

*Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage
must in time be utterly lost,
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night
incessantly softly wash again and ever again,
this soiled world;
For my enemy is dead,
a man divine as myself is dead.*

Walt Whitman

Introduction

After a chilling winter of bitter winds and bottomless snows, the aging forest of giant trees was laden with misshapen saplings and tangled underbrush. Although the debris-littered forest was a tough course to navigate on horseback, the broad leaves of late spring provided a welcome canopy of cool shade from the midday sun as well as an impenetrable cloak of secrecy.

It was a watercolor painting of both eerie seclusion and peaceful serenity with sun-dappled ferns nestled among the decaying logs and bright green moss clinging to the scattered rocks and gnarled tree trunks.

Suddenly, a spotted deer froze and gazed up in distrust at a passing rider and horse. A serious young woman, perhaps in her early twenties, momentarily stopped her mount and stared at the fawn. *Maybe the deer is an omen*, the woman thought curiously. Shrugging off the random notion, she suddenly tapped her knees against her horse's mange-scarred belly and rode on.

Aside from the quiet hoof beats and panting breaths of the weary horse threading its way through the rubble, the only other sounds were two plump squirrels chattering as they feverishly raced through the rustling leaves and the rippling of an icy mountain creek as it trickled over a panorama of sun splashed rocks.

Ducking under some low hanging tree limbs, the young woman leaned over her stocky mare's coarse black mane, which was a stark contrast to its mottled tan coat. Her mount was a poor piece of horseflesh to be sure, but the woman didn't seem to notice as she contentedly breathed in the earthy smells of damp, decaying wood and mud after a recent rainfall. The sights and smells of the forest were wonderfully familiar, and she briefly smiled and allowed herself a fleeting moment of pleasure.

Then it was back to business. As the young woman determinedly rode her mount over the unforgiving terrain, she gave the impression of being an expert rider with a maturity well beyond her years. It was remarkable how she cautiously

stayed the challenging course. A less experienced rider might have taken the broad and less strenuous, sunny trail through the mountain pass about a mile north. But past experience had shown the woman it was risky not to remain shrouded in the dark shadows from those who might intentionally harm her.

In the 1870s, the Montana Territory was a wild and woolly country filled with hearty mountain men, trappers, gutsy settlers, a smattering of cavalrymen and forts, and migrating Indians. Many bands of Native Americans from different tribes had journeyed westward to escape the alarming spread of the white man's settlements. More and more Indian bands dotted the rough landscape with tepees, but many were enemies after centuries of hostility. Because countless bands were suddenly boxed in and pressed into an overcrowded and smoldering geographical area, it was only a matter of time before the melting pot of frustration, resentment, and anger would boil over.

As these bands competed for their main source of sustenance, the dwindling buffalo on the Plains, it became survival of the fittest. Native Americans were not only pitted against other tribes but white settlers as well. Intertribal skirmishes as well as full-fledged battles with the white man were on the increase. When left with no other alternative to prevent the complete destruction of their way of life, some of the larger tribes began forming strategic alliances with enemy tribes. The Northwest had evolved into a complicated chessboard of tactical alliances which would one day determine the outcome of continual checkmates.

If the solitary white woman was afraid of traveling alone through hostile Indian country, she didn't show it. For one so young, her life had not been without sorrow and hardship. Through the years, she had mastered masking her emotions and veiling her thoughts under a facade of gritty independence. Instead of projecting fear, she displayed an uncompromising demeanor of self-reliance and resourcefulness. Not only did it appear she felt at ease in the wilds, but her unflinching bearing seemed to say, *Stay away from me.*

Although the woman took every precaution to conceal her femaleness, the deception was only successful at a distance. Although she was on the small side of medium, her stoic posture gave a tall appearance that was uncommonly graceful and long-limbed. One might even say her wisps of honey brown hair and sun tinted skin made her appear comely in an outdoorsy way.

On the other hand, her tenacity would probably have discouraged all but the strongest suitors of the opposite sex. One steely glance from her stubborn eyes would have made most men hightail it to an easier conquest. Although she might have been a desirable female in some respects, her remoteness and resilient determination made her an untouchable enigma.

To appear more masculine, the woman's long brown hair was coiled in an untidy bun fastened with a brass clip. Most of it was stuffed under a wide-brimmed

leather cowboy hat trimmed with ornamental pheasant feathers. In a further attempt to disguise her origins, the woman's buckskin clothing was plain and unadorned without any tribal beading.

From faraway, it was impossible to tell if the rider was a leggy cowboy or a skinny Indian scout from Fort Laramie in the Wyoming Territory. The latter category frequented the mountains, and Native American scouts typically chose to wear hats instead of traditional Indian breath feathers. The rider's fringed buckskin pants suggested an Indian heritage, but with no ornamentation on the saddle, clothing, or moccasins, the rider's tribe would remain a mystery. Although the stranger's skin was pale when compared to the rich sunbaked color of Native American skin, the person's complexion was tan enough not to give away any ethnicity.

