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Eagles Circle the Drum

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Eagles Circle the Drum

A Novel

Chapter One

The eagle, like the Sun Chief, took its time to climb its summit. After the skies had emptied rain for five days straight, the earth sheened with moisture. The smell of wet leaves soaked into every crevice of the land. Dozens of drowned worms baked on the rocky banks of the Red River, too burnt or waterlogged for animals to eat, while the air became a burden of windless currents that could be seen in the reflective sunlight above the rippling water. The golden eagle knew that not even fish could rest in the shadows to avoid the heat. Today was an awful day to hunt. All morning, the sacred animal circled around the two neighboring reservations, from the land of the Stockbridge-Munsee to the land of the Menominee, without so much as spotting a mouse.

A terrorizing sound, not produced by the natural world, shot off like thunder. Birds fled from trees. Squirrels and rabbits darted from one den to another. Deer sprang like grasshoppers. A couple of Doberman Pinchers, their coats infested with larvae, barked until they ran out of excuses. Their obnoxious habit continued when they heard Johnny Bear Moses' rattling muffler.

His name was a birthmark, a tattoo, and branding scar, reminding him of his identity, as well as his difficulty. His mother had named him Johnny, but his people called him Bear. A couple of centuries ago, white people had christened his family Moses.

He kept his windows down while he blasted the air conditioning full force. The open windows were as necessary as the A.C. because he needed to feel the hot breeze through his ponytail. Summertime was not the season to stay indoors, yet it did make hunting troublesome because he couldn't leave carcasses hanging out in above-freezing weather.

Already at 7:30 in the morning, the metal barrel of his rifle was too hot to touch. The heat caused him to rush his practice shot and graze the heel of an old tennis shoe rather than smoke its tongue. He swore at the shoe and the humidity and thought Northern Wisconsin must have the worst weather in all America. There were just too many blizzards and thunderstorms constantly beating against his house. To add to this misery, the lakes and rivers were frozen for one-third of the year, and by the time spring finally came, summer's heat was already intruding.

Visitors from the South liked to travel to this region because they said, "The summers up here are perfect," but what did they know about living in the Northwoods year round? Their perception of this country was limited. He was born and raised here and he knew he'd die here. This was his home when he loved the seasons and when he suffered through them. They ordered and guided his days even if he wasn't a traditional Indian, not the type of man who let the rhythms of creation beat inside his heart, directing his ceremonies for berry picking, maple tree tapping, fish spearing, drum tanning.

The weather was as unpredictable and uncontrollable as his life. For this reason, Bear was anxious, always praying that his family would be safe and free from pain in hopes that God, the Creator, who commanded the sun and the skies, and who had guided his ancestors after losing their home in the Hudson River Valley and then Stockbridge,

Massachusetts, would listen. White men had forced his people to relocate westward until they were given swampland from the Menominee Indians.

Earlier in the day, after thanking God for keeping his loved ones protected during the storm, he had thought about cleaning up his yard, which was littered with broken branches. Five or six of them would have to be diced up with a chainsaw, but the rest could be hauled into the forest without much hassle. The only problem was that there were hundreds, probably thousands, of these smaller branches. As a self-employed logger, he hated whenever he had to work his day job at home. Tomorrow was the start of the Tribe's largest powwow of the year, and even though he wanted his property to look maintained for this weekend event, he would wait for a cooler day.

His 1998 Oldsmobile rattled past the Lonsberg dogs with their drooling mouths. They snapped at his tires. Bear slowed down and threw the rest of his beef jerky out the window. He liked these unkempt Dobermans and wished Lonsberg would take better care of them. The jerky was too bland for him anyway.

Pulling into his brother's driveway, he glared at the uprooted maple tree dying in the front lawn. More work to do. He squeezed out of the front seat, wearing jeans and a T-shirt that just barely covered his bellybutton, and knocked on the front door.

No one answered.

"Jimmy!"

He knocked again then let his eyes wander up the cemented stones of his brother's house. Even though Bear chose not to live in a HUD home, he was still jealous of these four government-made stonewalls. The past five days he had worried that his own house would blow over. If a tornado had touched down nearby, his doublewide would not have

been able to withstand the winds he did not have insurance against. His envy stopped when he saw weed gardens growing out of his brother's gutters.

"Jimmy," he jiggled the doorknob even though he knew his brother was paranoid about burglars, teenagers, and the American government. "Why didn't you tell me your gutters needed cleaning?"

Walking around back with his boots sloshing through the grass, he looked through the kitchen window, peering above the strip of old Coors Light bottles.

"Better have your pants on."

