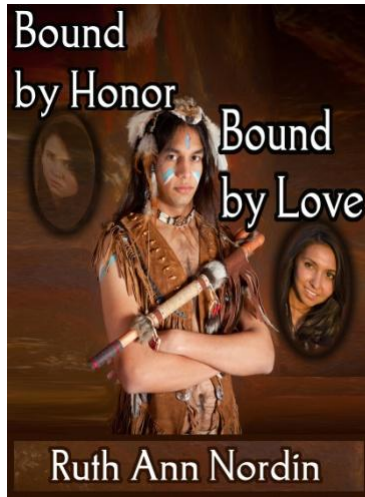
cover made by Bonnie Steffens

When Julia Milton refused to stay at the Mandan tribe to be Chogan's wife, she assumed that was the last she'd see of him. After moving to Bismarck with her aunt, she meets up with Ernest Freeman who had once asked her to marry him. Just when she decides to see what could have been with him, Chogan comes back into her life. But will she choose the safe and familiar world or go where her heart leads?



Also Coming 2011

Bound By Honor, Bound By Love



cover made by Bonnie Steffens

The day Onawa eagerly anticipated has finally come. She is to be Citlali's wife. But in the back of her mind, she worries that he wishes she were her older sister instead. Will her marriage be one of duty or see the fruits of love?

Or you can read both stories as I write their first drafts on my WordPress blog at <http://ruthannnordin.wordpress.com/>.