Another detail one would notice was that the rider of the mangy horse was sufficiently armed and apparently ready to use the weapons if challenged. A combination bow and quiver was strapped diagonally across the stranger's back, and there were plenty of arrows if one missed its target. The rider also had a nasty-looking, curved hunting knife, which was carved from a buffalo bone and shaped like a machete. It was visibly anchored on a belted waist and stained with dried blood. Only the rider would know the caked blood was from animals hunted for food.

The stranger had obviously been traveling awhile. She had a well-worn, dusty bedroll tied up somewhat sloppily, a rumpled saddlebag stuffed with a buffalo paunch and cooking utensils, and an oversized canteen, which she filled each time she ventured near a fresh mountain stream. Because she carried a large supply of buffalo jerky and pemmican, which was a dried mixture of buffalo meat and pounded berries, it also appeared she had a few more days to go before reaching her destination.

One could conclude by her direction that she was heading away from most white settlements and further into the backwoods. If a cavalry unit from Fort Laramie crossed her path, the soldiers would have been shocked to find a solitary white woman tempting fate in volatile Indian country. It would not have been surprising if they forced her to accompany them back to civilization. Worse yet, if an Indian war party discovered her, all guesses were off. Although the woman appeared capable, there was always the possibility of being captured or killed. A betting man, however, might put his money on the resourceful woman under any circumstance.

Aside from her unfaltering appearance, the most unusual thing about the young woman was the intensity of a strange pattern of obsessive behavior. Every few miles, she would pause to give her muscular, but scruffy mustang pony a rest. Then she would expertly dismount and examine her surroundings, looking for

traces of other humans or animals. It became apparent she was skilled in tracking as she checked tree markings, broken bushes, and prints in the ground as well as evidence of campfires, crushed underbrush, refuse, and defecation. Someone had taught her well the skills of an Indian tracker.

After making sure she was temporarily out of danger, the young woman carried out the exact same routine she had done the previous hour. First, she unfolded a map of the terrain, which was illustrated and written in English. After returning it to a pocket in her poncho, she reached into her tattered saddlebag for a cowhide folder, which was rectangular and shaped for holding important documents.

Gingerly, the young woman opened the worn leather folder and reverently extracted a folded piece of paper. From a distance, it looked like yellowed newsprint. As if confirming her reason for traveling and rededicating herself to her mission, her pale green eyes scanned a faded news article. Then as if she were stroking the paper in a soft caress, her fingertips lightly brushed a black and white engraving of an Indian warrior.

Staring proudly from the page, the stern Indian was dressed in his finest ceremonial clothing including a headdress of breath feathers, a ribbed white vest made of bleached elk antlers, and white intricately beaded buckskin pants. After briefly smiling at the engraving with a mixture of regret and pain, the woman tenderly replaced the article in its protective cover.

After performing the same ritual every hour day after day, she bowed her head in prayer, made the sign of the cross, and then looked expectantly at the blue sky inching through the shrouded trees. Only then did she take a deep, determined breath. After exhaling forcefully, the woman resolutely remounted her horse and nudged the mare with her knees in the way of an Indian. Filled with a renewed sense of purpose, the solitary rider once again began her strenuous journey and threaded her way through the eerie shadows of the darkening forest.

*If the stars should appear but one night every thousand years,
how man would marvel and stare.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

PART ONE

Chapter One

The stars in the midnight sky flickered like shimmering crystal pendants on a chandelier. It was exquisitely beautiful and startlingly peaceful. Reminding her of her distant childhood, Amanda vaguely recalled the breathtaking chandeliers in the fancy stores of downtown Chicago. For a moment, she could see elegant carriages and hear the sound of hoof beats echoing on the cobbled streets. All at once, the bustling picture vanished. The faded memories of long ago were growing fainter with time and laced with cobwebs. *It is better not to think of the past*, she decided, determinedly rolling over. *Closure is a healthier choice.*

Amanda tugged her buckskin bedroll snugly under her chin and curled her toes in its warm depths. She loved soft buckskin against her skin. *Nothing compared!* Her eyes longingly drank in the familiar constellation of the great bear of Ursa Major pouncing through the midnight sky, and she smiled contentedly. At the steep elevations of the mountains, the crystal clear sky and glittering stars overwhelmed her with joy and a sense of oneness with the vast universe.

In spite of the traumas of her past, the soothing night sky remained perpetually and reassuringly constant. Throughout the painful years of her life, fixing her attention on inanimate objects which remained the same had been a useful tool for introspection. It helped Amanda transcend her feelings of abandonment and find a sense of peaceful resolution.

