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Words: 31000
Middle Grade Fiction

Sleep Warrior

Clarissa and her story are based on my actual Cherokee ancestor but the flying bears are fictional.



Chapter 1 – Crusher and Apples

Oh, no, it happened again, I thought as I threw back the covers. I was soaking wet. This wasn't the type of damp you would find if you peed the bed. I was dripping all over but making sure; I smelled myself.

Okay, just water, not pee, I thought. For the last few nights, I had terrifying nightmares of flying, falling, and running through thick forests where I couldn't find my way home. I would wake up with dirty feet, leaves in my hair, or sweating like I had run a thousand laps around the track at school. Well...not a thousand, but at least a few good sprints. And I had enough stuff in my hair each morning to build a small campfire. Sometimes my head hurt as if I had run into a door. I wondered if I was spending too much time on my computer and cell phone.

But this was new, being wet. How did I do that during the night?

I tried to remember last night. First, I was up late, finishing an app on my computer. Then I searched and searched about sleepwalking on the Internet. It was called somnambulism. *Not to be confused with cannibalism,* I thought. Sleepwalking is typically hereditary and caused by a lack of sleep or extreme fatigue. I felt tired this morning but had never heard my folks talking about wandering around the neighborhood at night and jumping into their neighbor's swimming pool.

Sleepwalking into the shower, that must be it, I thought. *Odd, but not impossible.* But this was the third night it had happened this week. I hadn't been up late on the computer any of those nights. But I did spend about a hundred times more time on my computer, cell phone, and iPad

than most other kids, so maybe all those electromagnetic waves were scrambling my brain? I didn't think my twin brother Alec had this problem.

But why are my feet dirty if I sleepwalked into the shower last night? I need to do more research, I reasoned. Then I glanced at the clock.

Oh no, I'm going to be late! I smelled myself again and figured that at least I didn't have to take a shower. I rummaged through the pile of clothes in the corner of my closet and found an acceptably cleanish pair of shorts and a polo shirt. I cleaned my feet with my dirty PJs before kicking them into the non-cleanish pile. As I put on my school uniform, I noticed a tuft of fur on the floor. I tapped it gingerly with my toe.

I remember that I had a dream last night that I was flying on a bear, holding on for dear life, grasping his fur. I shook my head. I can't think about this now. *Maybe I just pulled this out of a stuffed toy,* I told myself. I looked at the fur and my stuffed toys. *It seemed so real and didn't match any of them.* I glanced at my clock again.

Oh no, late, late, late!



In the bathroom, I smoothed my Asheville Middle School uniform polo shirt with the bold reminders imprinted on the front. *Respect. Organization. Achievement. Responsibility.* The school was like a military prison with uniforms, metal detectors, locked gates, schedules, and thousands of rules. I hated everything about it. It was crowded and noisy. Bells rang, and hundreds of kids rushed up and down stairs like tiny ants to three different levels, frantically trying not to be late and avoid something I now dreaded; demerits and detention.

I corralled my thick unruly jet-black hair with a scrunchy. The fizziness was from my petite blond mom, and my warm skin and deep brown eyes were from my Cherokee father. This combination was enough to be labeled a “rez kid,” as the mean girls like Megan at Asheville Middle School called the Native Americans who had grown up on the nearby Cherokee reservation. My twin brother Alec didn’t look like me at all. He was slight and fair and must have been in the other line when they handed out sizes. The only thing Alec got from our dad was a set of enormous Dumbo ears.

It was only a matter of time before Megan started teasing him about that, I thought.



“Aya!” The scream from my mother downstairs could be heard around corners, across soccer fields, and probably in the next state. Well, . . . not in the next state, but maybe next door. So much noise from such a tiny person.

The screaming intensified. “Aya, you’re going to miss your bus! I cannot take you two to school today; I have an early showing. Get off your computer and get down here!”

Typical. . . she always thought I was on my computer instead of doing whatever she thought a normal girl my age should be doing. Just to prove a point, I took the stairs down two at a time, sticking a perfect ten-point landing with a loud thud. My dad was doing his morning Savasana in his yoga studio as I passed on my way to the kitchen. Although it looks easy, the corpse pose is the most challenging asana. Yup, those of us who can easily balance, bend, and twist through our yoga practice struggle with just lying on the floor. The art of relaxation is harder than it looks, especially with someone wound up tight like my mom in the house. I could

hear my dad's heavy sighing. He could sigh loud enough to fill a whole hot air balloon...well, maybe just a birthday balloon...but it was a big sigh. Next, I heard his footsteps behind me as I reached the kitchen. *Here comes the peacemaker to calm the warriors*, I thought. I didn't know why my mom picked on me so much.

My brother, Alec, sat at the kitchen table, sleepily shoveling in the tofu egg scramble that my dad had whipped up at sunrise. My dad was the best vegan cook in the world, but the food still tasted chiefly like bark. Alec stared at his iPhone. He wasn't supposed to; no electronics were allowed at the kitchen table, but he probably knew that my mom and I were on the warpath this morning.

The kitchen was a beehive of activity, all coming from one queen bee, my energizer-powered mother. My mom scrolled down her cell phone as she inspected the lunch packs for my brother and me. She was a true multi-tasker, and for my mom, that meant doing four or five things at a time instead of a couple.

My dad shook his head at Alec as he passed, and Alec guiltily flipped the phone over. "You left the TV on downstairs again last night," my dad said to Alec as he picked up Alec's empty plate.

Alec smiled apologetically. *He's the good kid*, I thought. I took a seat in front of my breakfast and inhaled enough to pass the bark eater inspection.

"No apple?" my mom said. I knew that tone. It was a mixture of when she accused me of something I had done wrong and the voice I used when there was some business issue. Both my dad and I stiffened up.

My dad rushed over to the lunch packs. My dad missing a chance to put fruit in our lunch is like a bear passing up honey in a tree. My dad frantically poked through the lunch packs and checked again. Finally, he glanced up at my mom as she pointed to her AirPods.

“The listing says ‘fruit trees,’ but how can you say ‘fruit trees’ in Asheville if there is no apple tree?” My dad realized there was no crisis. My mom was on the phone. He sighed, smiled, then kissed my mom.

Yuck, not while I’m eating, I thought. But I think my mom caught my disgusted look. As soon as she got off the phone, she harped on me again, “Hurry up, Aya, or you’ll miss your bus.”



The bus. I hated riding the bus to school. In Oregon, Alec and I walked and chatted the whole way. This was Alec’s and my first year at Asheville Middle School in North Carolina. A few elementary schools fed sixth-graders into this huge public school. Even this early in the year, I could see that most kids already had friends from years of being at the same elementary school.

Alec and I were new to the school like the other six graders, but we didn’t come from one of those local elementary schools. Instead, my parents moved here during the summer after my grandfather died last year. My dad wanted to be closer to his mother, who lived on the nearby Cherokee reservation.

For the past half of a decade, Alec and I had attended the Waldorf School in Portland, Oregon. There had been only a dozen kids in our class. We had learned through nature and art and had the same teacher from first to eighth grade. Yes, we were typical “tree-hugging bark-eaters” at the Waldorf School, but at least nobody made fun of my brother.

From the first day of school, I insisted that Alec sit next to me and text me on the bus, so the other kids didn't hear his severe stutter. But yesterday, Alec was excited about going to the Bear Zoo this weekend that he kept talking and talking instead of texting. Then the evil Megan turned around and glared at us.

“T-tell t-the s-s-s-low b-b-b-boy to, to, to shut, shut up. I am trying to to ta-ta-ta-talk on the ph-ph-ph-phone.”

Alec was visibly crushed. He hung his head, with his chin resting on his chest. He seemed to shrink down in the bus seat before my eyes. Megan had crushed him. I wanted to grab Megan's phone and stomp on it, but if the Waldorf School and my dad's yoga lessons taught me anything, it was to breathe deeply, relax my balled-up fists, and think of better ways to respond to conflict. I studied Megan's phone. She was always on her phone. I bet Megan had so many quality friends to talk to that were much better than the lowly kids like us on the bus with her. I checked my own phone and found Megan's AirDrop. I showed it to Alec. I think twin sense means that we don't have to say a lot. He nodded and, finally, a tiny grin.

Tomorrow, Alec will have his revenge, I thought.



Alec and I spent yesterday afternoon working on a new app. Bluetooth technology was developed in Sweden in the early 1990s to enable wireless control over devices, but we had something much more sinister planned. We borrowed my parent's iPads and placed them in different parts of the room and all the other devices we could round up.

It is ready for testing, I thought.

“One more time,” I said to Alec. He turned on his cell phone, pressed an icon, and slowly walked across my bedroom floor. Each device lit up with the message “Wassup?”

We ran around the room, checking each one. “It works!” I turned to Alec and held up my hand for a hand slap. “We did it! High five, way up high!” Then, I put my hand almost to the floor, “Way down low,” I added, and Alec beat me to the “too slow, Joe” part of the routine and pulled his hand away. That was good. He was doing better after what Megan did to him.

“By Grabthar’s Hammer, you shall be avenged!” I added after striking my collarbone.

I waited for him to reply, “Never give up, never surrender,” from one of our favorite old movies, *Galaxy Quest*, but instead, Alec turned and went into our Jack and Jill bathroom and closed the door. I had hoped I’d get a big smile from Alec, but no luck.

But then I had the challenge of writing the code to send the app to Megan’s phone, and that was hard. I fell asleep a few times, and maybe that is when I did the sleepwalking. Yup that must be it. It didn’t explain the other few nights, but now I knew what had happened last night.

It was worth it because I knew when Megan got on the bus today, and as soon as her cell phone was in range, Alec would load the app I wrote onto Megan’s phone. Then, as Megan neared the other kids on the bus, inside of her classes, and down the hallways at school, they would all get a text from Megan asking, “Wassup?” A few thousand ‘shoutouts’ of responses all day should be enough if Megan wanted to hear kids talk with no stutter. Well...maybe only a hundred, but it was time to crush the crusher.



The walk to the bus was short, and Alec still wasn't talking. After we had taken our seats together, I waited anxiously through the next few stops, hoping that our plan would succeed. After a few months of school, kids sat in the same place on the bus. Today, Megan got on the bus and headed back to the empty seat in front of Alec and me. Megan deserved her own private space. As usual, she was already on the phone and ignored us.

Alec smiled at me and opened his phone, and pressed a button. It was his first smile since Megan had crushed his spirit the day before. Then the "Hallelujah" moment happened. The kid in front of Megan turned around and said, "Not much, but we're going to the river this weekend."

The kid across the aisle held up his thumb, said, "Looking good," and smiled at Megan. The bells and pings were like church bells in the village. Hundreds of kids were saying Megan's name and replying to Megan by shouting out whatever first came to mind. Megan's screen quickly filled with text bubbles.

I looked at Alec. He beamed. "Never give up, never surrender," he whispered with no stutter. Alec was in a special program at Asheville Middle School, and his speech was getting better every day. I knew this school was good for Alec, but that didn't help much.

Moving from Oregon this summer was hard. I left all my longtime classmates behind. Next month was my birthday, and my parents were already asking what I wanted for a party. It would've been simple back in Oregon; a picnic, skating, or bowling party with a dozen kids from school.

Even after a few months of school, I still didn't have any friends here. I ate lunch alone and pretended to read a book. I read the same page over and over again, searching for a group of girls to join. I learned the hard way that you just can't walk up to any of them.

The second week of school, I had started towards where Megan Sinclair was eating lunch with her pack of friends. As I got closer, Megan looked right at me, made some tomahawk gestures, then whispered to the group, and they laughed.

How nice of sports teams to teach kids how to mock Native Americans.

I walked on by but started keeping a notebook using their code names. I called Megan "Crusher" because after I began to observe her, I noticed that Megan seemed to get boys to like her, and then when they approached, she'd crush them. Megan was number one in my notebook. With about eight hundred students, half female, and then a third in sixth grade, there were a little over a hundred girls available to be my best friend: one down, ninety-nine to go.

You can eat an elephant if you start with one bite at a time, I thought.

If I were brave, she'd try it again. But I wasn't. *Alec was brave, but not me.* He had already made a few friends, boys that liked to ride their bikes in the canyons. I had seen him eating lunch with them, and a few grunts and laughs were all the conversation required for guys. But I was alone, and each day I felt like everyone was looking at me.

I'm that rez kid with no friends, I thought. My dad had told me that when he was growing up, it was bad. When he and his friends from the reservation went into Asheville, they were bullied, but today? Seriously? Were these kids still using that stupid tomahawk gesture? I knew there would be some differences between kids from Oregon and North Carolina, but from

what I had seen in these first few months, they seemed to pick on anyone that was a little different, especially on the handful of kids that had moved from the reservation into the “big town” of Asheville. I had never thought I’d be different.

The bus pulled up in front of the middle school, and Alec and I hurried up the aisle to get far away from the crime scene. Once off the bus, I was excited that we had gotten away with it and did a little mini high five and “too slow Joe” down low with Alec to celebrate our revenge and clean escape. I glanced back up at the bus and saw Megan’s face when Megan looked up from her text-ridden phone.

Did Megan see us?

Chapter 2 – Busted and Beamers

I made it through homeroom and second-period. *We got away with it. Why would Megan think it was us?* I reasoned. But, by the time the third-period bell rang, I was terrified to face the wrath of Megan, who was in my English class. I remembered Megan’s icy stare from the bus. *Did she see our mini-celebration?* Then I panicked. Alec and I were probably the only ones who hadn’t responded to Megan’s text. *Stupid, stupid, stupid mistake.*

I waited until the last person entered and was relieved to see that Megan wasn’t there yet. *Maybe she was still trying to answer all those texts.* A few more steps to my seat and I was home free, but then the English teacher spotted me.

“Principal’s office, Miss Mankiller.”

The laughs of the kids echoed in my ears as I headed to the office. Bad enough, I looked like I did, but having a last name that everyone thought was funny added to my embarrassment.



Respect. Organization. Achievement. Responsibility. The words adorned a poster on the wall of the principal’s office, where Dr. Emily Haverson held court with Megan in the chair closest to Dr. Haverson’s desk.

“Aya, I know you’re new to our school district, coming here from the reservation, but we take bullying and vandalism very seriously. It took the IT department over an hour to uninstall that app and delete the thousands of texts.”

I wanted to correct her and shout, *I'm from Oregon, not the reservation, and Megan is the bully, not me! An hour? What types of idiots are working in your IT department? Hold down your finger on the app and select delete.*

Instead, I could feel the tears coming. Seriously? I was in middle school and not supposed to cry. I looked up. That always worked. I stared at the school's mission statement. *Respect. Organization. Achievement. Responsibility.* How many words could I make out of those four? Probably a thousand or more? Spectacle, organizer, pet...it was working. The tide of tears started receding. One problem; I hadn't been listening, and now they seemed to want an answer.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"It was either you or that idiot of a brother of yours," Megan said.

"One moment, let's get him in here," Dr. Haverson said as she reached for the phone.

The last thing I wanted was for Alec to come in here crying and stuttering and giving Megan more ammunition. "It was me; Alec didn't do anything," I blurted.

Dr. Haverson stood up and delivered her verdict. "Megan, return to class. Aya, you are suspended for the rest of the day. Go outside and wait while I call your parents, and I don't want you sitting anywhere near Megan on the bus."

"I'm moving to Crystal Falls next week," Megan bragged. "I won't be riding that bus anymore." She emphasized "that bus" as if it was made out of poop. With a swoosh of her glorious silken golden hair, Megan stomped out.

Dr. Haverson looked awkwardly at me, then shooed me out of her office. Everyone knew that Megan's dad was rich, and Crystal Falls set a record for Asheville's highest new home prices. I couldn't think of this as I thought instead, *Please, please let it be Dad, please let it be Dad...*



I winced as my mom's Beamer pulled up to the curb at school. "Firecracker" was my dad's nickname for my mother, Andrea. She sold real estate, which was good and bad. The good thing about it was that the Mankiller family couldn't live on the reservation because my mother had to be in a bigger town, like Asheville. The bad thing was that my mom was very good at it. There were always clients, closings, and open houses. *Dad is probably teaching a yoga class, and I bet mom is pissed off at having to interrupt her day to deal with me*, I thought.

My mom's mouth was moving. *Was she already yelling at me?* Hard to tell. The answer was easy after I opened the door, and my mom pointed to her ear. I put in my own AirPods and hoped that my mom's phone conversation would last until they got home.



After we arrived, my mom handed me a granola bar and sent me to my room. My punishment would be no dinner, and I also had to clean my room. The only thing my mom added was, "I can't deal with this right now." Saved by Busy Mom Syndrome.

I liked my bedroom in this new house. I had filled it with all the things that reminded me of the Waldorf School in Oregon; my artwork, painting supplies, and the dream catchers I had made in handwork class. Of course, the computer was a new addition, and it was almost an

abomination to the other more natural things, but I liked it. After years of shunning technology, I enjoyed figuring things out on the computer and learning how to write apps.

I dragged my bed into my walk-in closet. I looked at my handiwork with a bit of satisfaction. Putting my mattress into the closet might solve two problems. First, my mom had constantly been complaining about my bed being messy. Maybe she wouldn't notice it as much now that I had hidden it in the closet. The other problem was new, but I had not told anyone about that.

What was happening to me at night?

I was starved from all the work when dinner time came around. I loved dinner, and whatever my dad had in the slow cooker floated delicious aromas upward toward my room. Maybe I should have saved the granola bar instead of eating it immediately after they got home.

Alec came into the room carrying a toy pirate sword. He pointed it at his belly and pretended to fall onto it.

“Yup, I fell on my sword and took the hit for you,” I said.

“Why didn’t you play the ‘protecting poor little Alec’ card?” he asked as he turned towards the adjoining bathroom door.