He opened the backdoor and passed the empty PBR's, Budweiser's, and Milwaukee's Best's all sitting on their respective shelves and bordering the walls like decorative trim. Baseball was on the tube. Inside the family room were a couple dozen bottles neatly lined up in three rows next to the empty corduroy La-Z-Boy recliner. Each row of beer was organized by brand.

The bathroom light shown from under the door. Jimmy must have passed out on the john. Bear walked down the hallway to the increasing odor of piss and crap. He inched the bathroom door open, first seeing Jimmy's cane resting on top of the sink then an empty toilet seat. To the left, discarded in the wastebasket, rested his younger brother's underwear splattered in his bodily waste. Bear's hands began to shake. If Jimmy was having trouble with his bowels, he should've told someone. He knew that Bear, as well as his mother, would have kept it confidential. Money was not an issue because the North Star Casino and federal grant money paid for every tribal member's healthcare. More importantly, a thirty-seven-year-old man was too young to be crapping in his pants.

The last room in the house to check was Jimmy's bedroom. Bear poked his head inside. The sunlight shone on the light blue paint which revealed his brother's oily handprints running along the wall from the light switch to the bed. An open box of shells lay in the middle of the blankets.

He wondered where a handicapped man would go without a cane or a driver's license. Bear hurried outside and scanned the backyard.

"Jimmy," he yelled into the forest. "Where you at?"

The tall, wet grass revealed his own muddy boot print indentations, but no one else's. There were plenty of branches on the uneven ground, and Bear knew his brother could not have made it far without tripping. If Jimmy needed to hurry someplace, he could pick up his cane and speed walk for a good thirty feet, forty at the most. And on rare occasions when he forgot his cane, he would hobble from one place to the next. Yet, it was too painful and exhausting for him to limp around for even five minutes.

Whatever his current state, whether he had drunk all those beers before heading out or not, Jimmy would have had to take the easiest and the most familiar trail he knew. He would have walked down the road a couple hundred feet and taken a right down the old logging road. These two tire rutted trails would eventually lead near the Red River, close to Jimmy's favorite fishing hole. On this trail, he knew every divot, dip, and bump like the pain in his left leg. Here, the deer would be thirsty, but his bad leg would be spent. A healthy person with two good legs couldn't walk to the river in under fifteen minutes.

Bear drove a half a minute to the old logging road and thought he had made a bone-headed mistake. There was no need to worry, for someone had probably taken his brother

hunting. But at the entrance of the muddy trail, he realized he'd been right the first time. There were smudged boot prints as well as smear marks of a dragged boot.

“Jimmy Moses! If you can hear me, give me a holler!”

He hopped out of his car and followed the trail, feeling like the humidity had sucked all the oxygen out of the air. Never in the thirty years he'd walked this path had the river roared so loudly; the waters must've been higher than ever before. His skin itched and his shirt and underwear were drenched in sweat before he reached the fishing hole.

“What the heck, man? Where are you?”

But as he said these words, he saw his brother in his plaid green, polestar, brass button shirt lying down on his side with his good leg crossed over the bad one. Muddy leaves stuck to the back of this shirt. He wasn't moving as he lay on top of the barrel of his Remington Rifle.

“Jimmy?”

Bear choked on the air as he approached his brother. Jimmy's hair was tangled in twigs and his black military boots were brown with mud. Four or five inches of it stuck to the bottom of his treads along with a porcupine quill of pine needles and some trampled pinecones. Blood, near the back of his head, speckled the underbrush, and upon first glance, the eye that wasn't planted in the leaves had the look of a tired man. As Bear stared into this eye, he could not see anyone inside. Jimmy's spirit had left and the only thing that remained was the brown iris that circled its pitch-black pupil.

Sitting back, Bear's ass landed hard against the ground, his feet kicking forwards. Taking hold of his brother's hand, he massaged its muscles, knowing he wouldn't feel a response in blood flow or body heat. Not thinking about how his own breath was

gathering in his chest, he worked his hand up Jimmy's arm, rubbing it rhythmically, carefully. The fabric of the polyester shirt warmed between Bear's clenched fingers, causing him to think it was more responsive than his brother was to the touch of his own hands. He screamed the air out of his body and lost his gentleness. Jimmy's shirt crumpled and tore at the seam around its left shoulder.

Bear, aware that his hands were shaking again, turned his brother's head upright so that he could close both of the eyes. But when he saw the other side of Jimmy's face with the right half of his mouth blown open from a rifle's blast, he dropped the head and ran back down the logging road.

Before he reached the end of this trail, his face broke through a tire-sized spider web, which he'd managed to avoid on the way down. He stopped momentarily to wipe it off his mouth and nose but found himself coughing over and over. His throat was sore and his diaphragm felt constricted, so he punched himself in the chest several times. He couldn't run anymore but what exactly was he going to do when he reached his car? Drive around while animals and ants feasted on Jimmy's body?