With age, her perception of the complexity of the universe grew, and the stars began to whisper to her yearning heart that God was constant too. No matter where she was hidden from view, He was there, enveloping her in His everlasting arms and keeping her safe. Until the past few years, however, her young mind had not always been as convinced of God's unceasing love as her heart. *It was devastating to think I was forgotten*, she whispered to the night sky. Along with the familiar heartrending emotions of being left behind, a few stray tears trickled down her cool cheeks. *I am so glad You found me*, she murmured in contentment.

Brandy, her mange-scarred mustang, had been headed for a glue factory before her rescue, and the gentle animal neighed softly before bedding down in a leafy thicket for the night. Glad she had been able to save another living being, Amanda sighed. It now became her daunting challenge to accomplish that feat again, and she

wearily rubbed the tension in her stiff neck. It was an enormous task ahead. Had it not been for her growing faith, her plans would have seemed hopeless.

Against the serene backdrop of chirping crickets and croaking frogs, it became more tempting to finally tip the fragile jar of painful memories and spill a few flickering fireflies demanding to escape. Always a believer in resolutely accepting both the good and bad of life, Amanda knew it was important to examine her recent life-changing decision to return to the place of both her deepest anguish and greatest joy.

Accepting that life was a delicate balancing act between happiness and hurt, she knew a person could not have one without accepting the existence of the other. Life's purpose sometimes led to venturing out on a broken limb where survival depended solely on God's help. Could she courageously trust God in all circumstances and boldly step out in faith? In the grand scheme of a complex universe which she admittedly did not understand, it became increasingly important to acknowledge her need to obey God. Determined to further analyze her thoughts, Amanda quietly rolled over again. What would she find in the jar of fireflies and once they had taken flight, could they ever be contained again?

Amanda Blair's battle-tested journey innocently began one cloudless, sun-drenched day. It was the eagerly awaited trip of a lifetime with her parents across the beautiful, wide-open prairies of the United States and its fledgling territories. *Isn't it odd how life can change in the blink of an eye?*

She pictured the rich American land awash with its golden harvest of wheat and lush green prairie grasses, its lofty thriving forests and icy blue lakes of unknown depths, and its jagged, snowcapped mountain peaks and wild herds of woolly buffalo roaming the winding valleys. For quiet teenage Amanda, her sheltered, homeschooled life was magically transformed with adventure and excitement, or so she thought. It was the stuff made of fairy dust she only read about in her parents' books.

The slightly built girl was the only child of Louise and William Blair. Before moving to Chicago, her homespun parents had originally been childhood sweethearts in Wisconsin dairy farming country. She often wondered why they had left the abundant farmland of their youth. Her conclusion was her father had a penchant for wandering and trying new things. Her other thought was her parents' decision had come from boredom milking cows. Even as a little girl, she recognized her father's heart was in becoming a merchant, not a dairy farmer.

When she remembered her father's flamboyant style of dressing in silk suits as opposed to bib overalls and her mother's indulgent support of his whims, Amanda couldn't help but smile. William Blair was definitely a dandy in the making! Because Wisconsin had very little use for fancy, impractical clothes, William and

his sweetheart, Louise, married and rode off in a modest buggy to find their dreams among the swanky city folk in bustling Chicago. Eventually, they purchased an unpretentious store downtown near Washington Park. It sold and tailored men's suits and was known as a haberdashery. Amanda laughed to herself, remembering how long it took her to learn how to pronounce *haberdashery*.

There was an old saying you could take the boy out of the country but not the country out of the boy. Despite her father's expensive tastes and desire for the good life, a constant struggle to make ends meet made her parents yearn for the simple life and rich farmland of their youth. They began attending several public meetings sponsored by two pioneer brothers who had a profitable business leading wagon trains out of the Nebraska Territory. Before long, Amanda's parents began dreaming of owning a cattle ranch in the rugged, untamed West.

Influencing their decision was the fact that Congress had passed the Homestead Act in 1862. This legislation said a head of a family could acquire 160 acres of land, settle it, and farm it for five years. At the end of that time period, the head of the family would be granted the land. This far reaching law convinced many hesitant settlers to ignore the growing restlessness of displaced Native Americans and to migrate to the California and Oregon Territories for the deal of a lifetime.

After many family discussions and careful budgeting, Amanda's parents sold their business, packed their meager belongings and lifesavings, and journeyed westward with their only child by steam locomotive until they joined up with a large wagon train heading west on the Bozeman Trail. The highly praised direct route had opened in 1862 through the northern Plains, the Rocky Mountain foothills, and the goldfields of Montana.

Unknown to the travelers, the biggest obstacle to reaching the Oregon Territory safely was that the northerly trail coursed directly through buffalo country. Many different Native American tribes inhabited the rugged area, and there was great resentment over the white man's destruction of their way of life by killing off the buffalo. As a result, belligerent Indian raids on westward travelers had been on the rise. The owners of the wagon train, however, blithely assured the Blair family and other homesteaders that the danger was minimal and only sporadic.