I thought it was odd that he rarely stuttered when he was alone with his family, but I never said anything about it. Alec reached into the bathroom and came back with a plate full of steaming food. “Mom had to go to a showing, and Dad has a yoga class to teach,” Alec said as he set the plate down on my desk. He looked at the bed in the closet. “Been redecorating?”

I nodded as I gobbled down my food. Being sent to my room wasn't so bad, but missing dinner was a big problem. I was starving after moving furniture, picking up stuff, and vacuuming. Alec collected the dirty plate and started his retreat through the bathroom door. He took one more look at my bed in the closet on his way out.

“There wouldn't be any other reason for putting your bed there?” Alec asked.

What did he know? Had he seen me sleepwalking? I wanted to talk to him about it, but Alec was doing better. I'm smart; I can figure this out by myself.

Whatever is happening to me at night is my problem, and I will find it and crush it. I thought.



Chapter 3 – Nightwind and Night Terror

It was minutes after sunset, Nightwind's favorite time of the day, when he could see his victims losing their shadows. He peered out from his hiding place in the thick bushes on the other side of the creek. He trotted slowly, careful not to let his hooves crush any leaves or twigs. His master called him Nightwind. She liked to sing an old song to me, "Ride Like Wind," as they flew through the night.

His plan was unfolding as he tracked a small child, a girl about six years old, as she wandered farther and farther away from the soft glow of the campfire. Her parental units were enjoying their "firewater," as they jokingly referred to it. "They don't respect our ways," his master had said as she complained about those who had made fun of her people. "They don't respect the land," she had added when they left so much trash after camping.

Tonight, I would make my master proud of me, Nightwind thought.

The parents had called her back a few times, but he had something that would lure the child to the water's edge.

It was time. Nightwind slowly stepped out of the bushes and dropped the small toy boat he found last week into the stream. He hurriedly returned to his hiding place to watch. It worked! Nobody saw him. The forest shadows hid his hulking dark form.

The little girl spotted the boat and walked closer and closer to the edge of the stream. *Almost mine,* he thought. His instructions were clear; snatch the girl and take her into the dark forest. The important thing was for the humans to learn to never camp at Eagle's Peak again.

After Alec left me alone, I had enough energy to finish cleaning my room to the level that even my mom couldn't complain about. Although my mom didn't have time to "deal with it," I knew that my dad would be coming upstairs for "the talk" before bedtime. In the meantime, I had pretty much run my computer's search engine out of gas, searching for more information on sleepwalking. First, I found out it was more common in children than in adults.

I'll probably grow out of it. Most did that by their teen years, and I'll be a teenager in a couple of years, I reasoned.

I discovered that sleepwalking happens during deep sleep and results in walking or performing other complex behaviors while still mostly asleep.

Simple, I went outside, turned on the hose, and got wet. I used to love playing with the garden hose, I thought. I found a long-term study on the Internet that said 29% of children 2 to 13 years old experienced sleepwalking, with a peak in incidence between ages 10 and 13.

I'm not as weird as I thought, but maybe I should tell dad?

As if on cue, my dad tapped on the door and sat on the floor in the Easy Pose, crossed-legged next to my desk. Alec and I were at that in-between age when parents wanted to give you some space by letting you close your door but only tapped and entered.

I guess he wouldn't want me moving the dresser in front of it at night, I thought.

"Principal's office, huh?"

I nodded as I sat down across from him and mimicked his pose. This was our standard serious talk formation.

“Sorry, I was teaching a yoga class in the dog park and couldn’t get you at school.”

“Yuck,” I said, thinking of doing the Downward Facing Dog in dog poop. My dad laughed.

“The dogs go into the fenced area, and the doggy moms and dads do the yoga while they keep an eye on their fur babies,” my dad explained. “Tell me about this mean girl, Monica.”

“Megan,” I corrected. “And she has been making fun of us since the first day on the bus. She has asked us a thousand times if we’re identical twins or how long I’ve been off the rez.”

“Hmm...that’s rough, but a thousand? Maybe you’re exaggerating a little?”

Sure, I tend to exaggerate a tiny amount, I thought as I looked down at my fists. Relax, it is just dad, and he wants to help.

“I draw the line with Alec’s stutter,” I told my dad as I crossed my arms. My dad’s arms went into the twisted Eagle Pose. On reflex, I did the same and felt the relaxation come.

“I wish we could have put you two in the Waldorf School here,” my dad said. When my folks had discussed the reasons why not putting Alec and me in the Asheville Waldorf School, I wondered if money was more of a factor than they let on.

“The Waldorf School here has only been open for a few years, and they just added a seventh grade. With no Waldorf high school, it might be better to start fresh and get used to public schools,” my mom had reasoned. I was just thankful that they were not moving to the reservation and were going to be living in Asheville instead of Cherokee, North Carolina. But now I didn’t know why.

“Why not Cherokee Middle School?”

“A few reasons; first, we wanted neutral ground. Your mom’s home is Oregon, and mine is Cherokee, NC, so Asheville was a compromise. I think you know the rest,” my dad said.

Sure, I thought. A special program for Alec’s stutter and a bigger market for my mom’s real estate career. But on the reservation, I’d fit in better. I would look like them. My dad sensed my pause.

“Do you remember that book I gave you to read, *Apple in the Middle*?”

“Yes, red on the outside and white in the middle? Is that me?”

My dad nodded. “There is a lot more to being Cherokee than looking like we do and living on the reservation. The years you spent at Waldorf taught you to learn; how to be open to new ideas.”

“Instead of being like Grandma and Grandpa Nellesen?” I said and saw my father wince. He must have caught himself because he breathed deeply and placed his palms on his knees. A huge sigh came out, and he closed his eyes as he explained about his dreaded in-laws.

“I agreed to raise our children Catholic as required to get married in the church like your mom wanted, but that is a strict religion.”

I didn’t need to be told that. I remembered the Sunday when they all walked out of the church. The priest told the congregation who to vote for in the upcoming election and why during the sermon. My parents looked at each other, then nodded and went home. Later that day, Father McMurray called my mom, and the conversation didn’t go well. They never returned to

the church, and since Alec and I didn't like going anyway, they never asked. But our Oregon grandparents took us to church every time they stayed the weekend with them, which was less and less as they got older and now, probably never again.

“We agreed to have you confirmed before we moved, and now, you're at the age of reason. So if you want to go to church, we'll take you...you know that, right?”

I laughed. “Yeah, and I want to go to the dentist next week too.” My dad joined in my laughter as he got up and patted my head like a puppy. I lapped up the affection.

“You might want to spend more time with your Grandma Enola? Learn about being Cherokee from the source?”

I nodded guiltily.

“We good?” he asked as he headed for the door. I realized we didn't talk about the “Wassup” or the principal's office. That was how my dad was, and I nodded to let him off the hook.

My dad will go twenty miles out of his way to avoid a left turn, I thought. This wasn't the best time to tell him that I was sleepwalking at night. Probably won't happen again, now that I'm aware of what's happening, I reasoned.



Chapter 4 –Braids and Detention

The following day I stretched, then sat up with a start. *It happened again!* I thought as I threw back the covers. I was wet and dirty like before, but my hair was also in braids. Tight braids.

This is new. How did I do that during the night?

I tried to unbraid my hair. I didn't need to draw more attention to myself and Alec, but it wasn't unbraiding quickly for some reason. Then I glanced at the clock.

Oh no, late again! Did I sleep so deep to miss the alarm and my mother's yelling?

At least I didn't have to shower, and if I left my hair in braids, that would save a few minutes of trying to untangle, brush, and crunch.

We'll make the bus, after all, I thought as I put on my uniform. I sprinted down the stairs, taking two at a time and then landing with a large thump and another perfect ten-point landing. My dad smiled at me. Instead of giving me the usual frown, my mom smiled slightly.

Hmm...what does mom want? So that is the reason for no yelling...

"I made your breakfast scramble into a sandwich and put it in your lunch pack," my dad said with a kiss on my forehead.

Alec was waiting by the door. My dad tugged on one of the hair braids. "Your grandma will love these. We'll pick you up right after school."

Oh no, I thought. I didn't want to visit my grandmother today. It wasn't just because she was odd, but I needed to fix this sleepwalking thing. What was going to happen next?

Maybe I could put a lock on my door or try electrical shocks? I thought, but dad was right; perhaps I should get to know this grandma better. Once a year, my parents would stuff the family into economy seats and jet across the country to North Carolina. If my mom had a good year in real estate, they'd fly into Orlando and see the Mouse first before driving up to spend a few days where my dad grew up.

Grandma Enola lived on the reservation of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee. I hated that part of the annual "go east" trip. My grandma would harp on and on about how the white population had stolen our land, massacred our people, and brought disease and poverty to a once-powerful tribe.

Did Grandma realize that Alec and I were half white and my mom's side was generations removed from these crimes? Now I was getting the lectures year-round. I had to spend a few Friday afternoons each month visiting the odd old lady instead of only once a year.

I balled both of my fists. *My mother noticed. She always noticed.*

"Aya, don't start in," my mom warned. "This move has been hard for all of us," she added. "It takes years to get established in a new real estate market and for your dad to build up his yoga practice again."

Are we poor? I wondered.

"I have an important meeting with Chief Eve Blackhorse, and I can't leave you at home this week." That reminded me of one of the few good things about moving here. I got to stay by myself and skip the weekly trip to the reservation when my mom had to work in the office on a

busy Friday. When they lived in Oregon, I never got to stay home alone. Instead, I went over to my grandparents, who lived next door or went home with a friend.

“Dynamite, you haven’t been there for the last three weeks, and your grandma asks about you,” my dad said. “You look so much like her pictures as a girl with these braids,” he added.

Okay, that got me. He had played the “dynamite card.” My dad said that I would tighten my tiny fists, hold my breath, and turn red when I was a toddler before starting to cry or scream. He said it was like looking at a stick of dynamite getting ready to explode. He called my mom Firecracker because she usually already had exploded into a glorious display of starbursts.

I decided that it was best to nod and get out the door. No girl likes to be told they look like their grandmother, but at least it seemed like they were settling for a once-a-month visit, and I liked the weeks that I didn’t have to go up to the reservation. This week, my mom was going with them, which meant I was too.

No alone computer time, and I really want to do more research and figure this all out. If only the wireless connections weren’t so slow on my phone, she’d be able to do more work on this. But unfortunately, Alec and I usually used up all our fast data allotment by the first few days of the month, and now I was in the “too slow Joe” zone of data packet speed. At least the school bus would get Wi-Fi by the end of the year.



Since Megan didn’t get on at her regular stop, it was safe for me to finish my tofu scramble sandwich without Megan making fun of me. *This was going to be nice,* I thought as I tried to get enough bars on my phone to bring up a good browser.

But, for most of the trip, Alec excitedly texted me about the Bear Zoo up at the reservation. I looked up, and that “rez” boy with the ponytail was staring at me. I brushed my face with the back of my hand. *Probably something on my face*, I thought. He was sort of cute and smart but quiet.

His name was Dakota, and he always got on the bus a few stops after me and sat a few rows forward and opposite Me. But Megan usually blocked my view of him. Now, I had a straight shot at him with the empty seat and vice versa. He was also in my third-period English class. He got teased a lot by Megan and her gang, but he probably deserved it. He wouldn't stick out so much if he'd cut his hair. He looked like he was straight off the reservation.

Look at me; I'm just as bad with these silly braids, I thought as I flipped them over my shoulder.



I got through my first two classes without anyone making fun of my “Indian” braids. Although I hated going to school, I liked the schoolwork. I was ahead of most of the kids in the basics but missing stuff when it came to pop culture. That is what growing up with no TV or Internet does to you. Thank goodness now for the new computer and cell phone. The laptop was a peace settlement from my dad after announcing the move. It was quite a surprise also to get a cell phone this summer.

Yes, my dad was the major tree hugger in the family, but when confronted with a long five-day drive across the country, he decided that his kids could use a cell phone to watch videos and stay in touch with our old friends.

One problem...none of my old friends had cell phones yet. The Waldorf School practically forbade watching TV or getting on the Internet until they were in high school.

My old friends said they would stay in touch, but they stopped after a few landline phone calls during the first few weeks. When I would try to reach them, they were usually about to go somewhere with someone and then didn't answer my messages. I had been at this school for almost three months, and nobody talked to me except Megan, and I didn't enjoy her taunts. Megan was in this class.

If I can get into my seat quickly, then Megan won't have the chance to make fun of me.

But standing outside my third-period class was that "rez kid" Dakota. Was he waiting for me? They did have five more minutes, but maybe I could just look the other way and get by him since nobody else was around this early. But instead, he reached out for me.

What was he doing? I wondered.

"We need to talk about last night," Dakota whispered as he took hold of my arm. In addition to making the inmates here at Asheville Middle School climb up and down three floors of stairs, they decided that lockers were dangerous. Kids had to carry around our books using huge backpacks as prehistoric beasts of burden. I liked to keep a few extra books in my backpack to read the next lesson for other classes during boring parts of the school day. I also loved keeping notebooks filled with my observations. After Dakota grabbed me, I lost my balance and landed on my butt just as kids were starting to arrive for third period. *Last night? What did he mean?*

"What the...?" I hissed.

Dakota squatted down to help me, but I pushed him away. He landed hard on his butt. I had always wondered how the terrible term “redskin” had started. Native Americans are not red; they are a warm brown skin tone. Then, looking at Dakota, I figured it out. He looked like a ripe tomato left too long on the vine and ready to burst. I was probably just as red, prepared for battle or ready to explode like dynamite.

Another thing this middle school required of its inmates was peace and harmony, and one of the teachers immediately spotted this little disruption and came to settle things. The teacher, Mrs. Kirk, snatched our ID lanyards from around our necks.

“Zero tolerance for fighting. Lunch detention, room 305,” she said as she examined the IDs. “Aya and Dakota, you will get these back then.”

I gathered my books and hurried into my chair towards the front of the room. It was tempting to turn around and look at Dakota, who sat in the last row.

What did he mean about last night?



At lunch, I walked into the detention room. There were about a dozen kids already eating their lunches. A bored teacher was sitting at the desk eating his lunch. The sign behind him said *Silence Required*. I noticed Dakota towards the right, and I sat about as far away from him as possible.

Detention wasn't as bad as I thought. Lunch was that painful time when you were a new kid. I usually sat alone on a small retaining wall, reading a book while kids sat around on the

lawn or in little groups at one of the tables. Sometimes she'd tried to look like I was waiting for someone. I quickly devoured my lunch and headed to the library to read until the bell sounded.

The detention teacher finished his lunch and then left the room. Dakota got up to throw something away, and while returning, he dropped a folded piece of paper on my desk. I looked around. Nobody saw that.

I opened the note, and it said, *I'm sorry. I thought you had discovered your dream spirit last night.*

I turned around to look at him, but his head was deep inside a book. The teacher returned and handed each detainee their lanyards as the lunch bell rang. When I got up to leave, all I saw was the back of Dakota as he hurried away. I didn't have any other classes with Dakota, and my folks were picking us up after school to drive up to the reservation, so she'd have to wait until Monday on the bus to ask him. I glanced down one more time at the note. *Dream spirit. What did that mean?*

Yes, I was clueless about most things Cherokee. My dad was more a yoga guru and nature lover than a Native American and didn't talk about that part of his life. Most of my childhood vacation days on the reservation were spent hiking, swimming, or visiting the Bear Zoo. I knew someone who knew everything about being Cherokee, and it wasn't this kid, Dakota.

Chapter 5 - Grandma Enola and Black Holes

The forty-mile drive from Asheville to Cherokee, North Carolina, could be made in less than an hour, but it seemed like my father liked to take his time today. With my mom and Alec focused on their cell phones and my dad concentrating on the road, I could take in all the wonder and beauty of the Oconaluftee River Valley.

It wasn't as majestic as the Blue Ridge Parkway, but this time of the year, the waterfalls on each side of the road were breathtaking. When I heard we were moving from Portland, Oregon, to the east coast, I thought I was trading the wilderness for crowds. But in reality, Portland was crowded, and we lived in what my mom referred to as a "character 1940s bungalow," with only one bathroom. It was bad enough to share a bathroom now with Alec, but there was always a fight with the whole family before moving here. Now we had a big new suburban house with built-in closets and bathrooms everywhere.

The leaves were starting to turn, which caused me to look for a moment at Alec. He seemed happier. He had made the big downstairs family room his own and usually had it to himself to watch TV alone at night. He had his new canyon bike friends, and he liked these weekly visits up to the reservation.

I was not happy, and I knew I constantly let everyone know that with my anger. I'm sure that is probably why my mom and I fought so much. On the long car trip out from Portland to Asheville, I complained over and over about leaving my dozens of friends, kids I had known since preschool. The Waldorf School was different than public schools. Like me, Alec also had the same teacher from year to year. This enabled the teachers to stay fresh with new subjects each year and develop deeper relationships with their students.

But I wasn't sure Alec's Waldorf teacher had any training in fixing his stutter. Alec seemed to twin sense that my first few months at this new school were painful and lonely for me, and he thought he had come up with a perfect plan; bring back the haunted house at Halloween. My brother had good intentions and great execution but disastrous results.

Our family had made a haunted house when we were little kids and hosted an informal neighborhood party. This month, Alec had found the old boxes in the storage room, and he hauled them upstairs. I was delighted and spent hours creating unique invitations. I helped Alec put in some new gory features in the house. The grapes for eyeballs and spaghetti for zombies' guts were epic. For the first time in months, I felt happy and hopeful. Each time the doorbell rang, I'd jump up, grab the bowl of goodies and hand out the candy, which allowed me to look out and see if anyone from school was coming to our haunted house.

But nobody came, I remembered. Not one girl from the dozens of invitations I handed out showed up. At first, I bit my lip to hold back the tears of disappointment, but by the end of the evening, I sat down and ate the eyeballs – all of them.

Next, I dumped the zombie guts in the trash. I waited for my dad to correct me about recycling, but everyone started walking on eggshells that night after they saw how angry I was. The following day when I up, Alec had the haunted house torn down and back in storage. We never talked about that night again, but the anger and hurt lingered.

Last summer, when I heard we were moving here, I had no idea that being Cherokee and looking like I did was challenging in a town like Asheville. I did early Google searches, and it said Asheville was eighty-five percent white. After the Civil War, the smaller Black population

formed their own communities, mainly in an area called “the block” downtown. The Native Americans kept to their reservation in nearby Cherokee, North Carolina.

Nobody thought of my dad or me as being Native American back at the Waldorf School. My dad looked more like a hippy with his ponytail.

They didn't label us as anything, I thought. Kids at the Waldorf School were a rainbow of colors, and they embraced diversity. But here in Asheville, I was classified as a “rez kid,” which equated in North Carolina to drugs, alcohol, and the crime that comes from those activities. The good people of Asheville preferred that the Native Americans stay on the reservation and out of their clean white town.

Alec perked up and waited for my dad to start his spiel about the huge casino at the edge of the reservation. How often had I heard how it brought needed jobs to the area? Then my dad would tell us about the time long ago when it was the Frontier Land theme park. My dad and his “best friend,” Eve, could spend the day riding everything for only a dollar. Later, it became Water World, but that didn't last long, and eventually, Harrah's gobbled up the valuable location.

The Cherokee tribe benefited from jobs, but I didn't get it. I wished it was a water park. Those made a lot of money and fun jobs.

I could have worked at a water park during the summer, I thought. *But a casino?*

At least they hadn't messed with Eagle's Peak and the creek. Alec and I loved going down Slide Rock and then hiking up to Eagle's Peak during our summer visits to North Carolina.

“Here it comes,” my dad announced as they rounded the last corner. My mom didn’t look up from her cell phone, but Alec craned his neck.

“Grrrrr...” Alec and my dad said in unison as they passed the Cherokee Bear Zoo. Alec made his bear claw gesture and growled a little louder than usual. He was probably upset that they had to visit the tribe offices first and keep his bear friends waiting.

What was it about Alec and those bears, I thought?



Chief Eve Blackhorse crossed her office and held out her arms for a hug. “Adam Mankiller, I don’t think I’ve seen you this happy since you pushed me into the water at Slide Rock!”

I felt an immediate chill as the stunning woman crossed the room. But I also saw my father blush as he warmly hugged the chief of the Cherokee tribe and then looked around her office.

Gross, I thought. Is this woman flirting with my dad?

“You have come a long way from that scrawny kid who could trip over a pine nut,” my father said.

Eve laughed as she held out her hand to my mom. “I have heard so many great things about you, Andrea. You made Agent of the Month shortly after moving here.”

My mom managed to shake the chief's hand while ushering Alec and me forward. I couldn't help but think that they had all been dragged into this as a sales pitch and were on display.

Now I was close to the chief and staring into the cold dark eyes of the head of the Cherokees in North Carolina. During the lesson on black holes, my science teacher was wrong last week when she said that we'd never see one in our lifetime. But she was looking into two deep black holes. The gravity was so strong in black holes that nothing could escape its pull, not even light.

The multitasking chief touched my braids while shaking Andrea's hand. "You look like your grandmother. Did you know that your distant cousin, Wilma Mankiller, was the first female chief of the greater Cherokee Nation? Cherokees are the largest tribe, with over four hundred thousand members worldwide, although our little band in North Carolina is one of the smallest. I am sure your grandma has explained why."

Alec and I nodded. They had heard this story again and again from our father and grandmother. The chief noticed my dad looking at a map on the wall. She quickly took a position next to him and then pointed.

"Andrea, I'd like you to be the exclusive listing agent for these twenty homes under construction in Crystal Falls. We have sold only two, and they were investors. Don Sinclair bought this one," the chief said as she tapped on one of the squares representing the houses. She turned to Aya. "I think you're in school with his darling daughter, Megan?"

I nodded as Adam asked, "Why not a broker from the reservation?"

I watched my mother elbow him. Nobody could do that as covertly as my mother.

“I want someone from Asheville. Someone connected with the tribe, but not too connected, if you know what I mean,” the chief said as she winked at Adam and touched his arm.

Am I the only one seeing this? I thought.

“What about the new dam? It is hard to sell homes close to the path of any dam, but a new one, that’s especially hard,” Andrea asked.

The chief smiled. “That is why I picked you. If it were easy, anyone could do it. I picked you because I’ve heard that you can talk anyone into anything.” Again, Eve winked at Adam.

“Gross, gross, that was definitely flirting,” I thought. *Isn’t my mother watching? Nope, she only sees the map and the dollar signs from getting this listing.*

“Next week, we will close the spillway gate and start filling Eagle’s Peak Lake. The tribe also owns the property here, along Crystal Creek, and around the new lake,” the chief explained.

“Lakefront property is worth even more,” Andrea said. “But how safe are these twenty new homes?”

“Safe now that the dam is there. Before we built the dam, Crystal Creek would be more like Crystal River when the rains were heavy. We can now control the creek and have the added benefit of a new lake,” the chief explained. I looked back at the map to understand it better.

At the top was Eagle’s Peak and a tiny pond that some might have called Eagle’s Peak Lake. Alec and I loved playing there in the summer. At the bottom of the lake were Crystal Falls

and Crystal Creek, where they would go down Slide Rock. Then it was miles of open land that the tribe owned but was not officially part of the reservation.

It made sense to sell that land to people like Megan's dad, who wouldn't think of living on the rez but wanted to live in this beautiful valley. They had put the dam at Slide Rock, and once operational, it would turn that tiny pond into a vast lake. I could see ski boats, fishing boats, docks, and fun stuff.

But no more Slide Rock, I thought sadly.

"Eagle's Peak. That was one of our favorite hiking places as kids. It will be underwater if you shut the gate and create the lake," my dad said as he continued to study the map.

"Yes, and for a good reason," Chief Eve Blackhorse said. "I can't tell you how many tax dollars and tribal police resources we spend each year saving city folks at those rocks and camping along the creek."

"But—" Adam started, but Andrea cut him off as she took him by the arm and said, "I'm sure we've bored the kids enough with all this business talk. Why don't you take them to the Bear Zoo and then to your mom's before she starts to worry?"

Another win scored for the Mom Machine, I thought as their dad ushered Alec and me out of the office. After they are gone, my mother will have that listing signed in no time. I knew my mom was one of the best real estate agents in the world.



Chapter 6 - The Bear Zoo and Indian Princess

I watched Alec at the Cherokee Bear Zoo with fascination. *The kid really has a way with animals*, I thought. Other people tossed their bread and apples purchased from the gift shop at the bears, but both bears ignored it and instead waited for Alec to throw something and then stood up and seemed to smile at him. Then Alec would talk to them, although I couldn't hear what he was saying.

Her dad bought more food trays, and I decided to do a test. I waited until Alec was done and motioned for him to sit next to me on the bench. The bears still ignored the food tossed by the other tourists and continued staring at Alec. It was time to experiment.

“Go over there,” I said as he motioned for Alec to walk to the other side of the ramp fence with a tray.

The bears followed Alec and waited for their treat. I stood up and went to the far right with the first food tray. The bears looked back and forth at them, almost in puzzlement. They stared at Alec.

Did Alec just nod at them?

Finally, they left Alec and moved back to where I stood. One got up on his haunches. The other seemed to clap his hands together. *Probably because I'm a tastier treat*, thought I as I tossed a few apples at them.

I motioned for Alec to return to the bench and handed him the rest of the tray as I retook my seat. Alec got up and continued to feed the bears.

I used to love coming here during our summer visits when I was little, I thought. But today, I need to talk to Grandma. Something the chief said made me realize that I was a lot more “Indian” than I thought. My family descends from chiefs, warriors, and princesses. *What are these dream spirits that Dakota wrote in his note?*

Her grandma was a docent at the Museum of the Cherokee Indian. The town and museum were crowded, as the fall colors in North Carolina brought lots of tourists into the area. There was only so much time that you could spend looking at leaves, so a bunch of guilty-looking white people unexpectedly learned how many Cherokees their ancestors killed by marching them out of North Carolina into Oklahoma.

They thought they would take some great pictures in front of a Cherokee warrior statue out front, and instead, they got a lecture from my warrior grandma, I thought with a smile. I held up my iPhone and looked at my dad. *It was almost closing time; they needed to go.*



I walked around the Museum of the Cherokee, trying hard not to appear impatient, while my grandma explained the Trail of Tears to a lingering group.

“*Dream spirit, dream spirit,*” I kept thinking. I had looked at every exhibit, and there was nothing. I needed to talk to Grandma alone. Thankfully my dad took Alec to get some dinner to bring back. I’d have time alone to ask my grandma. The place closed at five, but there were always some who wanted to get their full money’s worth of the entrance fee.

Grandma Enola lectured the tourists standing around a particularly gruesome photo exhibit. “All the Indians were gathered up or rounded up by federal soldiers, put in pens, and guarded until ready for the move.”

The tourists’ eyes moved from the photo to their shoes, looking as if they all had stepped in dog poop on the way in.

“They were gathered up by their clans and left behind their homes, livestock, gardens, and crops. As a result, over four thousand perished without adequate food or protection from the elements,” Grandma finished with a flourish.

I smiled. *Nobody could dish out shame like my grandma.* The group rushed off to the gift store, leaving Grandma in the dust.

“Looks like it will be another record sales day!” Grandma said as I reached out for Aya. Grandma was a natural-born hugger and pulled in a big one from Aya. “Let’s get out of here.”



Grandma lived in what she liked to call her “cell” but was actually Senior Housing Unit #3. The tiny house had a long Cherokee name on the door, but my grandma liked to make everyone smile. She joked about her next step on the path into the “Great Spirit waiting room,” which was the senior housing building for those no longer able to live independently. She was proud to be able to work and live on her own.

“What is on your mind?” Grandma asked as she opened a can of ginger ale and placed it in front of me at the kitchen table.

Can she read my thoughts? I wondered.

“What is a dream spirit?” I asked.

Grandma sat down and popped open a can of real beer. *My grandma is salty, crusty, and fearless*, I thought. I couldn’t figure out why my dad felt he needed to be close to his mom after Grandpa died. *This was a woman who could take care of herself and a small war party.*

“Dream spirit.... I haven’t heard that term for quite a while,” Grandma mused. But she quickly got back into museum docent mode.

“Cherokees embraced Christianity; in fact, the Cherokee tribe is considered one of the five recognized ‘civilized’ tribes because of that. Remember your Catholic upbringing of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

I nodded. *Never could really figure out that Holy Spirit thing*, I thought. *But best not to go into that now; Grandma is getting close to actually answering my question.*

“Cherokees believe that the physical world is not separated from the spiritual world. They are one and the same. Dreams are an extension of reality, an opportunity to travel to other realms and communicate with ancestors and animal guides. But a dream spirit is special. Both dream and animal spirits join with the human form and enable both to do superhuman feats. But, animal guides are different.” Grandma said.

Grandma Enola explained how children sometimes bond with an animal guide and can hear their thoughts.

“Our thoughts?” I asked.

Her grandma shook her head. “No, the animal talks to the child with their thoughts. An animal guide helps the child grow and understand their place in our natural world. But animal spirits and dream spirits are very different than a guide. A spirit takes over the body. I think one of our ancestors mentions a dream spirit.”

Grandma got up and ran her finger through the old books on the living room shelf. Finally, she stopped on one particular frayed volume.

“I found it,” she said as she brought it back to the table, blowing the dust off of it on the way. “This is the diary of your great-great-great-grandmother Clarissa... Princess Clarissa,” Grandma said as she opened the old journal and carefully turned each page.

“We come from royalty?” I asked.

Grandma shook her head. “Clarissa fell in love with a white man, Elijah Phillips, in the 1800s. It was common back then to get their white family to accept an Indian wife by saying that she was a Cherokee princess,” Grandma explained.

A sketch fell from the journal of a beautiful Cherokee girl. I picked it up. “Is this Clarissa?”

Grandma nodded. “Yes, she was quite young when she married. We think she died a few years later after giving birth to a son on the Trail of Tears. Her Cherokee brothers wanted to bring the boy into the clan and raise him, but his father took him away and raised him with his other children from his second wife, a white woman.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Land. When the surviving Cherokees arrived in the new Indian Territory that is now Oklahoma, the ones that were of Indian blood got free land. This Cherokee son enabled the greedy father to get a land allotment of one hundred sixty acres in his son’s name.” Grandma turned another page.

“Here, dream spirit!” Grandma pointed excitedly to a page. “Read this. My eyes are so tired.”

I squinted to make out the beautiful script on the page. “‘I was so hungry, and Tsa Ni was shrinking before my eyes,’” I read.

“Tsa Ni means ‘John’ in Cherokee. John Phillips was her son,” Grandma explained.

“‘My dream spirit came to me last night, and in the morning, a dead deer was beside my sleep blanket, and I had blood on my hands and mouth ...’ Gross!” I exclaimed.

“She said ‘gross’?” Grandma asked with a twinkle in her eye as I scanned the rest of the page. “Any more about the dream spirit?”

I shook my head.

Grandma picked the sketch and studied it. “With those braids, you look like her.”

I looked at the sketch. “She was beautiful. How old was she?”

“This sketch was probably made before she married. Maybe sixteen? This dress looks like a Cherokee maiden’s dress. After marrying the white man, most Cherokee women wore settler’s gowns because—”

Grandma started to explain but then was distracted by the television. In the living room, the local Asheville affiliate news on TV interviewed a small child in front of BJ's Diner.

"Isn't that where your dad and Alec went to pick up dinner?" Grandma asked as she headed for the living room couch.

I glanced at the television and joined my grandma on the couch but kept the journal with her. Once Grandma started watching television, her eyes grew wide with the focus of a wolf.

"There's Alec!" Grandma exclaimed. She sure could jump up fast for an older woman as she stood a foot from the television, almost blocking my view. Grandma tapped excitedly on the screen. On TV, a newscaster with brilliant white teeth crouched down to be level with a little girl that looked about six. Behind them was Alec in the background, doing a photobomb of the shot and jumping up and down. Adam came up alongside Alec and guided him away. The camera zoomed in on the little girl who stared fearlessly at the newscaster.

"What else can you tell us about last night?" the newscaster asked.

The little girl smiled at the camera and replied, "A black horse took me, and I was lost and wet; then an Indian princess found me dead and brought me back to life and pulled me out of the river."

The newscaster stood up, and the camera focused on him. "There you have it. Last night, after searching for five hours for little Jessica and fears growing that she had drowned in the river, she mysteriously reappeared. She was brought in a canoe to safety by some amazing superhero from the Cherokee tribe," the newscaster said with a wrapping-up tone.

The little girl tugged at the newscaster's jacket. "It was a bear," she said.

The newscaster crouched down again next to her. "A bear saved you?"

"No, the Indian Princess had these long braids and was flying on a bear, not in a canoe," the little girl corrected him. "She jumped in the water—"

The newscaster interrupted her by standing back up. "This is Tom Sanders, coming live to you from the heart of the Cherokee reservation, where a mysterious tribal woman and her bear-like dog found this little girl in the raging river and returned her safely to her family."

Grandma Enola got up and looked out the window. "I hope this doesn't delay Alec and your dad from getting dinner here soon. I could eat a horse."

That was me! I saved that girl last night. It wasn't a dream; I was wet, and my hair was in braids, I realized.



Chapter 7 – White Witch and Pig’s Head

I was in a trance all the way home from Cherokee. At first, my brother talked about the television crew, the lost little girl, and the bears, but eventually, he was exhausted and dozed off.

Her mom was so excited about getting the big listing from Chief Blackhorse, and she talked the rest of the way. “Crystal Falls will have the most luxurious houses in the greater Asheville area. Don Sinclair and his daughter, Megan, moved in this week. I need to get them a housewarming gift, then start on the marketing material. Yes, I know I won’t get the commission on that one, but all the rest will be mine!” My mom leaned over and kissed my dad on the cheek.

Yada, yada, yada... All I could think about was Princess Clarissa. Why didn’t I remember the dream from last night earlier? Now it was so clear; I saved that little girl. Dakota and I were riding on the backs of bears and spotted the little girl in the water, floating face up. My bear took flight, and I grabbed the girl and dragged her out of the river. I was next to the girl, and Dakota was chanting and doing all sorts of things with stuff from a leather pouch. There was smoke, and I joined in the chants. The next thing I knew, I woke up wet this morning.

Why was I remembering it now?

I wished I had listened better when her grandma talked about Cherokee lore over the years. Was this something that happened at night to every Cherokee teen?

I was terrified when I got home, but I knew what I needed to do. I snuck a six-pack of my mother’s Diet Cokes into my closet and vowed not to fall asleep. No more joyriding will happen tonight with my body by this Princess Clarissa with that boy Dakota’s help. I had a lot of

research to do as I started doing searches on my computer. *There must be a way to make this stop without staying up all night.*



The next morning, I crept downstairs to watch the Saturday morning news. I had done it...I stayed awake all night. I wanted to look for more stuff about the little girl being saved. I enjoyed Saturdays. My mom always had an open house, and my dad taught a sunrise yoga class at the local park. Alec went out early to ride his bike in the canyon with friends, meaning I usually had the house to myself.

Something on the news caught my attention, and I moved closer to the TV. Chief Eve Blackhorse was being interviewed, and the banner at the bottom of the screen read, Hiker missing in the reservation hiking area.