It was 1866. A fragile peace treaty had been negotiated at Fort Laramie with Red Cloud and other Sioux (Lakota) leaders as well as the Northern Cheyenne. Meanwhile in the eastern half of the United States, people weren't focused on the mounting Indian problems but on reconstruction after the Civil War. For the pioneers, there was a pie-in-the-sky optimism that the government's plan to establish Native American reservations and to populate the country was working.

A euphoric feeling of adventure, hope, and enthusiasm marked the beginning of the twenty-five family caravan of wagons as it began its long drawn-out journey to the Oregon Territory. *What had a younger Amanda thought of her*

parents' idealistic dreams? Uneasily, the older Amanda twisted her lengthy body in her warm buckskin sleeping bag as she considered the complicated question. Had she always blamed her parents for the staggering events that would later define her life?

Reflecting on her adolescent thoughts, Amanda conceded she had never understood her parents' dreams of the grass being greener away from Chicago. Conversely, she honestly had not resented their desire for a better life.

Although city life had been progressive and modern, Chicago had also been overcrowded and teeming with immigrants who remained isolated from and intolerant of other immigrants. It was a rough-and-tumble, sometimes lawless place with a natural enmity between different ethnic groups. A sense of agitation simmered beneath the guise of technological advancement.

Amanda decided, however, that lofty ideas of pioneer adventures were more to blame for her parents' wanderlust than wanting to leave Chicago. America was marketed as a breathtaking place of raw natural beauty where dreams were supposed to come true and anything was possible! None of the risk-taking pioneers were looking for trouble, just the opportunity to make better lives for their families. Although she was young at the time, Amanda had shared the excitement of her parents and the other settlers.

Hindsight showed that the settlers were not accurately informed of the scope of the Indian problems or the sense of urgency Native Americans felt about their way of life being destroyed. Too much misinformation downplaying the escalating problems in the West had been presented by the newly formed wagon train companies. After the Civil War, who wanted to contemplate more war when peace and rebuilding was on everyone's mind?

Trouble was ominously brewing from the onset of the trip, yet everyone was looking through rose-colored glasses. During the first week, wagon train life was a novelty for everyone, including Amanda. She was accustomed to independently entertaining herself, and she had her favorite books and a few dolls along. When she hadn't been doing chores cleaning up scraps of material in her father's shop or being homeschooled, her life had been spent in the protective cocoon of a cramped apartment above the shop.

Because Amanda had never traveled outside the smoky din of the city, the panoramic landscapes, wide-open prairies, and eventually the rugged mountains of the West were a breathtaking experience for her. In the beginning, there was a curiosity about meeting other teenagers and their families. But Amanda was an introvert and contentedly went back to the company of her books. *My love of reading probably saved my life*, she reflected.

The idyllic trip soon became tedious and increasingly filled with adversity. To most of the children, it was even boring. Although it was still spring, the

temperatures had become unbearably stifling, and the wagons were suffocating with sizzling heat.

There were nonstop hardships along the way with wagon wheels rumbling off their axles or splintering in two on the perilous trails strewn with boulders. There was also a widespread epidemic of dysentery from polluted drinking water followed by a large number of pack animals dying from heatstroke. The ominous deaths of several pioneers and their burials in the parched ground boded evil for the remainder of the journey.

Because of the harsh conditions, several of the grieving families decided to forego the trip. One of the wagon masters volunteered to lead them back to the Nebraska Territory where they had initially joined the wagon train. Eighteen discouraged but hopeful families still remained, all of them determined to endure any future misfortunes for the chance to gain a new life.

Three weeks dragged on under the blazing sun. One uneventful morning, Amanda sought the secluded shade of her family's wagon. Although the tiny interior was sweltering, the teenage girl settled on several feather pillows to lessen the jostling of the wagon wheels on the rocky trail. With determination, she tried to concentrate on a new detective book called *The Woman in White*, which had been published in 1859. Although the story about a woman escaping from an asylum was intriguing, perspiration trickled down Amanda's flushed cheeks, and her sleepy eyelids began to droop.

Years later under the night sky, a much older Amanda reflected on her memories and unconsciously shivered in her sleeping bag. Although she had tried to unsuccessfully block any recollections of the unspeakable day, the shocking events forever shaped her destiny and abruptly forced her to grow up and leave any remnants of childhood behind. Amanda determinedly tucked her sleeping bag under her chin, breathed deeply, and shut her eyes as a painful scene began to unfold.

Without any warning or provocation, a loosely organized column of rampaging Indians suddenly unraveled on a low-lying hill and attacked the unsuspecting wagon train. Against a horrific backdrop of gunfire and bloodcurdling screams, a sizable raiding party of at least twenty warriors slathered in war paint plowed into the unprepared wagons. Amid a torrent of shrill whooping, mass confusion, and an explosion of arrows, spears, and tomahawks, the entire population of the wagon train was bludgeoned and gruesomely scalped. Only one person remained perilously alive—*Amanda!*

The piercing sounds of screaming were terrifying. Jumping into action, Amanda frantically dumped an entire steamer trunk of her mother's carefully folded clothes onto the planked floor. After wedging the sleeve of a blouse on the rim, she jumped into the sturdy crate and pulled the lid nearly shut.

The clever plan might have worked, but the perspiring girl was nearly smothering from the intense heat. Helplessly, she began sneezing from the trail dust kicked up by the Indian ponies and seeping like a cloud into the wagon. One of the prowling warriors had leapt into the wagon and while he was rummaging through her parents' belongings and scavenging for silver jewelry, he heard a muffled, high-pitched noise.

Astonished there was a survivor, the Indian roughly tossed back the lid of the trunk and wrenched Amanda by her armpits out of her hiding place. Ready to attack, the violent man in red war paint glared at her and unsheathed a sharp hunting knife. There was no trembling on Amanda's part, no screaming, and no second-guessing her decision to fight for her life. Defiantly, the girl threw her shoulders back and stared into the man's coal black eyes, facing him head-on without fear.

She balled her fists in readiness to defend herself but remained stoic while waiting for the inevitable. She would let him make the first move. Amanda would later find out the aggressive Indian respected her courage and lack of hysterics in confronting him face to face. Bravely facing an enemy was called *counting coup*, and it was greatly honored in all of Indian culture. In the eerie silence, the warrior appeared indecisive about the spunky but foolish child. Unknowingly by defying death and opposing her enemy, Amanda's life was inexplicably spared unlike the other children who had been massacred.

The shocking outcome was she didn't have to fight at all. Her determined captor suddenly backed off and spoke to her in an unintelligible, non-aggressive voice. With a firm nod, he motioned her to come outside with his comrades. Amanda's quick decision to cooperate probably saved her life. Instead of killing and scalping her, the warrior sheathed his knife, forcefully held out a weathered hand, and motioned the gutsy girl to put her small hand into his.

Terrified at the implications of what the simple action would mean for her future, Amanda knew she must pretend to be tough and feisty. It was the only thing keeping her alive. Although she was churning with fear inside, she ignored the Indian's outstretched hand, marched toward the side of the wagon, and quickly scrambled down from the wagon under her own power. Willing herself to be calm, she unfalteringly stood alone by the wagon. The dazzling glare of the noonday sun beat down upon her tiny figure as she wondered what would happen next.

As a distraction, Amanda curiously watched a few of the other warriors setting the wagons ablaze after first rounding up any horses, which seemed to be the prize they were after. A vast carpet of carnage covered the dusty ground with crimson red. *The sight was gruesome.* With great despondency, the teenager quietly grieved, knowing her parents were among the lifeless bodies crudely dumped on the trail as fodder for the vultures. Deciding she must hide any further grieving for when she

was alone, Amanda abruptly turned her back on the pile of dead bodies. There was nothing more she could do for her parents or the others but to pray and ultimately survive.

Although she was young, her first priority was to decide on a cautious plan. The main problem was there weren't any good options except to obey her captors. *Will I be harmed?* The thought made her heart stand still. *It's better not to show fear*, she resolved. As she quietly waited among the swirling dust from the stomping horses and the acrid smoke from the burning wagons, Amanda's mind wrestled with why she had been spared. Every other man, woman, and child had been brutally murdered and scalped.

The only distinguishing factor was her lack of hysterics and her calm confrontation of her captor. She was well aware of the future consequences of rebelling in any way and immediately decided to simply go along with the band of warriors. Perhaps one trick up her sleeve would be to convince them she was much younger than her actual years and only an innocent child rather than nearly an adult. *It might protect my safety*, she thought.

Her captor returned and thrust out his hand again, still wondering if she would willingly take it, or if he would have to force her. He had not seen a captive so composed, especially a child. *The young ones were usually mewling like animals and punching*, he thought unflatteringly to himself.

Startling him, Amanda spunkily grabbed his hand in a vise and began marching him across the clearing, nearly dragging him along instead of the other way around. The odd pair reached a towering pinto horse with a lanky, middle-aged Indian about the age of her murdered father. The warrior was sitting tall on an elaborately beaded saddle, and he was bare-chested like the others and slathered in red war paint, which was melting in the sun. His shining black braids were interspersed with strands of graying hair. The Indian on the horse nodded his approval to Amanda's companion. It was apparent this was going to be her new captor, and Amanda scrutinized the man warily.

The first Indian whose hand still gripped hers spoke civilly but unintelligibly, and he motioned he would lift her onto the back of the pinto. With a toss of her long brown hair, Amanda imperiously nodded her assent as if she was the queen of the prairie and he had asked her permission. A grudging flicker of approval flashed in the Indian's dark eyes. *Obviously, tough behavior is admired by this particular Indian tribe*, she thought. That knowledge might help her future survival.