The close-up was of Eve as she said, "That area is dangerous. The sooner it is closed off, the better."

"There have been protests that the new Crystal Falls Dam will put this hiking area underwater along with some ancient burial grounds," the reporter countered.

The chief smiled directly into the camera. "Yes, but that is a good thing. This area is not safe. My thoughts are with the missing hiker's family, but when we close the outlet next week and start creating the new Eagle's Peak Lake, we'll no longer have to worry about hikers attempting to climb Eagle's Peak or children drowning in the campground."

I knew the area well. Alec and I had probably climbed Eagle's Peak a dozen times during the summers with their dad while visiting their grandparents. I was sad that it would soon be underwater. *But a new lake; that could be fun too.*

Chief Eve Blackhorse, my dad's old girlfriend? I had heard my mom refer to the chief that way jokingly. My dad said that he grew up with Eve, but they lost touch after he went away to college. Then, my dad got his teaching degree, and instead of returning to teach at the reservation school like everyone wanted him to, he fell in love with my "Firecracker" of a mom and went home with her Oregon. After a few years of teaching school, it made better sense to teach yoga and be a full-time dad, so my mom could sell houses.

Ancient burial grounds? The chief didn't answer that question, and this was the first I had heard of that.

A little girl lost and almost drowned and now a hiker lost; I wondered if there was more to this.



A few hours later, I pounded on the door of a suburban house. Although I had spent the night and early morning trying to learn about dream spirits and sleepwalking, I found very little, and none of it specific to young girls and Cherokees.

It took a bit of Internet searching, but I found Dakota's address. Of course, there were not many Buschkoetters in Asheville. I couldn't figure out how a kid who looked straight off the reservation got a name like Dakota Buschkoetter. But based on where he got on the bus, this had to be his house.

“Yes?”

A white witch opened the door. Well, not really a witch, but probably the whitest woman that I had ever seen in a flowing white dress. This can't be the right place, I thought as I searched for the house number to the right.

“Sorry, wrong house,” I muttered as I backed away from the door, losing my footing and landing in a woody mint bush. I had a huge gash where my knee struck a rock when I got up. It started trickling blood.

The witch reached down and helped me into the kitchen. I shouted, “Dakota! Bring your medicine bag.” After depositing me into a kitchen chair, the witch turned to the stove, where a pig's head sat in a huge pot. “You have to be careful to make sure it doesn't boil,” said the white witch.

For the first time in a long time, I was speechless. I had violated every Stranger Danger rule and now sat in a witch's kitchen, who probably was staring at me to figure out if her head would fit in the pot. Then, finally, the witch came over to me to look closer and gently touched my clenched fists. “Don't be afraid,” I said.

Yup, that is always what witches say before they eat you, I thought. So first, a princess is taking over my body at night, and now a white witch wants to eat it during the day.

“Mom, did you have to make head cheese today?” Dakota said as he rushed into the kitchen and knelt in front of Aya. He held a cloth firmly against the gash and then took my hand and guided me to press it to the wound. Next, he placed a leather pouch on the floor and dug through the contents.

Mom? Was this woman Dakota's mother? I felt a little lightheaded, but things were starting to make sense.

“When your cousins get done butchering a pig, this has to be in the pot by the next day.” She turned to me and added, “They also complain about the process but sure enjoy eating the product,” she said as Dakota cleaned the wound and applied salve to my leg.

“Can I get you something to drink?” his mom asked as she opened the refrigerator. “We have sweet tea, orange juice, and Dakota's favorite, Dr. Pepper, of course.”

I couldn't figure out why his mother laughed when she said and emphasized the “doctor” Pepper. Actually, at this point, I couldn't figure out anything. I thought about the rescue night again. Dakota looked the same but bigger than I remembered from that night, and he was working so hard on my leg.

Is he saying something? Is that a chant? I thought.

His mother poured a glass of sweet tea and set it in front of her. “Didn't take me long after moving here from Germany ten years ago that in the South, you better offer some sweet tea to your guest in the first five minutes or be banned for life.” She set a Dr. Pepper in front of Dakota.

“I'm Olga Buschkoetter, and I can tell by the look on your face that you expected Dakota's family to look more like you two,” Olga said as she went back to her pig's head and continued her yada, yada yacking. “I met your dad at PTA. I'm thinking of signing up for some of his yoga lessons.”

Dakota stopped his chanting, took a sip of Dr. Pepper, and stared at my leg.

Was he admiring his work? Was he a doctor? Why did he seem so old? I wondered.

“The swelling and bleeding have stopped,” Dakota said as he got up. He no longer seemed small as he gently touched my arm. “Want to go into the family room where we can talk and get away from this pig smell?”

I wordlessly let him guide me into the next room. Olga followed them with their drinks and set them down on the coffee table after carefully putting coasters under them. She retreated – I think to us kids some privacy.

“I’m adopted,” Dakota explained as he continued to keep one eye on the wound on my knee.

I looked at it. It was gone. *How did he do that?*

Dakota dug into his leather bag. “I mixed tea tree oil, echinacea, and grapeseed extract into this salve. My animal guide taught me all this while I was growing up. He’s pretty old but knows everything about Cherokee medicine.”

Animal guide, dream spirit. Some of my lightheadedness and shock disappeared, and I remembered why I was there. I spent the night hyped up on caffeine learning about the history of the Cherokee people. Her people. Thankfully I never fell asleep. I dug Dakota’s note from my pocket and handed it to him. He read it to her. “I’m sorry. I thought you had found your dream spirit.”

“Dream spirit,” I said. I could hear my voice, so part of my brain had restarted.

Dakota nodded. “We needed you last night to save that hiker, and Clarissa couldn’t find you. Where were you?”

His mother came back and announced, "Time to get going: they've killed another one."

Dakota smiled. “It is going to be a good day. Can Aya ride up there with us?”

“Give me your phone, Aya, and I’ll call your dad,” his mom said.

How much weirder could this day get? I thought as I nodded and handed over my phone.



Chapter 8 - Fat Man and the Dam

Nightwind enjoyed the ride over to Crystal Falls. He used to play here as a foal with his mother before he became Eve's animal guide and raised her. She had tied him to the railing of the Sinclair home and then sat on the porch with the fat white man. Today Eve didn't talk to him, and he didn't understand why.

Why did she shut him out so much lately? When she was little, they would talk together at night, and she would teach him how to fly around this valley, laughing and playing. Most animal guides can't fly, but he and Eve were special. They were becoming more and more like animal spirits. He was starting to feel her, but lately, she was all business and almost barked her orders to him.

He still loved her because he knew that the weight of the whole tribe had fallen upon his little Eve. She was too young when they talked her into running for chief. Eve had done such a fantastic job at the casino. She increased profits, and that doubled the size of everyone's casino checks. But then, Eve had an idea that real estate was where big money was. This land was worth more than the small cut from Harrah's gambling, and Eve knew that.

Last week he snatched that little girl for Eve. That was fun. He had hours to let the girl ride on him before he deposited her into the creek, as Eve told him. He didn't tell Eve that he couldn't let her drown; instead, he put her on a rock, and she fell asleep. Then he found Clarissa and told her it was done. He had seen Clarissa the night before teaching that funny bear how to fly. He laughed and laughed each time the bear ran into a tree. It had brought back such memories of when Eve taught him to fly...when Eve cared about him. But it was his job to guide Eve and ensure she did the right thing.

Maybe Eve found out and is mad at me?

After she tied him to the post, Eve gave him an apple. *She is still my lovely girl*, he thought. He liked the view from here as he enjoyed his apple. He could see the majestic earthen dam built by Eve and the tribe and dozens of big fancy homes scattered throughout his valley in various stages of construction. He was proud of what his Eve had done. *She is helping the tribe, but what has she become?*

The fat man, who Eve called Don Sinclair, sat down and picked up his glass of ice tea. “Sorry about the interruption. It is hard to get a free moment to take a piss nowadays.”

Eve nodded in agreement. “What can I do for you, Don?”

Nightwind moved slightly to the left to hear better and cocked his head.

“Gotta problem with one of your rez kids picking on my little Megan. I’ve done my best to raise my little princess without a mother, teach her right and wrong”

“I hate to interrupt, Don, but most of the kids on the reservation go to school in Cherokee. Doesn’t Megan go to Asheville?”

“Here’s where it gets delicate, honey. This kid, Aya Mankiller, is the daughter of the real estate agent you selected to get this listing,” Don said as he gestured to the houses. “I thought with a name like Andrea Mankiller, we’d get some authenticity for the Northerners with lots of money who want the native experience.” The fat man made little air quotes at the word “native.”

“I’ve met Aya and her brother, and I’d hardly call them rez kids—”

“I tell Megan to stay away from those rez kids. Most grew up in druggie houses, but this one ...” Don made a tomahawk gesture. “A real troublemaker. Don’t want us to end up massacred in our sleep.”

His Eve took a long sip of her tea. Nightwind wondered if she was visualizing the damage that a tomahawk would do to the fat man’s shiny forehead like he was. *Patience, my Eve. This man has the attention span of a two-year-old.* The fat man looked at the dam.

“Tell me again how safe that thing is.”

His darling Eve smiled and went into her sales pitch. He had heard it many times when she talked to the tribe. “The Crystal Falls Dam enables us to control the flow of Crystal Creek, which during the rainy season turns into a raging river. Most of this area would be underwater during a hundred-year flood, but now, these homes are so safe, you don’t have to buy expensive flood insurance.”

Eve got up. “As far as the other matter, let me handle that. I will make sure Aya Mankiller never bothers your little Megan again.”

Good answer; say whatever you need to make this guy happy and get us out of here, Nightwind thought.

Eve leaned down and whispered as they rode away, “Did you hear him say massacred?” Nightwind nodded. “I think Chiksika said, ‘When a white army battles Indians and wins, it is called a great victory, but if they lose, it is called a massacre.’”

She's talking to me again! I can do massacre, starting with the fat man, thought Nightwind as he went faster.



They rode like the wind towards the dam. “See how well it blends into the valley?” Eve asked him. He nodded and gave her a little neigh. He didn’t care if it was purple and had neon lights; he loved everything Eve did. “Yes, the cost was a factor in building an earthen dam, but you taught me that making sure that the things we build are part of this world is important.”

Nightwind didn’t think it was a good time to argue. He had been there when the engineers met her in the valley and laid out the plans for a concrete gravity dam, but his Eve was brilliant. She questioned the millions more it would cost and told them to go back and propose an earthen dam. She said it was because of the strong Cherokee connection with the land and their commitment to stewardship of the tribe’s homeland.

But Eve did more than that. She took care of her tribe and had done her best ever since the tribe proposed building a casino. Eve was only a teen when Harrah’s came to town with their idea, and Eve fought hard to get it approved. In fact, she didn’t go away to college and stayed with him to make sure the casino happened. At first, he thought it was because she couldn’t bear to leave him, but it was that casino.

Money from the casino brought new housing, upgraded water and sewer systems, and better schools. Those gambling dollars got the tribe a diabetes clinic, an urgent care clinic, a wellness center, a youth center, a recreational park, a visitor center, a community center, a nursery, and a fire substation. Kids got college scholarships, and old folks got new senior

citizens' housing. Everyone got a check from the profits to buy food for their children and pets and sometimes bad stuff, but mostly food. After the quarterly casino checks arrived, he loved the molasses mix that Eve bought as a treat.

Before the casino, tribal businesses closed their doors for the winter months. But in the years since the casino's opening, the stores in town had had plenty of business, with tourists visiting every month of the year. The casino provided steady employment. It was fall, and before the casino, most tourists would be gone by now. But the new casino was now open 24 hours a day, seven days a week – all year-round. Even crime was less because the tribe could afford more police officers.

His Eve was a hero, but this dam worried him. The engineers wanted steel reinforcements, but Eve decided that hardwood would be cheaper and more “of the earth.” He was proud that Eve thought of natural things like that.

But I have been able to chew through even the hardest wood in the forests, Nightwind thought. *That is a lot of water,* he felt as they rode across the dam. The workers below tested the spillway and toe drain outlet by letting the dam fill and then releasing the water.

It seems dangerous; I hope nobody drowns. Well...maybe the fat man is okay, but no little girls like my Eve thought Nightwind. *I love her so much.*



Chapter 9 – Waya and Pig Guts

For someone who probably learned to drive on the dangerous “no speed limit” autobahn in Germany, it seemed like Dakota’s mother would break a land speed record for the longest anyone ever took to make the forty-five-minute drive from Asheville to Cherokee. They had already been on the road for two hours...well, maybe only a half-hour, but it felt like hours to Aya.

Dakota rechecked his medicine bag in the car as I tried to be polite while Olga Buschkoetter retold her life story, starting with the invention of electricity.

“Yes, I’m technically the second wife of Command Sergeant Major Gerard Buschkoetter. The Army is his first wife, and he is still married to her,” Olga said with a giggle before she continued.

“My ‘Sarge’ was a Sergeant First Class in Germany a decade ago when I married him. In the service, there is a joke, “if the Army wanted you to have a wife, they would have issued you one.” I had to laugh at this, I had heard that joke somewhere, but my laugh didn’t slow down Olga’s story.

“I met the Sarge at the NCO club, where I was a civilian employee. I have my degree in social services and helped manage the Morale Welfare and Recreation office,” Olga recounted. Dakota perked up.

“Dad says that her warm heart towards children and winning smile at soldiers broke through his crusty outer shell and got to the chewy treat inside, and she said ‘yes’ when the Sarge proposed to her. That meant she was now official Army-issued equipment,” Dakota added with a smile.

Olga's face turned sad. "Yes, and I accompanied him to North Carolina and Fort Bragg as he moved up the Army ladder. After moving here, we found out there would be no children. Our doctor was kind enough not to tell us why. I applied to be a foster mother, but everything changed during a weekend trip to Asheville and Cherokee. These forests reminded me of home. My gosh, I missed Germany, and I was sad. But, up here in Cherokee, I was happy. With my degree in social services, I visited the tribe's Family Support Services to inquire about remote jobs. Sitting on a bench was my precious Dakota. His father had tried to care for him after his mother died, and now he was in prison."

I looked over at Dakota. This was not something that most people talked about to a new friend.

Must be a German thing to be brutally honest about stuff, I thought as Olga continued.

"The tribe had been unable to find a foster family, and they were moving him to a group home in Asheville. I sat down next to my little Dakota, and after a few moments, the tired darling fell asleep in my lap. We became a family."

Was she crying? I looked over at Dakota, and he turned to look out the window while his mother took a huge gulp of air and continued.

"We knew that we couldn't take him back to Fort Bragg and far from his Cherokee family. However, we passed a lovely new housing development in Asheville. You know... where you live. So, what started as a temporary foster solution led to our Dakota's eventual adoption after his birth father, Sam Whitecloud, realized he could not raise him in prison and released his parental rights."

I looked over at Dakota; he was busy fussing with his medicine bag again. This whole conversation was getting a little weird, but at least I could see the Bear Zoo coming up, and the pain would be over. His mother took another big gulp of air.

Is there more? I wondered.

“We knew how much culture mattered, and for the next decade, I drove Dakota up to the reservation a few times a month to hike, visit his cousins, or the Cherokee Bear Zoo that my Dakota loves.”

“My brother loves that place too,” I added to be polite and maybe shift the conversation to something lighter. But, nope, Dakota’s mom was just getting warmed up.

“My Sarge runs the Advanced Airborne School at Fort Bragg, about four hours away, and is now a Command Sergeant Major. Well... ‘runs’ is probably an overstatement since there are higher-ranking officers that do that actual administration. But my Sarge is the one who fights to preserve the ability to deploy a thousand troops anywhere in the world in 18 hours by either an airborne or air-land assault.”

Wow, I thought. Most people just say, “he’s in the Army.” I looked at Dakota, and he was really proud as he added more.

“He trains soldiers in Jumpmaster, Air Movement Operations, and Basic Airborne techniques. Growing up, I loved going to bed when my dad was home. At bedtime, he would command, “Stand, Hook up, Check Equipment,” which meant to go stand next to the bed. First, Dad would make sure I had brushed my teeth. Then, Dad would shout, ‘Exit,’ pick me up and toss me into bed. Next, my dad would check my ‘landing’ to ensure all was secure and then ‘lights out.’”

As they rounded one of the last curves and then turned up a gravel road, I mistakenly shifted the huge pot filled with all types of equipment, and a “ping” caught Olga’s attention.

“I hope that stuff isn’t in your way, Olga said. “I hate to put all that in the trunk. I feel a certain amount of nostalgia when I think of my sausage stuffer, meat grinder, and sausage pricker. These are some of the few things I brought from Germany after marrying Dakota’s dad.

I looked into the pot. *Really? This junk has sentimental value?*

“My mother handed them to me and said it was the only thing left from my grandmother's house after the nine kids divided things, but my mother was wrong. I have my grandmother's recipes for head cheese and sausage. I have memories of doing this as a young girl with my grandmother. These precious keepsakes are in my heart, and I don’t need a lace table cloth or the family bible.”

All I could think was, *nobody wanted this pig stuff.*

“We’re here!” Dakota said as they pulled into his cousin's driveway, and a kid that looked a lot like Dakota ran to the car. For some reason, nobody opened their car doors, and the kid started running around the car like a little puppy.

“That’s Waya. Waya means wolf in Cherokee,” explained Dakota.

“Does it bite?” I asked as I watched his mom keep her hands firmly on the wheel.

“No, much worse,” Dakota said as he opened his door a crack. His mom sighed as Dakota got out. Waya pounced on Dakota, showering him with hugs and pats. Dakota looked over at his mom, getting quietly out of the car. His formal German mother looked relieved as she came around and nodded at me that the coast was clear and opened my door.