The pinto's hindquarters were exceedingly high up from the stony ground, and Amanda exhaled a huge breath as she swiftly soared through the air and landed with a thud on the back end of the fancily embroidered saddle. Unwilling to show her lack of experience, she gathered up her courage. Startled by the sudden whooshing sound of her breath, her new captor whirled around to stare. When he

saw the girl was visibly anxious, the warrior murmured a few words meant to be comforting. Then in a fatherly way, the man gently cupped her hands and showed her how to grasp the buckskin waistband of his brief covering, which had a leather panel in both the front and back. When Amanda cooperated, he patted her forearms lightly as if to say everything was going to be all right. His gentleness immediately bolstered her confidence.

Amanda was struck by the stranger's kindness, which was an oxymoron among the blood and violence of the unspeakable day. Curiously glancing around the raiding party, she saw most of the warriors were in their late teens or early twenties, not much older than she was. They were awash with weapons hanging on their painted bodies and saddles. Some had gruesomely mounted bloody scalps on stone-headed clubs, and others anchored ball-and-spike clubs, tomahawks, or bloodstained spears in a loop near their saddles. Nearly all wore combination bows and quivers stuffed with well-worn, feather-tipped arrows and slung across their bare backs.

With a satisfied chorus of shrill whooping and a few caws sounding like crows, the Indians and the lone white girl galloped away in a billowing haze of dust. The surreal picture of total mayhem was quickly left behind, but its gory brutality would replay in Amanda's impressionable mind for years to come. Amanda focused on keeping her wits and watching for any possible opportunity to escape, but it never came. As the searing sun began to drift behind a cooling white cloud, reality finally set in. Amanda was a captive and alone in the world.

Chapter Two

Within a few hours, the renegade band of Indians and huge herd of stolen horses ceremoniously arrived to the welcoming cheers of a small Crow Indian village. On the first night of her captivity (or as her captors believed, her adoption as a Crow), the teenager unknowingly met someone who would one day help rebuild her shattered life and eventually bring a sense of normalcy. Too shaken by the devastating turn of events that had changed her life forever, Amanda saw nothing but hopelessness on the night of her arrival.

In the future after assimilating and learning to speak the Crow language, Amanda would identify the middle-aged, tall, paternal man she accompanied as her adoptive father Roaming Elk and his old-looking squaw as her adoptive mother Rain Cloud. The woman, who was not unkind but very dour, was heavy set and wrinkled. Their only child was a gangly teenage son named Crazy Hawk, who she would discover was also a teenager.

Her adoption was to be as a replacement for her new parents' nine-year-old daughter, who had died the previous winter from pneumonia. It seemed Amanda looked somewhat like the daughter with a slight build, tan skin, and long hair. It was an awkward situation to be swapping places with a child who was deeply loved, especially since Amanda planned to escape at the first opportunity.

In due course, Amanda would learn many things about the Crow. They were unusually tall for Native Americans and for the most part strikingly good-looking. They were among the best horsemen of the northern Plains, and only the Comanche, whose hunting grounds were far to the south, owned as many mounts. Like the Comanche, the Crow were skilled horse raiders, and they would take any risk to increase the size of their herds.

The Crow were originally called the *Absaroka* or the *Apsaalooke*, which was translated by the early French settlers to mean *people of the Crow*. The shortened name remained. They were a Siouan language tribe originally thought to be located as far east as northern Minnesota, Canada, and North Dakota, but they were gradually pushed westward by the Sioux. Eventually, they settled in the Montana and Wyoming Territories.

There were two main branches of Crow, the Mountain Crow and the River Crow. Making up the overall Crow nation or Crow tribe were many smaller tribal units or bands of one hundred or less. These bands lived autonomously in separate villages or camps, and each had its own chief and Council of Elders. Amanda would find she was a member of one of the smaller, independent tribal bands of the Mountain Crow.

Like other northern Plains tribes, the main form of sustenance for the Crow was the buffalo. In the months to come, she would be astonished at all the

uses Native Americans had for buffalo. In addition to buffalo meat being the mainstay of their diet, the Indians used the hides for everything from constructing tepees, swaddling babies, and fashioning drums and shields to making soft clothing, blankets, and wraparound winter robes. Buffalo hair made rope and stuffed cradleboards, saddles, and even balls for games. The horns formed eating utensils and drinking vessels, and even the bones became fleshing tools, sleds, and hunting knives.

Amanda would also learn the Crow were artistic, and they created beautifully decorated saddles, bridles, collars, and blankets. The tribeswomen's skill at tanning, embroidering, and an art form called quilling was unequaled among other Native American tribes.

But as the abandoned girl quietly huddled on a woven rug during her first night in captivity, Amanda knew nothing about the Crow or the family sitting like statues in a row in front of her. She didn't even know where the encampment was located except that it was much cooler than the hot, dusty trail of the wagon train. Amanda only knew her emotions were raw, and she was alone in the world and in charge of her own survival.

For a brief moment, curiosity won out over grief. Because Amanda had never seen the interior of a tepee, she wearily surveyed the medium-sized enclosure. It was made of buffalo skins stretched over a tripod of poles, and the pine tree poles were stripped of branches and wider at the base than at the tip.

A fire pit used for cooking was situated on flat rocks in the center, and its ashen smoke swirled out a ventilated hole transected by the top of the poles. Sleeping rolls or mattresses of animal skins were arranged around the circular edges near the buckskin walls, and there were buffalo hide seats called leanbacks randomly placed near the fire pit. Giving the enclosure a homey feeling, geometrically patterned woven rugs were scattered on the dirt floor.

After studying her new surroundings, Amanda's attention drifted to her silent family. The mother wore a soft deerskin dress decorated with what she thought was elk teeth. On the woman's tiny feet were comfortable beaded moccasins, and her black hair was parted in the middle with two medium length braids.

The father's hair was unexpectedly longer than the mother's, and it was arranged in one neatly combed braid centered down his back. Amanda would find out later that the father favored wearing his hair loose to his waist. For ceremonies, many Crow men wore two braids with an unusual poof or pompadour in the front. Unlike the father's scanty clothing for the raid, he now wore a comfortable deerskin shirt, trimmed leggings with a belt, and beaded moccasins.

An awkward conversation abruptly began among the three family members, and the tired girl did not understand a word. Their concerned black eyes kept glancing her way, and Amanda immediately sensed her inclusion in the family

and that she would not be hurt. Her temporary safety only gave her a hollow sense of comfort.

The father politely extended a wooden bowl of stew, which she would later learn was one of their regular meals. It consisted of lean buffalo meat boiled with prairie turnips and wild carrots. Showing their unity of purpose, the entire family nodded for her to eat along with them. After waiting for a while, they ignored her lack of interest and ravenously began eating their own suppers.

Although her stomach was rumbling with hunger, the magnitude of her parents' gruesome death and the reality of her violent kidnapping suddenly overwhelmed Amanda with emotion. Her nerves were raw from pretending to be strong and brave, and she feared what would happen to her in a forbidding new world. Helplessly, she began sobbing. Within moments, the father figure was at her side. Gently taking her by the hand, he pointed her toward a solitary bedroll intended for her.

Through her overflowing tears, Amanda gave him a tiny smile of thanks and gratefully crawled between the snug layers of softened buffalo hide. It was oddly welcoming. Deliberately, she rolled toward the tepee wall. *Should I pray? Maybe God will hear me.* Then her mind said, *Why would He help someone who had never asked for His help before?* It was a logical thought. With weariness and despair, Amanda mumbled a few uncertain words to God and closed her eyes.

A troubled sleep finally overcame her desperate feelings of abandonment. Amanda's eyes were painfully swollen and her wet cheeks tearstained. Every so often in her restless sleep, a shaky sob would rumble from deep within her hollow chest, and her entire body shivered from the intensity of her emptiness.

All at once, her tiny hand was no longer alone but covered by the warm flesh of a hand only slightly larger. Turning her head away from the buckskin wall, her startled eyes flew upward to her new brother's gentle round moon face. His coal black eyes and coppery skin reflected the dancing orange firelight of the fire pit. He had selflessly tucked his sleeping mat next to hers in an attempt to console her, and there was genuine compassion in his kind face.

For the first time on that horrifying day, Amanda felt her fear and loneliness melt away. *If I can remain strong, things might turn out all right. Maybe God heard my feeble attempts to pray after all.* Amanda fell into a deep sleep, her hand tucked in her new brother's for the entire night.

Within a few days of her capture, Amanda made a conscious decision to take charge of her life and thrive, not just survive. Her mind recognized there was a huge difference between feeling sorry for her situation and actively living her life *for the time being* in the Crow village. *For the time being* became her daily motto. Participating fully in the unfamiliar world around her would better prepare her for her eventual escape.

After scrutinizing her adopted family's customs and the interactions between family members, Amanda began imitating their every action from how they held their eating utensils to how they rolled up their sleeping mats during the day. Because communication was the golden key to understanding her surroundings, she set a personal goal to learn the complicated Crow language as soon as possible.

Although taken aback by her unexpected eagerness to learn, her new family seemed up to the challenge to help her adjust. Amanda's new brother, Crazy Hawk, was especially interested in teaching her. Every day, most of her time was spent repeating his words, pointing and asking questions about different objects, and exploring the nearby forest with her brother. She hoped he wouldn't tire of her inquisitiveness.