"It was huge; I bet over two hundred pounds," Waya shouted.

"Where's Dusty?" Dakota asked.

Olga leaned in and whispered as I helped her with the pig stuff. “Dusty had been the only child of a much older Cherokee couple until Waya was born. Dusty was a football star and planned to go to college after graduating. But unfortunately, both his parents died, and Dusty ended up being the only parent that Waya knew. Dusty couldn't handle raising Dakota after Sam Whitecloud stole that money from the casino and went to prison. I think Dusty blamed Dakota for leaving the reservation and getting adopted by a woman that looked like me and a man that was well...my Sarge.”

“He’s picking up Tayny from work. She wants to learn how to stuff the pig’s brain from Auntie Olga,” Waya replied.

Dakota turned to Aya. “Tayny is Dusty’s girlfriend. She works at the casino on the books.”

“Accountant,” Olga corrected him. “Tayny is studying to be a CPA,” she added.

“Hey, maybe when she’s a bookie, she can count the money again and prove your dad didn’t steal anything?” Waya offered. For some reason, Dakota’s mom didn’t correct Waya.

“Waya, will you get the pig’s head and put it in this pot?” Olga asked. It was like tossing a tennis ball at a puppy, and Waya almost wagged as he ran behind the trailer with the pot.

“Dakota and Aya, I’ll need a big fire; why don’t you go into the woods and gather some wood and dry kindling. The woodpile looks pitiful. What has Dusty been up to?”



“Mom doesn’t like Dusty,” Dakota explained after they got out of range of his mom’s hearing.

“Because Dusty thinks you’re like an apple?” I asked, and Dakota shook his head.

“I don’t think Dusty would try to accuse me of being red outside and white to the core, but he thinks he’s more Cherokee than me.”

“More? Are you half like me?”

Again, Dakota shook his head. “Being Cherokee is not about blood. Your clan is what is important. If you had no clan or family meant having no rights in the Cherokee tribe. There were no Cherokee "orphans" because if a child's mother died, their clan would take the children into one of their households. When a clan mother adopted a person, they inherited all the rights, rules, and responsibilities of that clan, and vice versa. The clan was just as responsible for them as any clan member by birth. Many famous Cherokees were members of the tribe by adoption, such as Attakullakulla. He was a famous Cherokee warrior and diplomat captured as an infant during a raid and then adopted into your Wolf Clan. He married Nionne Ollie, a Natchez captive adopted by his cousin and, therefore, Cherokee. The marriage was permissible because they were of different clans; he was Wolf Clan, and she was Paint Clan. He was the greatest warrior because he fought many battles with his mind and wit.”

“What does this have to do with dream spirits?”

“Nothing, but you asked why Dusty doesn’t like me. It is simple; he doesn’t think I’m part of our Deer Clan anymore.”

“How can he possibly think you had any say in being adopted at...what...three years old?”

“I am of an age now that I should ask to return to the clan, especially since I’m a disappointment to my adopted dad. I don’t have any contact with my birth father in prison. That is a breach of loyalty to the clan.”

“Why don’t you visit him?”

“Because asking her to take me there would break my mother’s heart.”

“I think you’d be surprised how much your mother would do for you. Right now, she’s up to her elbows in pig guts. I wish I could ask her about dream spirits.”

“I know you want to know more about dream spirits, but there are things we can’t talk about.”

“Like drug addiction and alcoholism?”

“No, we talk too much about those things,” he said.

Did Dakota try to make a joke? This guy has no sense of humor. He was born forty years old, I thought.

“I can’t tell you what happens at night when you are with your dream spirit,” but I can tell you that when you stay awake all night trying to keep her out...it only makes her stronger.”

“Her? It is Clarissa, isn’t it?”

“Do you remember that...or are you guessing?”

What the—how could that possibly matter? I could feel my face getting hot. Dakota gently touched my arm.

“This is important; I am not allowed by tribal rules to tell you what happens with you and your dream spirit; you need to discover this yourself,” Dakota explained. When I got angry, all my energy concentrated in my face, fists, and arms. My brain and mouth shut down to send all the power flow for a fight.

This guy can really tell when I’m getting pissed off, I thought as they gathered wood in silence and then made their way back to the trailer.



Two Mayan gods got out of a pickup as Dakota, and I rounded the trailer carrying their foraging results towards the fire pit. That was the only way to describe what I figured was Dakota's cousin Dusty and his girlfriend, Tayny. Both had shimmering blue-black long hair and perfectly toned bodies. Tayny ran to me and took my load of wood from her.

"Osियो! I have been waiting to meet you," Tayny said with a smile so warm that it could boil the water in the pig's head pot.

"Me?" I asked as I looked at Dusty and Dakota.

Odd, those two didn't greet each other, and no help from Dusty for Dakota. That cold look could quickly put out the fire, I thought.

"Yes, Dakota tells me that you're a computer whiz. I started working in the accounting department at the casino last summer after graduating from college, and there are some...things," I noticed that Tayny's smile had disappeared. Tayny looked nervously at Dakota and Dusty.

"Let's go inside. I want to write down Olga's head cheese recipe," Tayny said as she led me into the trailer. Tayny winked at Dusty as they left, "We'll let the boys keep the fire going."



The kitchen of the trailer was surprisingly large. Olga and Waya were already cooking, grinding, and packaging the various pig parts spread across the counter, table, and even hanging above the sink.

"Waya is a natural at making sausage," Olga said as Waya beamed with pride.

"Last night, I rolled out the pig guts into a washtub with great care, as Auntie Olga taught me, so there were no cuts or tears. I got them very smooth and clean on the outside and to clean out all the poop—"

“I’m not sure the girls want to know all the details of that step....” Olga suggested to Waya as she touched him on the shoulder. Waya nodded and continued as he fed sausage into his perfect casings.

“Then the guts had to be turned inside out. That is hard. Dusty helped me with that. The bottom end of the gut needs to be turned up like a cuff on a shirt. I poured that water into that turned-up piece near the lower end. Dusty held the other end high above his head and gently lowered the gut as the weight of the water pulled it down, and it automatically turned itself inside out!” Waya explained while Tayny sat at a tiny desk and took notes.

“How about the head cheese?” Tayny asked.

“After we clear out the kitchen today, you get Dakota and Dusty to bring the pig head pot and put it on the back burner. Dakota is adding his magic herbs to it right now. Then let it simmer all night long, and tomorrow your head cheese is ready. I take big hunks of meat like the cheeks....”

Am I going to be sick? I wondered. The kitchen smelled wonderful, but all these guts and brain stuff were getting a little much. Tayny looked over at me and then got up.

I guess my red face has turned to green, I figured.



The next thing I knew, Tayny had led me back to a small dark bedroom with a computer. That perked me up, the soft glow from the computer and the cool room far away from pig guts.

“I’m logging onto the accounting system for the casino,” Tayny explained. “I will send you that link, and here is my password. Dakota said you’d help me get what I need?”

“Won’t you get in trouble?” I asked as she nodded.

“Not if you’re as good as Dakota says you are. It didn’t take me long to figure out that my boss has better security permissions. If I’m going to figure out what is going on with these shortages, I need you to clone his session and then look at the areas I’ve written on this pad.”

Tayny said.

My gosh, she is gorgeous and smart, I thought with admiration. Tayny leaned back in the chair.

“I know in my heart that Dakota’s real father didn’t take the money. Sam Whitecloud had turned a corner and came out of rehab the month before it happened. He blamed himself for his wife’s overdose after Dakota was born. She suffered from postpartum depression, and he tried to cure her. He was a medicine man like Dakota. She killed herself. Did you know that Native Americans have higher rates of suicide compared to all other racial and ethnic groups? It is the eighth leading cause of death for us. Sam started drinking and taking drugs, and the family put him in rehab. He got clean, loved taking care of Dakota, and liked his new job at the casino. The first rule of forensic accounting is to find the money and motive. There are neither.” Tayny explained.

I nodded. “Wouldn’t money be the motive?” I asked.

Tayny shook her head. “Money is not as important in our lives as yours. Sam didn’t need money; the tribe was building him a home. He and Dakota were taken care of by the family. After the ‘theft,’” Tayny paused to add air quotes, “there was no hidden money. There would be money somewhere if he had actually taken the couple hundred thousand that they accused him of over the previous few nights.”

“What if he hid it somewhere?”

Tayny shook her head. “Dusty has asked Sam, and he says there is no money and, as I said, no motive. Sam’s only motive was to take care of Dakota, and after he lost all appeals, he did the unthinkable thing...he gave Dakota away.” I heard Tayny’s voice crack. “You cannot imagine how hard this is for us. Family, your clan...it is everything to us.”

“Why does Dusty blame Dakota?”

“Why does an eagle fly? Why does the bear growl? Dusty and Sam's shame is more than either you or I could carry. That is why we must help them. I have asked Dakota to write to his father and ask for his version of what happened that night.”

I stared at the screen. “I think I can program a session cloning script that you can load. But you would need to do that and execute it at night during server updates. Find out when updates happen, so you can get in and do that,” I said.

Tayny shook her head. “My key card is set to my work schedule. I can’t get in, but you might be able to.”

“Me? Seriously?”

“No, not you...your dream spirit. I understand she is getting stronger?”

I stood up. “Why does everyone seem to know stuff about my dream spirit except me?”



Chapter 10 – Flying Bears and The Hiker

The problem with being sleep-deprived was that nothing seemed real. After returning home from the pig slaughter, I did my Saturday chores robotically. The things Dakota and Tayny tried to explain to me and the fog from missing a night's sleep put me into a trance.

What did Tayny and Dakota mean about my spirit getting stronger? I wondered. Is my spirit this Clarissa, and what ghostly unfinished business does she have?

I was terrified to fall asleep. Maybe I can move my bed out of the closet. It's not working anyway because I'm still sleepwalking. Clarissa is taking me at night. I can't stay awake forever...but what if she gets mad at me"

It was too much to process. My mind felt like a phone with a frozen screen. It was getting dark, and I was tired, and the next thing I knew, I felt terrific.

There was a breeze on my face and stars in the sky. The houses below looked like tiny fireflies. I rubbed his soft fur and hugged Standing Bear. *He is such a good bear. I love him so much*, I thought.

Oh, no! I'm riding a flying bear! I thought as my hug turned into a death hold. I looked down. The bear seemed to be hovering like a helicopter. Then slowly, the ground got closer and closer and finally touched down in a forest clearing.

"It is just a dream, just a dream, just a dream," I repeatedly said as I got off the bear.

"Aya?" Dakota came from around a tree and surprised her.

“Dakota? You’re in my dream?”

“This isn’t a dream. Is it you, Aya?”

“Duh?” I said. Then I looked down. *What am I wearing, and why is Dakota so short?* I touched my chest as my hands felt the leather tassels, beads, and trim of a ceremonial Indian dress. *What the heck?*

“Your outer body is part yours and Clarissa’s when you join your dream spirit. Your mind joined with Clarissa’s. Clarissa has almost superpowers from the concentration of years and years of ancestor spirits. She is strong and fearless.”

I ran up to Dakota and picked him up. “You’re right! You are little and light! I am stronger than I have ever been.”

Standing Bear turned to Sitting Bear and asked, “You think she’ll pick us up too?” Sitting Bear shook his head no. “She can try, but she’d have to catch me first.”

I looked at the bears in shock. “You can talk!”

“Most people are more surprised that I can fly, but yup, we can both talk, too,” Standing Bear said. Then he pointed to Sitting Bear and added, “But Sitting Bear can’t fly, only me.”

The bear looked almost proud, although I wasn’t sure how a bear would display this. Maybe it was something else, like hunger. Her fear grew.

Dakota handed me a bow and arrow with a long climbing rope attached. “We don’t have much time left with you not showing up last night.”

“Time?” I asked as I awkwardly handled the large bow and arrow. “I’ve never used one like this before.”

“There is a hiker stranded on Eagle’s Peak, and you need to shoot this into the tree above him so he can grab the rope and pull himself out. Clarissa is an expert with the bow.”

“Why don’t you fly a bear up there and pick him up or call the police?”

“Only dream or animal spirits can fly. I think it is a Peter Pan sort of thing. I can ride Sitting Bear, but to fly ... that is Clarissa and Standing Bear. She taught him to fly, and I don’t know how and Sitting Bear is way too old to start learning. But regardless, we don’t want the hiker talking about flying bears and Indian princesses. Nobody believed that little girl but an adult? The tribal code requires that we keep our dream spirits and animal guides secret from outsiders.

“How did you get here? Don't you have a dream spirit?”

“Sort of,” Dakota said as he pointed at Sitting Bear. “He is my animal guide and doesn’t mind me riding him. He goes about forty miles an hour. Standing Bear is mostly yours and Clarissa’s. I called the tribal police and left a tip about the hiker this morning, but they didn’t do anything.”

“Chief Blackhorse. I saw Chief Blackhorse on TV this morning talking about the lost hiker. I think the chief doesn’t want him found. It would justify the dam and filling this area with water.” I said. I looked at the arrow tied to the rope and felt the point. “It is sharp.”

“These are your Mankiller family arrows. The shaft is black cherry. The point is made of deer bone. Those are eagle feathers made from the strongest and bravest of all birds. Get close to the hiker, and Clarissa will take over,” Dakota said as he guided me back onto Standing Bear.

I used one hand to grab the bear’s fur tightly and the other to hold the bow and arrow. The next thing I knew, they were flying again, up towards Eagle’s Peak.

I was terrified. I could feel my legs and arms, but somebody else was moving them. They were almost at Eagle’s Peak, and with the moonlight, I could see the rocks and the ledge where the hiker must be. So that must be the hiker that Eve wants dead, I thought.

“Yes, and we’re going to save him,” I said. But I knew I didn’t say that. I heard my voice, but that didn’t come from my mind. Instead, I looked down. It was a long way to fall. What was the thing that the TV had said this morning about ancient burial grounds?

“Not now, I need to concentrate,” again the voice.

I could now clearly see the hiker on the rock ledge. Was he dead?

“Closer.” I heard myself say that, but I didn’t say it. I didn’t want to get closer. I wanted to go home and get back in bed. Standing Bear moved a few feet closer and began his hovering. I leaned in close to Standing Bear’s ear and asked him, “Did you say that?”

“Sure, I can fly, I can talk, I can hover like a helicopter, and on top of all of it, I do impressions of dead Native Americans from the early nineteenth century.”

Standing Bear was also capable of sarcasm.

“Shush ... steady, Standing Bear.”

Again, I hadn't said that. I looked around, but there was nobody else. Then, suddenly, I let go of Standing Bear's fur, raised the bow, and shot the arrow expertly into the tree a few feet above the hiker's head. The hiker stirred and started to sit up. I could see him reaching for the rope.

Suddenly an arrow was headed straight for Standing Bear. Had the hiker thrown the arrow back at them? Her thoughts were answered when I saw an enormous black horse whoosh by them.

Another arrow! This time it hit Standing Bear in the front paw. He made a painful yelp.

"Get us out of here!" the other voice said in a hushed whisper.

Standing Bear turned so fast that I started to fall.

I quickly executed a bear hug of the bear. Her hands worked again! Was she gone? Standing Bear was so warm, and the night was magical. I felt myself getting sleepy.



Chapter 11 –Eagle Feathers and Toy Sword

The next morning, I went into the family room and found Alec glued to the TV screen. The local Asheville news on television interviewed a hiker outside of the hospital.

I wonder what they will say? I wondered.

“That guy has a smile that looks like it was painted on his face each morning. How do they do that?” Alec asked as my dad came into the room.

“Alec, Aya breakfast,” my father said as he looked with interest at that broadcast.

“They saved the hiker. I want to see,” Alec said as my dad reached for the remote.

What was it about the remote that equated to man’s power? I wondered.

The newscaster gently touched the arm of the hiker, who got up from the wheelchair and started to limp toward the parking lot.

Ah, the smile turns to a frown, implying concern, I thought as I studied the newscaster.

“See, see,” Alec said as he pointed to the screen. “That is a plastic smile.”

“What else do you remember from last night?” the newscaster asked.

The hiker smiled at the camera and replied, “As I said, I was able to tie a rope to a tree and then rappel down off the rock.”

The newscaster stood up, and the camera focused on the screen. “There you have it. After two days and a broken ankle, the hiker heroically got himself off of the rock ledge, back down to

the trail, and hiked out of Eagle's Peak Park. Later today, we'll talk to Chief Blackhorse and the tribe's plans to start filling Eagle's Peak Lake with the new dam and flood Eagle's Peak Park."

"That's not right," Alec said.

What did he know? Had Alec figured out that I was sleepwalking, and I saved that hiker?

I was in a panic. Her father nodded.

"You don't need to tell me; I spent some of the best days growing up in that park and hiking up to Eagle's Peak with Eve. Now they are going to dam up Crystal Creek, all so they can sell the houses below, with the new dam protecting them being a big selling point. Then they will start building houses above the dam with waterfront views," Adam said as he clicked off the TV and gestured for Alec and me to get up.

"But mom will make lots of money," I argued.

"Sometimes nature is more important than money—breakfast time. I hope you're both hungry; French toast this morning," my dad said.

Alec and I loved French toast, and I was starved. "Yum..." they both said in unison.

"Good, come and eat. And Alec, let me change that bandage on your hand first," my dad said as he ushered Alec into the dining room. "Tell me again how you managed to do this with a toy sword."

Toy sword? I looked at Alec's hand. *I guess I'm not the only one playing around at night.*

Nightwind was exhausted after last night, and Eve wanted to ride again this morning. However, he had to admit that it was faster to ride from their cabin to the Cherokee Museum, with many humans coming up to see the fall colors. He would never complain about a ride with Eve, even if it were only to the crowded town center.

Those Mankiller kids' grandma stood by the statue outside the museum talking to a tourist group. *I think her name is Enola. I wish I had a grandma. I miss my mom.*

Eve tied him up to a park bench then she stood nearby with her arms crossed. I can tell my little Eve wants to talk to her by how her eyes track the old lady's every movement.

Finally, the group moved into the gift shop area, and Eve intercepted Enola before she could capture another tourist group. As she reached into her bag, Eve cornered Enola.

"Recognize this?" Eve held a broken arrow in her hand. He tugged to the end of his lead to get closer and hear what the grandma said.

It's an arrow; it's an arrow, he thought excitedly. This was easy! More riddles?

Enola held it and stroked the eagle feather. "Eagle feather fetching, the shaft of black cherry, head of bone—it looks like the Mankiller clan. Let's go take a look," she said as she led Eve inside the museum.

Oh no, thought Nightwind. I'm not going to hear the answer to the riddle. He was Eve's animal guide which meant that he raised Eve and taught her everything about fire, wind, and other animals. He wanted to be with Eve. She needed him.

Yes, he let Eve tell him what to do because she loved him and fed him. They could talk to each other, but he wanted more. Nightwind wanted to become joined with Eve and be her animal spirit. He had been practicing, and this was a good time. *I need to hear what they are saying.* He closed his eyes tightly and started floating. Then, he opened them, and he was inside the museum!

Enola was standing next to one of the display cases holding the arrow. *Where was Eve?*

Enola tapped on the case. “Yup, that matches. One, two, three, four—”

“Are you seriously going to count them?” Eve interrupted as she grabbed the arrow back. He felt the arrow in his hoof but looked down, and it was a hand. A human hand.

It worked! He was joined with Eve. Did she know?

“Well, not now, after you made me lose my count,” the grandma said.

“Don’t play with me, Enola. This arrow was found at Eagle’s Peak.”

“What are you asking me?”

“Your granddaughter. Does she have it?”

I know, I know! Nightwind thought.

“The arrow? Obviously not; it is in your hand. Do you mean more arrows? I was trying to count them. There should be two dozen in this display,” Grandma Enola said as she turned back to the case. “One, two, three—”

“You know what I mean. Does Aya have supernatural abilities? Is your granddaughter joining with a dream spirit?”

“You know there is no such thing as dream spirits. It is merely old Cherokee folklore.”

“I know it is something we are taught not to talk about, but you and I—”

“We are old enough to know better than to talk about it, aren’t we?”

“Don’t mess with me, Enola,” Eve said as she turned to leave.

Enola smiled and said softly, “Maybe I better count all the arrows in all the cases.”

I wonder if I can stay here and help her, thought Nightwind. I like this grandma, she is funny.



Chapter 12- Loneliness and Yearning

The rest of the week at school seemed like a daze to me. Indian Princess, Clarissa, dream spirit. *It can't be true. It is all too much, I thought. Why is Clarissa here? Am I going to be stuck with her forever? I doubt if anyone will want to be my best friend now that I'm crazy.*

Dakota didn't approach me all week, and I didn't seek him out. I didn't think it would help to find a group of girls to make friends with if I was always with another rez kid and, worse, a boy.

Fortunately, my nights had been peaceful, and I woke up each morning dry and clean. Maybe Clarissa was gone after saving that girl and the hiker.

But why would someone come back from the dead to be a superhero?

By Friday, my emotions had turned from confusion to anger. Why wasn't Dakota trying to talk to her? He wasn't telling me everything. When I spent that morning with him at his house and later at his cousin's trailer, instead of explaining things, he would respond, "All in good time." Dakota spoke to me like I was a small child.

It is a good time, and I want answers, I thought.

Now it was almost the weekend, and when I spotted Dakota, I could tell he finally wanted to talk. Dakota was standing there when I headed to my third-period class, almost blocking the door. He reached out to touch my arm, but I avoided his reach.

"Now, you want to talk?" I hissed.

“I finally have some answers,” he whispered as they struggled to go through the door simultaneously. Their backpacks and their growing bodies prevented them from going into the classroom. Instead, Dakota caught me off guard and guided me to an area by the drinking fountain. “I know why Clarissa is here,” Dakota insisted.

Now you have my attention, I thought as I unclenched my fists. “It is because of all your herbs and chanting. You’re causing Clarissa to wake up at night.”

“You’re wrong. I can heal and communicate with my animal guide, but I certainly cannot conjure up the dead.”

“And I can? You think I’m the one who brought Clarissa back from the grave and asked her to join her body with mine and go around at night being a superhero and rescuing people?”

“Your loneliness and yearning let her in,” Dakota whispered. “She thinks you need her.”

“You’ve been spying on me?” I pushed him away.

“I see you at lunch, looking at those popular girls. I notice you in class, constantly seeking the teacher’s approval. Clarissa saw your weakness, but I needed to know more.”

“I am not weak!” I hissed as I clenched my fists again. “Leave me alone. This is over,” I added as I stormed down the hallway and outside the school.



Later, when I walked into my fourth-period class, my teacher merely pointed to the door. “Principal’s office?” I asked.

The teacher nodded as I turned around. It probably wasn’t good to ditch third-period after that whole Megan “Wassup” thing last week. As I neared the front of the school, I spotted Chief Eve Blackhorse standing outside, talking to Dr. Halverson.

Why is the chief here?

“Aya, your chief would like to have a word with you,” Dr. Halverson said as she opened the door for them.

How many times do I have to correct her that I’m not a rez kid? Then I spotted the arrow in the chief’s hand. Busted. Are my fingerprints on it or something?

After Dr. Halverson took a seat, she made some notes in what I could only guess was my dreaded permanent record. Finally, after making them wait, the principal leaned back and reached a verdict. “These are some serious allegations, Aya. Bullying Megan, trespassing in a restricted reservation area, endangerment of the public—”

“Trespassing?” I interrupted.

The chief placed the arrow on the desk. “This was found in the Eagle’s Peak area. Don’t deny that it isn’t yours.”

“You shot this at someone?” Dr. Halverson asked as her phone rang. Then, after listening, she said into the phone, “I’ll be right there.”

Both Dr. Halverson and the chief stood up. I looked at them and did the same. *Saved by the bell*, I thought, but I was wrong. It wasn't over.

"Thank you for your valuable time, Dr. Halverson. I think Aya and I can work this out if you don't mind," the chief said. Eve Blackhorse the door after the principal left. The kind face turned to icy stone. "Sit," she ordered me as she went around the desk and took a seat in the principal's chair. I sank lower in my chair and stared at the arrow.

How did she get that? I wondered.

"That hiker was supposed to die. Just one more day, and we'd always be able to say how flooding that area saves lives," Chief Eve said as she picked up the arrow and stabbed it into the desk. "Don't deny this was your doing, Clarissa."

I gasped. *That is going to leave a mark. Clarissa? Oh no, the tears are coming.* I looked up at the poster. *Respect. Organization. Achievement. Responsibility.* The chief effortlessly pulled the arrow out of the desk. *Was I next? Was this the person on the black horse that night? Was Chief Blackhorse trying to kill Standing Bear and her?*

"Don't play all innocent with me, Clarissa. I know who you both are, and I think your grandmother is behind this," the chief said as she picked up the arrow and got up to leave. "Your grandmother will have lots of time to think about this after I fire her."

"You're going to fire my grandma? She loves that job," I protested.

“That is only the tip of what I will do if I find you two messing around at night,” Chief Eve said. “Stay away from the reservation, or my arrow will find its mark the next time. I never miss something I aim at.”



Chapter 13 – Ponytails and Toads

The last period of the day was rough, but the walk out to the car was even more challenging. The hallways were crammed with kids trying to escape and excited about the weekend. I was almost out when I spotted Dakota being harassed by Megan and her gang. They grabbed Dakota's ponytail and dashed it with pink glitter as he made his way to the bus area.

Why doesn't he just cut his hair and try to fit in? I thought as I felt my face getting red hot.

Megan looked at me, laughing. I put my head down but felt the challenge from the group of girls. As I passed them, I gave in and laughed. Better to fit in, I thought.

As I turned to the parent pickup area, I looked for Alec. He usually beat me to the car, but he slowly exited the school. I waited for him.

"Seriously, Aya," Alec said as he caught up with me and brushed pink glitter from his shoulder.

"What?"

"Why didn't you stop it? Why did you laugh at Dakota?"

"What makes me the world's hero? I'm sick of having to protect everyone all the time."

"I-I ... w-we don't nnnneed youuuu to ... to proooo ... tect us."

I felt the arrow of his words hit its mark when Alec stuttered and walked to the waiting car.

Arrow hitting its mark, I thought. I looked at the bandage on Alec's hand. *Could it be?*



After getting dropped off at the museum by my father, I was ushered into a small meeting room by my grandmother. The conference table was filled with dozens of old journals, books, and stacks of documents. I hugged my grandmother.

“I am so sorry you lost your job. Is it okay to be here?”

“I am still a tribe elder, and I’ll go wherever I want,” Grandma Enola said as I took a chair at the table. “Gave me time to do this research after I got your call. First time for me.”

“First time getting fired?”

Her grandmother shook her head. “First time you ever called me on the phone.”

“That’s not true. I talked to you on the phone a few times a year. Christmas, your birthday, my birthday,” I argued.

“First time you called me,” my grandmother corrected her. “Sometimes we old folks like to be called.”

I thought about this. I realized that I hadn’t called my Oregon grandparents either. I used to talk to them almost every day when they walked Alec and me to and from school. I gestured at the pile on the conference table. “Clarissa wrote all of this?”

“No, just that one journal that I showed you last week. These were all written about the same time that Clarissa died, and they mentioned either her or her family. You can learn more about a person by what others wrote about her,” my grandmother said as I opened the journals to the page she had marked with Post-it Notes.

“Here are some things that Dakota wanted me to look up when he called this morning.”

“Dakota called you?”

“That Dakota is a great kid. But, until the Buschkoettters adopted him, he had to be the little man in the family. His mother died when he was born, and his no-good thieving father ... well ... don't get me started,” Grandma said.

“You're wrong,” Dusty said as he entered the conference room with Tayny.

“When I asked for your help, I didn't ask for an argument from him,” Grandma said as she went over to greet Tayny. She wasn't too upset with Dusty because she pulled him into a bear hug.

“To catch you up, Aya has met her dream spirit, Clarissa. She and Dakota are trying to find out why she is here and help Aya get her out.”

“I guess the apple doesn't like being red in the center?” Dusty taunted me.

“Back off, dam boy,” Grandma said to Dusty.

“Grandma!”

“He works at the dam, Aya,” Tayny explained as she turned towards Dusty. “And you – stop picking on Aya. Neither she nor Dakota chose to live at large.”

“Large?” I asked in my angry voice. Her mom always said that I had an indoor voice, an outdoor voice, and an angry voice that went up a full octave. I knew I was a lot bigger than most girls my age, but I didn't like it pointed out.

“Being at large means that you're enrolled in the tribe, but you're out there in the white world trying to fit in. There's nothing wrong with that.”

“Why do we have to fit in with their world? Dakota probably wants to cut his hair, and I bet this one will dye her hair pink someday,” Dusty argued. Tayny wasn’t having any of that.

“You have no idea what it is like being at large out there. Before I got the job at the casino, I never told anyone that I was Cherokee. Instead, I’d color my hair to look more like I could be his mom’s biological kid,” she said, winking at Dakota, “than being related to any of you. It was the easiest way to get a job while in college.”

“You denied your heritage?” Dusty accused her. She shook her head.

“What is a box on a form? Black, White, Purple? Why should race matter? For me, living in Oregon, it probably didn’t. But here, when Asheville is so white and so close to the rez, being Native American, Cherokee, or Indigenous People means that I’ll be late to work because I drank too much last night or steal to pay for my drugs,” Tayny argued.

I felt confident having someone like Tayny on my side and stood up to Dusty. “Sure, I’m red on the outside, but I am white too. Why would I discount the amount of white in my blood in order to be Cherokee enough for you?”

The room was silent as if all the hot air from a balloon had slowly leaked out after the birthday party was over. Finally, Grandma Enola turned to Dusty.

“Why did you say I was wrong about Sam Whitecloud?”

“Sam told me that he didn’t steal that money. I believe him, and now Tayny does too. She’s seeing some strange things going on at the casino.”

“Hmm...” Grandma thought about this. “How can I help?”

“Let’s work on Aya’s problem first. Sam has been there for a decade, and I guess a few more weeks won’t matter,” Dusty said, much to the surprise of all the ladies in the room.

“Here are items one, four, and seven from Dakota’s list.” Her grandmother handed each of them some documents. “I think Dakota is on to something. She died here, not in Oklahoma, as we thought. She was never on the Trail of Tears.”

“How did she die?” Tayny asked.

“It says suicide and gunshot, which is odd,” Grandma Enola answered. “Women rarely kill themselves with a gun. And even rarer that a Cherokee woman would if she had a young child.”

“Where is she buried? That is his second item on his list.” I asked as I looked at my grandma’s notes.

“That’s easy,” Grandma Enola said as she handed me another document. “Cherokees were buried either in the floor directly under the place where the person had died, under the hearth, outside near the house, or in the case of a distinguished chief, under the seat, he had occupied in the town council house. Now, Chief Blackwater in 1812—”

“So, this address is where she lived?” I got excited. This was all making sense.

Grandma Enola nodded. “It is close to Eagle’s Peak, where the new dam will flood.” I opened up another journal. “It says here that Clarissa planned to flee to the Smoky Mountains with her brothers and son instead of getting marched to Oklahoma.”

Dusty pointed at a map. “I know this area. It has gone underwater three times as we test the toe drain and spillway gate.” He gestured for Tayny to get up. “I’m going to get some more maps and plans, and I’ll get them to Dakota. But the real person who knows is Clarissa.”

I got up and hugged Tayny, Dusty, and then my grandma. “Thank you all so much. You’re right, Dusty; I need to talk to Clarissa.” I turned to my grandma and asked, “How do I summon a dream spirit?”

Grandma Enola handed me a small pouch. “I thought you might need this. Make a tea out of this, and either you’ll get visited by Clarissa tonight....” Grandma smiled and winked as she continued, “or a ghost from Christmas Past if I mixed this wrong. Sometimes you forget to add one little thing, and then everyone complains about being turned into a toad.”



Chapter 14 - Clarissa's Tears and Drowning

Later that night, I stared at a cup of tea. I knew my grandmother was only joking about being turned into a toad, but my dad raised me to avoid any drugs, even aspirin. So instead, he'd rub my temples and give me various yoga poses that normally made the headache disappear. But my grandmother seemed sure that this and a chant I had copied down for me to recite would bring Clarissa forth.

Was it worth the risk? Maybe Clarissa was done with me after saving the little girl and hiker, but their research told a different story.

I hadn't really talked to Clarissa the other night when they rescued the hiker. It was more like when you fell asleep in an airport and sort of heard voices around you. You wake up many times with a start, then fall back to sleep. Clarissa had taken control of my body, but this tea was supposed to bring Clarissa right here in my closet. I wasn't supposed to have anyone up in my room without clearing it with my folks. *Did this count?*

I drank the tea and immediately felt sleepy. I could barely read the Cherokee chant that my grandmother had given her. "*Dream adanvdo hear Oh now, dream adanvdo come to Oh now.*" The next thing I remembered was waking up and feeling cold. Then I screamed. I was sitting on the crest of the new dam.

"Wow, she must have given you a double dose!"

I turned, and Standing Bear was behind her, licking his paw. He used it to point at what could only be described as a ghost. "You got company, Aya."

Clarissa floated down and sat next to her. “Hello again.” She seemed like a hologram, translucent and heavenly. She was beautiful. No wonder the little girl said she was a princess. Her hair was thick and dark like mine’s. Her eyes were large and soulful. She had lovely warm skin and a smile that invited me into her magical world.

Wait, she looks like me, but I’m not pretty, I thought. “Why are you here?” I asked.

“You called me. I heard your chant.”

“What I asked is ‘why are you here’ and almost two hundred years after you died, haunting me?”

Clarissa laughed. “We don’t haunt. We’re spirits. I died here.” Clarissa gestured to the land below them. “But I exist here and here in my descendants.” Clarissa pointed at my heart.

“You killed yourself?”

Clarissa bowed her head. “I destroyed everything when I married a white man, Elijah. I was taken in by his charm and promised a better life. But when I learned that he only wanted us to go to Oklahoma to get the free hundred and sixty acres that he had already sold, I told him I was leaving with my son, and he shot me in anger.”

“Are you here then for revenge against the white man?” I asked.

Clarissa shook her head. She tried to pat the dam they were sitting upon. Her hand passed through it. “I am here because of this dam. It is a problem. It will put my bones and all my ancestors underwater. I hear their screams. I wake up from my rest with a feeling that I’m drowning.”

“But haven’t many ancient burial grounds been underwater for years?” I argued.

“It is this earthen dam. We are all worried. The supporting beams should have been made of steel, but they used wood. The core is not made of pure clay. It has bark and other filler material that could burn. They built this dam wrong.”

“How do you know all this?” I asked.

“My great-grandson was an engineer. We are everywhere in spirit. We are always watching, always inside all of you. I learned a lot from him.”

“I had my grandmother research your family. Your son John grew up fine and then had kids and dozens of grandkids and hundreds of great-grandkids. You should be at peace.”

“You thought I was taking over your body because I had some unfinished business in my life? Something I needed to say to John?”

I nodded.

Clarissa laughed. “You watch too much television. The spirit life is not a tortured one. It’s more like you’ve fallen asleep at the airport and can hear voices”

I got up, angry as a firecracker. “Seriously! You’re spending your afterlife in my head?”