Her persistence began to pay off, and Amanda felt more at ease in the alien surroundings. One thing she stubbornly refused to deal with was her grief. She reasoned that dwelling on painful memories would make it impossible to endure her unending captivity, so she hid her heartache in a locked box and temporarily threw away the key.

In a ceremony at dinner one night, her new family glowingly described her as being delicately built but strong like a young white-tailed deer. After praising her tan complexion, her new brother even said her honey brown hair had the warm coloring of a deer in the summertime. Then Amanda was formally named *Spotted Deer*, and they celebrated her new name with special cornbread cakes.

As much as she tried to convince herself to the contrary, Amanda genuinely liked her new name and chose to embrace it *for the time being*. She was also flattered by her new family's efforts to make her feel accepted. Refusing to even consider the name Amanda any longer, she began calling herself Spotted Deer.

Like other Native Americans, the Crow believed the traits of an animal could be channeled to a person who shared the animal's name. *Does that mean I am gentle and doe-like?* Thinking about it always made her laugh. Knowing she could be tomboyish, stubborn, and downright tenacious, Spotted Deer was frequently amused by her dissimilarity to a deer's calm demeanor.

In the Crow village, children were indulged and pampered before being thrown into an endless stream of adult responsibilities. Although she fully considered herself an adult after her violent capture, Spotted Deer was in no hurry to put on the Crow mantle of adulthood. Fortunately, her small size and decision to hide her true age enabled her to be mistakenly grouped by her new mother with much younger girls.

With the younger children, Spotted Deer usually played babysitter and sometimes referee. But it became exceedingly boring to play with wooden dolls in miniature tepees covered with buffalo skins. Worse yet, the young girls always

acted out household chores they would do as future squaws—cooking, scraping buffalo skins, or binding their baby dolls in stiff cradleboards. In her mind, Spotted Deer vetoed the idea of ever willingly becoming a squaw. Besides, she was only there *for the time being*.

Regretting her white lie, she finally admitted her age to her mother and asked permission not to play with the younger girls anymore. Although Spotted Deer was expected to help with a few more chores because of her true age, she was caught at that in-between age of not being a child but almost being an adult. Because they were in the same category, she set her sights on tagging along with the rough-and-tumble, maturing teenage boys who played warrior games. Because her capture made her feel vulnerable and helpless, she developed an insatiable thirst to become strong like the boys and test her mettle.

Her newly acquired toughness and unbridled enthusiasm for adventure made the boys grudgingly accept Spotted Deer's annoying presence. When she heard them use derogatory slang words when talking to each other, she flippantly began using their jargon, which always made them laugh at her lack of femininity. She knew her boldness would guarantee her acceptance in the rough boys club.

Spotted Deer's *in your face* attitude was totally incongruous with her quiet, homeschooled childhood in Chicago, but she didn't care. It was to her advantage that she was becoming an incorrigible tomboy. She learned not to whine if she got hurt and not to squeal with squeamishness if she bled. When a few of the boys punched or tackled her, *the new white girl* punched back or got even. Of all the girls they knew, this was the only one who took care of herself. Most of all, the boys liked Spotted Deer's sassy mouth, and it kept them in stitches when she deliberately mangled the Crow language.

It was much more to her liking to hunt imaginary herds of buffalo with her newfound skill of shooting a bow and arrow than to play dolls. Tagging along at every opportunity and generally becoming a nuisance, Spotted Deer pursued the future warriors with gusto. Because of her persistent nagging, they gave up on trying to keep her out of their tracking games, where they chose teams and laid trails for the other team to follow. Whether they were playing ball in a field using rackets and balls stuffed with buffalo hair or playing hide-and-seek or tag, the white girl could be found in the middle of the pack, running wildly to keep up with the taller and stronger young braves.

It was satisfying for Spotted Deer to discover that Crow parents gave their children immense freedom to choose their paths in life. No matter what her new parents thought of her tagging along with the boys, they never objected or intervened.

On the one hand, Crow parents doted on their children, rarely reprimanding or spanking them. In spite of her different skin color and ethnic background, Spotted

Deer was accorded the same tolerance as the other children and totally assimilated into the culture.

On the other hand, one of the most important freedoms children had was the ability to foolishly choose unsafe situations, such as getting too close to a campfire and getting burned. Facing danger was considered the best way to train a child how to avoid future danger. Without meaning to revisit her grief, Spotted Deer realized her own parents had lovingly cocooned her in their apartment in Chicago and been overly protective about her safety when compared with the lenience of her Crow parents.

At the sudden thought of her real parents, the teenage girl quickly shoved the painful memory into the locked box in her heart. One day, she would be forced to unpack her heartache but not today. Today was for survival.

With a growing sense of self-determination, Spotted Deer made use of every moment learning survival skills. Blending in as inconspicuously as she could, Spotted Deer continued to set a goal of escaping. Although she liked living in the Crow village, it became a matter of principle to leave. No one deserved to have her freedom taken away with violence.