Again, Clarissa smiled. “You called me, remember?” Her head dropped. “But I have been feeling the pain and loneliness you have felt here.” Again, she gestured to my heart. “Your yearning let me in.”

Dakota was right. It was me all along.

I got on Standing Bear. “Well, it is time to get you out. I don’t want you taking over my body anymore. But, if helping you stop your ancestors' bones from flooding and waking you up, I will need a plan.”



Saturday morning, I got up early and headed to Dakota’s house. When he answered the door, it was almost like he was waiting for me and ushered me to the dining room table. But he was different, almost business-like. *Did he see me laugh?* I wondered.

“I know why she is here,” I said.

“The dam,” Dakota said.

Dakota spread out some drawings and a map. “Dusty got me these yesterday. Here is the new earthen dam on the map.” He pointed at the plans. “It has a toe drain in the middle that governs the flow of the former creek. On the right is the emergency spillway. Dusty said they have been testing both for the past few weeks.”

“That is when I started sleepwalking,” I commented as I studied the map. “That is the drowning feeling that Clarissa told me about that woke her and the other spirits up.”

“Yes, they closed the toe drain and the spillway and let the lake start to fill. It has passed all the tests, and now it will be filled to the top next week.”

Dakota started studying the documents from my grandmother that I had brought. “Yes, she was probably buried right here,” he said as he pointed to the map. “It goes underwater each time they perform a test, and by next week, it will be permanently underwater.”

He picked up a family chart and pointed at the top. “Since you’re Clarissa’s great-great-great-granddaughter, she can physically join you, and she’s been trying to find out why she is drowning, but she ended up saving that little girl and then the hiker,” Dakota said.

“The only way she’ll stop taking over my body is if we move her bones....” I pointed at the map, “to somewhere that won’t flood, and she’ll stop waking up and taking over my body.”

“Are you sure that is what she said?”

“It was something like that; these bones woke her up at night.”

“I think she wants us to stop the lake from filling,” Dakota said.

“Do you mean to destroy the dam? She did say something about the dam not being right; let me look at those plans again.”

“There have been a few protests from hikers during approvals over the past few years, but the tribe has been victorious every step of the way,” Dakota said.

I studied the plans and moved closer. “It says hardwood and mixed filler here. Clarissa says it should be steel and pure clay filler.”

“I’m not a dam expert, but she might be right,” Dakota said after studying the plans.

“But if we destroy the dam after they fill the lake, then these homes in Crystal Falls will be destroyed by the very thing built to protect them. I need to think of a way to let everyone know that,” I said as I took the plans and tucked them into my backpack.

Chapter 15 – Animal Spirits and Animal Guides

When I got home, Alec was sitting at his desk reading. I looked at his bandage. Then I spotted an arrow on his desk. It was different than the one Clarissa and I had used to rescue the hiker. It had a dark black obsidian arrowhead. The shaft and fetching were different. *Black arrowhead, black horse—could it be?* I thought.

“You’re Standing, Bear,” I said. “That is where the arrow hit your paw.” I pointed at the bandage as I picked up the arrow.

“Shhh ...” Alec said as he went over and closed the door.

“Are you Standing Bear?” I asked again.

Alec nodded.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You won’t let me sit by myself on the bus. Do you think you’d let me fly around at night, dodging arrows?”

“How?”

“An animal spirit is different from an animal guide like Dakota and Sitting Bear. Dakota told me that man and animals were one in the early days. Animals didn’t eat each other, but the rabbits and rats were greedy, and soon the plants could not provide enough. The animal council ruled that they would eat other animals to thin the herd. Man became even more greedy and made weapons out of other animals—the bow out of bones, string out of intestines, and the fetching from feathers. The animal council kicked out man, and man could no longer hear the

animals' voices or the plant's wisdom. So, plants and animals decided to produce poisons and diseases and many different bacteria and viruses to thin out man's herd. But the plant council agreed that if man listened hard enough to them, they would provide the cures for these diseases. Our tribes created medicine men and women to listen to the plants and cure man."

"Dakota is a medicine man taught by his animal guide, Sitting Bear?"

Alec nodded. "Sitting Bear is old; hundreds of years old. It makes Dakota the way that he is. He needed Sitting Bear—"

"That explains a lot," I agreed.

"But some might be able to join with animals—"

"And poof — you're a bear! Grrr..." I held up my hands as pretend claws. "Cool, way up high!"

Alec and I did the "high five, way up high, way down low" routine and ended with Alec, who said, "Too slow, Joe!"

"How did you become an animal spirit?"

"I connected with Standing Bear while visiting the Bear Zoo. The next thing I knew, we were talking internally. He likes to watch television, so I always leave the one in the family room on so he can come over here at night and watch. After a while, we don't even have to talk. My head is inside of him like Clarissa does with you."

"What the...this is all too much." I grabbed my head. "My head is going to explode!"

“I only leave it on the Disney Channel. Standing Bear is only a few years old. A growing bear needs to feed his mind.”

“I mean, this flying around at night is too much; you have to stop. You could have died. If you join Standing Bear and he gets killed— ”

“When are you going to stop trying to protect me? Are you ever going to trust me? I’m stronger than I look. What about Dakota? He has been the best friend we’ve ever had, and you treat him like the other kids treat you. You are a bully.”

Bully? Her? No way. How can he say that?



I stormed out of Alec’s room, but his words stung. But none of this hurt my appetite, and I realized that I had left for Dakota’s house without eating breakfast. As I neared the kitchen, I could hear my parents. They didn’t sound happy.

“Did she give any other reasons?” Adam asked.

“Some gibberish about bringing it in-house. I have never lost a listing before. This is humiliating. I have three clients ready to make an offer in Crystal Falls. That is all that I’ve been working on. I have spent so much out of pocket on marketing. I don’t know how we’ll make it this month.”

I gasped. *Chief Blackhorse fired both her grandma and mother? She meant Alec and me when she said something about aiming her arrow at a mark!*

“I’ll talk to her today. We have a history,” Adam said.

“No, don’t. That would make things worse. I see the way she looks at you. She wants to rekindle your high school romance.”

What did she mean by that? Is the chief out for our whole family? I wondered.



I spent most of the rest of the day on my computer and studied the plans for the dam. I learned more and more about earthen dams. They are much better to look at but must be carefully constructed to be safe. Clarissa was right; they are “mostly dirt” and specifically clay. But the supporting beams needed to be steel to make it safe.

Again and again, I studied and memorized the different mechanical functions of the dam. By the time it started getting dark, I knew what I needed to do. But when?

Later that night, I sat in my closet in the dark, unable to sleep. I could see a soft glow coming from under Alec’s door. I still couldn’t believe that Alec had been flying around inside of Standing Bear all this time. Why? Sitting Bear was Dakota’s animal guide, but not an animal spirit.

So why was Alec becoming Standing Bear, and why couldn’t I have a big fearless terrifying bear? Instead, I got a dream spirit who took over her, changed my body, and listened to my thoughts in my head. Why?

I glanced over at my desk and saw the pouch my grandmother had given me and the cup of tea I had made earlier. *Everything was a mess, and it was all my fault for being angry about this move.*

Or was it? Maybe Dakota and Clarissa were right. It was that dam. Chief Blackhorse and Megan's dad built the dam. The dam caused my mom to ignore everything and try to sell luxury houses that were now in danger. Chief Blackhorse was destroying my family for the sake of that dam.

I texted Dakota and drank the tea. *Never give up. Never surrender*, I thought.



Chapter 16 – Superhero and Nature’s Way

I sat on Standing Bear, looking at the ravine below them and the dam wall illuminated by the moonlight. Then, finally, Dakota rode up on Sitting Bear and got off.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come,” I said.

“This is more important than your hatred of me,” Dakota said.

“What the—?” I demanded as my fist balled up.

“Aya,” the pleading came from Standing Bear but sounded like Alec.

I got off of Standing Bear and stood close to Dakota.

“I don’t hate you. I hate being different. I hate being taken over by a dead spirit and flying around on bears at night.”

“Then why are you here?” Dakota asked.

“I hate the chief more. I hate that Mr. Sinclair and Chief Blackhorse fired my grandma and my mom. I think Eve wants my dad. Gross.”

I unfolded the plans of the dam while Dakota used a small flashlight to see my notes. I pointed to the dam spillway. “A carefully placed fire arrow in the spillway will burn the gate, release the water slowly, and show how using wood was wrong.”

“Brilliant! Sometimes the simplest plans are the best,” Dakota said.

“Simple? Seriously? Clarissa and I fly down there to the dam wall on Alec’s Standing Bear Express; we’ll somehow hover by the spillway, light the arrow, and I’ll shoot it right into the gate brace. Easy, right?” I got on Standing Bear.

“You don’t sound confident.”

“I was kidding, genius. It is a ridiculous plan. Why can’t we just walk or ride the bears together down there?”

“It is too dark, and the forest and brush are too thick,” Dakota said as he lit the fetching of the arrow.

“Okay, let’s go. Ready, Standing Bear?” This was Clarissa asking, and the next thing I knew, I was holding onto Alec/Standing Bear with one hand and looking at the glowing arrow.

As they neared the dam, a dark horse flew in front of them. Standing Bear was barely able to dodge the horse. It turned and came back directly at them.

“Steady. Closer,” Clarissa commanded Standing Bear. Clarissa drew back her bow and aimed at the spillway gate. At the moment she released the arrow, the dark horse struck. The animal rammed Standing Bear in the rear. Their flaming arrow went to the left, directly towards the toe drain. The horse spun around, and another arrow flew past them.

“No!” I screamed. “No, no, no.” They started spiraling down and down toward the bottom of the ravine. “Standing Bear, follow that arrow!” Clarissa commanded.

I felt warm liquid on my hand. “Alec/Standing Bear is hit!” I said.

“We must put that flaming arrow out!” Clarissa argued.

“No, we have to get Alec to Dakota before we die! Alec! Do what I say!” It was my voice. I felt my hands steering Standing Bear towards the ground.

Standing Bear/Alec seemed to come out of the trance at the word “die” and turned towards the top of the ravine. He struggled but was soon next to Dakota, who pulled out the arrow from Standing Bear’s rear hindquarters.

“I’ve seen this arrow before. What did the rider look like?”

“It was so dark and so fast,” I answered. But I knew who shot those arrows and rammed them. “It was Chief Blackhorse. She is trying to kill us.”

“You chose the right thing. Another few minutes, and this arrow would have worked its way into an artery, and Standing Bear would have died.”

Suddenly a roar echoed through the ravine. I hopped on Sitting Bear.

Sitting Bear tried to shake me off. “Excuse me... I don’t fly. I thought you understood that I’m Dakota’s animal guide. He doesn’t join me, and he never taught me to fly as Alec and Clarissa did for Standing Bear. Let me slowly explain the difference between an animal spirit and an animal guide again.”

“Shut up and run,” I interrupted as I grabbed some fur and kicked him in the sides like a horse. “The dam is breaking up, heading right towards Crystal Falls,” I said. “Go!”



“Oh, no!” I screamed as Sitting Bear and I neared Crystal Falls. One home had a porch light on, and a soft glow came from the upstairs lights.

I quickly got off Sitting Bear, ran to the front door, and rang the doorbell while I pounded on the door. More lights came on. A sleepy Don Sinclair stood at the front door holding a shotgun.

“What?” He was annoyed until he heard the thundering roar of water and rocks in the distance. “Megan!”

Megan came running down the stairs and joined her father. They followed me as I jumped on Sitting Bear, close to his head.

“There is no way I’m going to let that fat man—”

“Shut up, Sitting Bear,” I said as I patted the spot behind me.

Megan jumped on, but Don paused. In the distance, a wall of water approached. He hopped on the bear’s rump, holding on for dear life as Sitting Bear galloped up the side of the ravine, breathing heavily.

They reached the top, where Dakota worked on Standing Bear’s wound. Then, everyone got off and turned to the crash below them. The wall of water, rocks, earth, and mud slammed into the Sinclair house, and in a few minutes, it was a pile of rubble and then carried downstream.

Megan looked at me and then hugged me. “You saved our lives!”

I beamed with pride. *I did it. It wasn't Clarissa this time. I was the one who saved Megan, and I was the hero.* I looked at my body. It was my body and not Clarissa's.

Megan let go of me and stood back, and her head dropped. "I have been so mean. I'm sorry."

Don Sinclair glared at Dakota and me. "What are you two doing up here?" He grasped his shotgun tightly. "Maybe you are the ones who blew up the dam...some sort of eco-terrorist?"

Dakota stood up and handed Megan and Don a small cup. "Aya and I were hiking tonight when we saw some folks messing around the dam. We called the police but realized nobody knew someone had already moved into Crystal Falls. So here, drink this, sit down and relax while we wait for an ambulance." *How old is he? I thought. Is Dakota ordering around Mr. Sinclair? Maybe he is getting more like old Sitting Bear.*

Don and Megan collapsed to the ground and drank their tea. In a few minutes, Megan leaned back and fell asleep. Don fell to the side with a loud thump.

"The bigger they are, the harder they fall," Dakota said with a wink. "They will wake up in a few hours, see their home, and wonder how they were able to get up this bank to safety."

"What did you give them?"

"Something to make them forget that they rode a talking bear up a ravine and that we were here."

"But Megan hugged me; she said she was sorry. She knew I had saved her life. She would have stopped tormenting me, making fun of me. I could have had friends. I could have

lots of friends. I would have been accepted. Now she'll wake up blaming the tribe, blaming me, and making fun of us just like before! What have you done?" I stomped the ground and balled up my fists.

How could Dakota have done this without talking to her?



I woke up the following day in my bed. I remembered the dam and being angry at Dakota, and then the next thing I knew was now. I looked out my bedroom door, and Dakota stood there, looking at her.

Her dad came up behind him. "Alec's room is that one," he said.

Dakota quickly disappeared.

Her dad took a step into my room. "Alec had a bad spill this morning on his bike. He says that he started feeling sick. I guess the flu is going around. Fortunately, Dakota was there and got him home. He is back with some more salve for the scratches and tea."

"Tea," I said. Then it came to her. Clarissa must have drunk something Dakota gave us, which knocked me out. But how did I get back here with Standing Bear being hurt?

"That kid has a real talent for herbs and Cherokee medicine. His mom was like that; God bless her soul. Died so young. His dad tried his best, but when the Buschkoettters got him as a foster—"

"The dam ..."

“You heard about that? Did you get up early and watch the news? Very sad; it took out the houses in Crystal Falls. Your mom is over there now. Don Sinclair and his daughter got out just in time and hiked up to a high point.”

“How? What happened?” I wanted to know what the news was saying.

“Sometimes, it is just nature’s way of telling us something is wrong. There is speculation that some eco-terrorist bombed it. Others say that there are burnt timbers. I can’t believe they constructed that with wood instead of steel. I called Eve this morning and let her know that I had blamed her. She wasn’t like this when we were younger. We had planned to do so much good for the reservation, but she never forgave me for picking a different college and not returning. But that is all in the past. I doubt she’ll ever speak to me again after I yelled at her and hung up the phone.”

I got up slowly. Her head hurt. *What had Dakota put in that tea?*

“Breakfast is ready. Come down after your shower,” my dad said. Then, he turned around and added, “Ask your brother if he wants a tray brought up. Maybe something for Dakota, too?”



I knocked and opened the door to Alec’s room without waiting for an answer. Alec was lying face down in gym shorts while Dakota finished applying a new bandage to Alec’s upper thigh. On the floor was the bloodied old bandage.

“Is that where the arrow hit you?”

Alec responded into the pillow. It was muffled.

“You almost died! I was so stupid.”

“Shhh,” Dakota said as he went over and closed the door.

Alec slowly turned over and looked at his sister.

“And you!” I turned on Dakota.

“I cost you a chance at a best friend,” Dakota said as he packed up his medicine and headed for the door, where I stood with my arms crossed. He waited for me to stand aside.

Alec looked at the two of them. “I thought you two were best friends.”

“I didn’t want any of this. I just wanted to fit in. I wanted to have friends,” I said.

“Sometimes, you need to find your own tribe to fit in,” Dakota said as he pushed past me and out the door.

I could hear him stomping down the steps, and then the front door slammed shut. I looked back at Alec.

“What?”

“You’re not going after him?”

“Why?”

“I don’t get you, I. You’re always so angry when you have everything. Look at you—you’re big, you’re strong. You always have been. You have never needed anything or anyone until now. But you need Dakota.”

“What I needed was to fit in. It is the only way I’ll survive this horrible school and living here.”

“You’re wrong. I fit in so much that nobody even sees me until I open my mouth, and then it is all laughs. But my stutter is almost gone now. Ever since we got here, I’ve been talking each morning to Grandma Enola on the phone, and then every night, I call Grandma and Grandpa in Oregon before I talk to Standing Bear.”

“Standing Bear has a phone?”

Alec laughed at the idea of that. “Remember, Standing Bear comes here every night to watch TV. It all started months ago after we started talking at the Bear Zoo. He told me that he and Sitting Bear bust out every night. Sitting Bear has always hung out with Dakota. One night I heard a tap on the window downstairs in the family room, and there was Standing Bear, motioning for me to move to the side so he could see the Disney show on animals. He’s fascinated by polar bears.”

“Your stutter is a lot better.”

“Almost gone. Growing up around those tree-hugging folks in Oregon, I had no reason to work on it. They accepted me, and it made me special. Moving here was the best thing that happened to me. I was terrified and started doing everything they told me to do: slow down, say the words internally, and only then, speak. I was practicing a question I wanted to ask the girl who works at the Bear Zoo, and suddenly Standing Bear was answering me. But I hadn’t spoken.”

“But I had dozens of friends in Oregon,” I said.

“No, you had dozens of followers. You were the leader of the pack. The alpha. The strong one. You will be that again. You’ll be Chief Aya someday of the Cherokee Nation.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Clarissa told me. That is the other reason why she came. At first, she would float around at night talking to Standing Bear and me while we watched TV, and then she started telling me about her plans for you. The next thing I knew, she was back with you. I tried to tell you, but you hated to hear anything about Cherokee lore.”

“She is here to make me the chief someday? Does Dakota know this?”

Alec nodded. “It was his idea. Dakota knows how to heal almost anything.”

“I’ve been so mean to him,” I said as my head dropped. “I hated being Cherokee. I hated going up there on Fridays. I didn’t like seeing Grandma or spending time with her.”

“She knew that, but Grandma has the patience of an eagle. She has been pretending to be soaring gently over us for a long time, but she’s had her eye on the prey, and I think she’s ready to strike.”



Chapter 17 - Warrior Grandma and Auditors

Nightwind spotted the grandma way before Eve did. For an old lady, she could really move out. Enola held an arrow up to Eve Blackhorse's face after she stormed up the steps of Eve's cabin. Eve got up from her porch chair and stood up to the grandma. Enola didn't back up the way most humans did.

How did she get here? Northwind wondered. He continued to munch on his morning apple treat from Eve.

"This is your arrow! The string and fetching are both made of horsehair," Enola said to his darling Eve.

"Where did you find that?"

"One was in the behind of my grandson. This one missed his heart and was on the ground."

"You were there last night?"

Grandma nodded. "I happened to fly by and saw what you did. I put this in my beak when nobody was looking. I wanted proof."

"Your grandson is an animal spirit. There are risks for men who join up with animals," Eve said.

"You were hunting them," Grandma Enola accused.

"I was not hunting. I was trying to save the dam that your grandkids destroyed!"

“They did not mean to destroy it. They only wanted to expose the wooden beams. You built that dam with cheap material. You cut costs, and where did the money go that was supposed to be used for steel? Into your pockets? You are listed as one of the destroyed luxury homeowners in Crystal Falls.”

Eve stood up and put her hands on her hips. “You cannot prove anything.”

“Yes, I can. This morning, the bank board held an emergency meeting and appointed my daughter-in-law the agent again for their bank-owned and tribal properties. She has been looking at the contracts and deeds of the tribe and has some interesting things to tell us at the tribal meeting tonight.”

“You called a meeting?”

Grandma nodded. “With the dam gone, Andrea has some exciting ideas for the new Eagle’s Peak Estates to show them. There will be riding and hiking trails, community gardens, and eco-friendly builders. Then, after a vote, I will be the new interim chief, and the first thing that I will do is fire you. So, you should probably pack your bags. I hear Florida is lovely this time of the year. And take your animal spirit, Nightwind, with you.”

The grandma knows! Nightwind thought. I wasn’t sure if Eve and I had joined, but she said ‘animal spirit’ and not ‘animal guide.’ Eve and I can finally be together forever. Florida has beaches; we can run in the surf. The saltwater is so good for my coat.



Eve seemed to be in a big hurry to get to her office after the grandma left. Nightwind was disappointed, this was usually the time of the day for their morning ride, but he could tell that something was bothering her. As they rounded the last corner, he could see many cars at the tribal offices. Eve dismounted, tied him under an oak tree, and gave him an apple.

One of the men from the cars came over to Eve. He didn't look happy, probably because he was so much smaller than the other humans and had to wear glasses, but his Eve was a charmer. She held out her hand and said, "Osiyo, Peter."

The tiny man shook his head and said, "Not good, not good."

"Yes, revenue always drops a little as we move from fall to winter. Just wait for the first nor'easter, and they will be flocking down here to escape the cold of New York. You might have heard something about the dam and my position as chief, but I will get that straightened out this week, and you can tell your bosses at Harrah's that—"

"We've been hacked. Somebody downloaded some employee schedules from ten years ago, receipts, deposits, videos...everything."

"Ransomware?"

"No, there was no ransom, and all our systems are operating fine, but everyone is on high alert."

"Ten years ago?"

Peter nodded and pulled a little notebook out of his pocket. "Sam Whitecloud, that is the employee records they got. Then they got two or three months of all the cash transactions, and only some of the video feeds...those are big files—"

"Sam?"

Peter nodded. “We’ll want to talk to him today and review the videos they downloaded. The auditing team is here from Las Vegas to review all the hard copies. We heard about the dam accident, thank goodness nobody was hurt, and none of the records were destroyed...” the tiny man said as he headed towards the tribal offices. Eve just stood there staring at him.

Didn’t she realize that the tiny man was done talking?

“Idiot, twerp,” Eve said, but Northwind didn’t hear it in his ears.

Where did that voice come from? Northwind wondered as he quickly looked left and then right.

It’s me, Nor...

Eve? You haven’t called me Nor...I can feel you! But you are so sad.

Eve got on him and patted him.

Guess where we’re going? He could hear her thoughts, and she was trying to be upbeat.

I know, I know...we’re going to Florida! Northwind replied.



Chapter 18 - Best Friends and Two Spirits

Dakota moved on the bus to the empty seat in front of me. “I heard the Sinclair family moved back to our area,” he said.

“Yup, Megan will probably be on the bus again tomorrow. My mom said their old house hadn’t sold yet, so they moved back in.” I looked around the bus. I had never noticed it before, but none of Megan’s pack rode this bus. So maybe Megan’s dad moved into this new development away from Megan’s childhood friends. I thought that Megan wanted a whole seat to herself, but in reality, who would Megan sit with if she could sit anywhere?

“How is Alec?” Dakota asked while looking at the empty seat next to her.

“I think he’ll be back in school tomorrow. He walks without a limp, but sitting down is a challenge. He’s been pretending that he still has the flu so that he doesn’t have to walk much.”

“I’ll stop by again today and change the bandage.”

“Good. I want to learn more about animal spirits and animal guides. I worry about Alec.”

“I could tell you more at lunch? It might be better to talk about this out of your dad’s hearing range.”

“Sure, I’d like that. I’ll meet you after our fourth-period class in the library and then show you where I eat.”

Dakota got up as the bus pulled up in front of the school. He picked up my backpack and helped me get it on. I let him. That was odd.

“I know where you eat. We’ll meet there,” Dakota said with the biggest grin I had ever seen.

What was that all about?



Dakota took a seat next to me on the bus the next day. I liked that. He brought me a book on Cherokee medicine.

I wonder where that potion to turn someone into a frog is? I thought as they neared Megan’s stop. I wondered where Alec could sit when he returned. Oh wait, he can possess the body of a flying bear and has his bike friends; maybe he was sitting here to protect me?

Megan got on the bus at her stop and wasn’t talking on her phone. Maybe it was lost in the flood? I wondered.

Megan quickly took the seat in front of them and glanced at me and then at Dakota, and then back at me. The looks were long. *Maybe she’s thinking of a real zinger?*

Instead, Megan looked around the bus and then turned around and looked at me again. *Here it comes, I thought.*

“Do you have any notes from third-period? I lost mine.”

I was stunned. Dakota dug into his backpack and handed Megan a small notebook. Was that a smile for Dakota from the crusher? No way!

“Thanks,” she said to Dakota, but her eyes were on me. Did she remember?

“Sorry about your house,” I said.

Megan gave me a nod, turned around, and flipped through Dakota’s notes.

I thought about something I read online last night. *Being Indian is an attitude, a state of mind, a way of being in harmony with all things and all beings. It is allowing the heart to be the distributor of energy on this planet; to allow feelings and sensitivities to determine where energy goes; bringing aliveness up from the Earth and from the Sky, putting it in and giving it out from the heart.* Brooke Medicine Eagle wrote it.

I looked at Megan, flipping through Dakota’s notes. Maybe Megan wasn’t evil. *She certainly wasn’t best friend material but no longer a threat.* Wolves join a pack for protection and to claim territory. They are weak when they are alone.

Maybe I was wrong about Megan? Perhaps I’m wrong about myself?



After school, I went over to Dakota’s house. He was waiting on the porch with a piece of paper in his hand.

“Got your text. What’s the emergency...another little girl, dam, or hiker in trouble?”

“I took your advice and wrote to him. I got this today,” Dakota handed the letter to her. I read it,

After your mother died, I was desperate. I thought I could forget everything with the right potion, but it was too easy to buy the drugs. I entered rehab, and Dusty took care of you. When I got out, the casino was the only place I could get a job, but the demons haunted me.

Eyes in the Sky are what we call the security cameras hidden in ceiling-mounted black plastic globes. These dark, ominous eyes see the seats, tables, hallways, restaurants, and elevators. That night, I was struggling, and they were like a leopard ready to pounce.

By three AM, the slot machine area was almost empty. It should have been easy for me to give each one a thorough cleaning. But as I glanced up, the eyes in the sky saw everything, and for me, they also spoke.

That early morning, they screamed, "Get out! Get out!" The beads of sweat slowly rolled into my eyes, stinging and blinding me, but I didn't need to see where I was going.

I had counted the steps from the last machine through the food court and to the patio door so many times that I could make this journey in the dark, but I didn't need to. In the early morning, the lights in the casino were as bright as mid-day. I knew I wasn't supposed to go outside during my shift, but I had to. I couldn't stand it any longer.

There was no place to hide from the eyes in the sky. I could see through the food court to the exterior door and the cold night sky. Finally, I was getting closer to my escape into the night. The food court had windows, but the casino did not. Moreover, gamblers were encouraged to lose track of time; thus, there were no clocks either. But I knew the time and the layout better than I knew myself back then.

The voices shouted louder, "Get out! Get out!"

I flipped the page over. "That's it? This explains why your dad stole two hundred thousand dollars?"

"Exactly! That's what I thought. This is our clue. Sam Whitecloud...I mean, my father... is up for parole next year. He has to admit that he did this and is sorry to get out on parole. He cannot say anything else. He cannot deny what he was convicted of doing.

I looked at the letter again. “Tayny said the third rule was we needed to figure out how he did it. But he didn’t do it. Voices? I think someone used Bluetooth technology to make the music speakers say, ‘Get out.’ As Tayny thinks, they might have put a small amount of money in his janitorial cart, drugs into his coffee, and then pinned the full amount they embezzled on him.”

“Rule?”

“Yes, Tayny said the first rule is to figure out the motive and money. That didn’t work out to be Sam...I mean...your father...didn’t have a motive and need for money. Just the opposite; he wanted to be a father for you.”

“I already have a father.”

“Dakota, you said your dad was disappointed in you. Tayny told me about all the family picnics at the base and how you never won any of the father-and-son races. Tayny says that the Sarge thinks you are ‘Two-Spirited.’

“Why did she tell you that?”

“Well, I don’t think she meant to, but I asked why he was never home.”

“He has an important job, and I don’t think he really connects with my mom or me. But I’d never hurt her. She raised me. She is my family.”

“Tayny explained that to me too. When Tayny clears your father’s name, you can have him for your family. Olga can still be your family. Family is everyone and everything. I became a warrior to protect Alec and my family. I got my spiritual family, Clarissa, to go into the casino and load my program for Tayny. You are my family too. But don’t worry about all those stories about how the Wolf Clan treated the Deer Clan—”

“You did all this for me?” Dakota asked, and after my nod, he hugged her. As they pulled away from the hug, their faces were close. It was almost like a magnet pulled him close to her.

This is weird, I thought. Something is telling me to get out of here, but I can't seem to move. Dakota was not moving back, either. Is he going to kiss me?

“You’re right, my dad, I mean, ‘the Sarge’ does think I am ‘Two-Spirited,’” Dakota said with a voice that didn’t seem right. It was gravelly, rough, and forced.

Two-Spirited. I read about this in some of the books Dakota gave her. Long ago, we had both a female and male spirit before they were split. Some special people kept both their spirits.

Did his adopted ‘Super Army’ dad think Dakota was Two Spirited because Dakota didn’t win a three-legged race at Army family day?

Dakota moved even closer, and then it happened. Her first kiss was going to be a science experiment.

Hmmm... this kiss seems more like the ones in my mother’s books that she kept on her nightstand that I wasn’t supposed to read, I thought. Kisses that lasted over ten pages...well, maybe not ten pages but at least a long paragraph.

Dakota pulled away and said, “Not Two-Spirited. Thank you. I have to go eat dinner,” he added as he headed inside his house and shut the door.

Thank you? All he could say was, ‘Thank you?’ I thought as I still held the letter in my hand.

So I’m holding the most important letter of his life, and he has to eat? Then I smiled and gently touched my lip and then the letter. He needs me, and he is family, I thought.

Chapter 19 – Goodbye and Later

One problem with memory tea and hiding things from adults is that you have to cover all your tracks. I learned that from another one of the books that Dakota gave her.

“One more time,” I said to Alec as he crossed the room, set a small book on the right edge of my desk chair, and then carefully sat down, first on the left side and then on the right. I studied the side of the chair and switched the book with a smaller one.

“That works. I can sit without winching. My wound doesn’t touch the chair,” Alec said as he held his hand up for a high five.

Alec and I did the “high five, way up high, way down low” routine and ended with Alec, who said, “Too slow, Joe!”

I smiled when I noticed the massive smile on Alec’s face.

“With any luck, nobody will notice that you can’t sit down, and we’ll get away with this,” I said.

“Grandma has a way of getting people to talk, but even better ways to get them to shut up.” Alec laughed. “Maybe after I have a serious talk with Standing Bear this weekend, I’ll have Dad take me over to Grandma’s and spend some time with her.”

“She’d like that. I’m staying home Friday and going over to Dakota’s house to learn more about Cherokee medicine. Why a serious talk?”

“Standing Bear is planning a trip to Disney World in a few months and teaching Sitting Bear how to fly,” Alec explained.

“What the... no way!”

“Yup, way.”

“I can see why you need to get serious. There is no way those two bears can fly that far without being seen or missed.”

“Actually, they are remodeling the Bear Zoo this summer, and they are shipping them off to a reserve in northern Florida while the construction is going on, so they probably won’t be noticed.”

“Then what is the problem?” I asked as I helped my brother put on his backpack for school.

“Without me, Standing Bear is like a toddler. He runs into trees. And with Sitting Bear just starting to learn to fly, he’s pretty old to be doing this....”

Old? Maybe that is why when he is around Sitting Bear, Dakota acts like a grumpy adult. I remembered flying, the breeze on my face, and hugging the bear. There was a passage from one of Dakota’s books;

If you talk to the animals, they will talk with you, and you will know each other. If you do not talk to them, you will not know them, and what you do not know, you will fear. What one fears, one destroys. Chief Dan George of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation wrote it.

I knew I needed to get to know Standing Bear and Sitting Bear better instead of being afraid for Alec. I smiled at Alec. “I’ll talk to Clarissa and Dakota, and we’ll go with them,” I said

as I picked up Alec's backpack and started to sling it onto my shoulder. He took it from her, put it on himself, and then opened the door.

I whispered, "we're all going to Disney World!"



Later that day, for the first time in weeks, I was looking forward to bedtime. After school, I moved my bed out of the closet and waited for Dakota's text. Then Dakota and I went into the canyons and looked for herbs. They didn't talk about the kiss, and no more kisses followed. *That's okay for now*, I thought.

After all that hiking, I was hungry and exhausted. I helped my dad do the dishes after dinner and then hurried upstairs with a cup of hot water. I made Dakota's secret tea, said the chant, and a few minutes later, Clarissa was going through my closet.

"How come you never wear this?" Clarissa asked as she held up a summer dress.

"Cuz it's ugly?"

"Hmm..." The flipping through clothes continued. Clarissa was getting stronger. At first, she had to join with me to move things, but here she was; still rather faint, but she could do things. *Was she stalling? Was it over?*

"Remember, you called me."

"Are you still hearing my thoughts?"

Clarissa shook her head, no. “I don’t hear you often. My ancestors’ drowning screams no longer wake me from my great rest. You are now the hero. I am at peace.”

“What?”

“I am at peace.”

“No, you said I’m the hero.”

Clarissa pulled a traditional Cherokee maiden dress from the closet and put it on the bed.

“This is perfect!”

“I can’t wear it here. Kids would think of it as a Halloween costume, and that is just wrong.”

“Why did you save it?”

I didn’t have an answer for that. I touched the fabric and remembered getting the dress years ago from my Grandma Enola, and it was a hit at the Waldorf School Indigenous People Day. I was proud of being part Cherokee. I looked pretty. I looked strong.

I wonder where my bow and arrow are? Maybe in the storage room? I wondered.

“Your grandma signed you up for archery lessons. You’ll get a new set with your family arrows for Christmas.”

“Seriously? You’re listening to my thoughts again?”

“You called me. I can’t help it. Yes, you are the hero. You are strong. It was you who rode Sitting Bear and saved Megan. I was helping Dakota take care of Alec/Standing Bear.”

“Dakota...he wants to be my friend...but—”

“He doesn’t need any more kisses to know he is not a Two Spirit.”

“You saw that?” I asked with a blush.

Clarissa smiled. “You have time for all that when you get older, but for now, you need to become a Truth Warrior and help him clear his father’s name.”

“Are you saying my days as a Sleep Warrior are over?”

“You no longer need me, but Dakota needs you. You are a good Internet Detective.”

Clarissa replied.

“Truth Warrior, Internet Detective... I like that. So, this is goodbye? I haven’t been sleepwalking these past few nights.”

“There is no word in Cherokee for goodbye. Instead, we say ‘donadagohvi,’ which means, ‘Til we meet again.’ Sort of like saying, ‘Later Alligator.’”

I picked up the dress to put it back in the closet, turned around, and Clarissa was gone.

“Donadagohvi, Clarissa.”