He pulled out his cell phone and dialed 9-1-1.

*

Twenty minutes later, a tribal cop arrived and Bear directed him down the logging road. By this point, his hands had stopped shaking but his voice hadn't. It sounded soft and weak when compared to his heartbeat. He didn't want to be answering questions or even be talking to this officer. He knew Dale, a thirty-something-year-old man who still had the lanky frame and rosy face of a teenager. He had questioned Bear four times before: twice because of his neighbors' abusive relationship, another for punching the

man who T-boned him at a two-way-stop intersection, and once for drunk driving, their first encounter. Bear hadn't passed the sobriety test but in all fairness, Dale hadn't give him a chance, asking him to say the alphabet backwards, starting with the letter "Q." Not even a sober man could do that.

When they reached Jimmy's body, Dale spoke into his two-way radio transistor. Bear stopped when he saw the back of his brother's head, tangled in twigs. A snap-shot of his bloody face flashed behind his eyes. He decided to walk toward the riverbank to watch the current ripple and listen to it babble.

It was enough to let ten or fifteen thought-free minutes pass by until two Shawano cops arrived along with the coroners, all in matching starch-pressed, brown uniforms with bluish green disposable hospital gloves. Under their arms, they carried a body bag as well as a stretcher without wheels.

Now that his brother's body was no longer underneath the Remington rifle, Bear realized that the barrel was also caked in mud and pine needles. Jimmy had been using his weapon as a cane.

When he told the three coroners about the makeshift cane, they nodded like they'd already come to that conclusion. Yet, one portly coroner said, "That's kind of an uncomfortable cane if you ask me. He could've easily just taken rests along the way."

After more than enough questions from the men in uniforms, Bear brushed aside the black earthworms on the rocky bank of the river and sat down. Dale walked up behind him and they stared at the flowing water as the pale-faced Indian lawman began his story.

"You know, uh, the first time I met your brother was because of this phone call I got. I'm not supposed to tell you names but, you know, what does it matter? You could

probably figure out who it was. Anyway, Jimmy's neighbor was saying that she was hearing screaming and yelling coming from Jimmy Moses's house and she gives me his address. So, I drive over there expecting the usual. You know, some drunken party that's gotten out of hand or a domestic disturbance or something of that nature. And as I pull in, I notice that all the lights are turned off and all the curtains are closed and it's really, really quiet. But, I still have to check in and make sure it's all right and everything. So, I proceed to knock on the door and tell the homeowners that there had been reports of domestic disturbance at this address. But, I never got around to doing that, you see, because the guy who opens the door is wearing a big, old, brown hat. And he's holding one of his hands behind his back. And, I hear a 'Shh. Be quiet' in the background. So, I says, 'Slowly show me both of your hands.' And, he proceeds to show me his other hand and it has those flimsy, white—you know—plastic, little knives taped to his knuckles. And he says in his sarcastic Jimmy voice, 'What the hell do you want? Freddy Kruegar needs to murder him some little girls right now'."

Dale, with moistened eyes, looked over at Bear and laughed.

"I could not get over it. These two little girls poke their heads out and one of them says, 'What's going on?' and Jimmy says, 'Can I stab her while Mr. Policeman watches?' It was just too much. I had to laugh. With all the shit I'm called in for, it was nice to see something like that." Bear looked up from the river when Dale said, "Did he ever tell you that story?"

"Yeah, I heard it first from my daughters. They thought it was just as funny as you did." He was glad that his brother could connect with his daughters at their age level, but he didn't like how Jimmy would pushed the line of appropriate babysitting.

“Yeah, he was a charmer all right. Had to be. For this one incident on the Fourth of July, I asked him if he was drunk and he says, ‘What’s wrong with drinking fire water?’”

Bear let out a laugh at the same time the portly coroner called for Dale. Over the sound of the flooded river, Bear could barely make out what they were saying. “It looks like he shot himself.” He wiped the sweat off his face, wondering why government workers always took so long to do their job.

“All right, yeah, I’ll ask him.” Dale walked back to the riverbank and crouched down beside Bear. “They want to know if Jimmy had written a suicide note or if he had been showing any signs of depression.”

“No. I don’t think Jimmy meant to shoot himself. His barrel was all dirty and all that, so yeah.”

Dale looked at him confused. “Well, they just want to know any details that might be helpful in determining the cause of his death. Like if he had recently broken up with a girlfriend or if he had a history of manic depression or something of that nature.”

Bear shook his head.

“He wasn’t on any prescription medication for a mood disorder, was he?”

“No,” said Bear. “Jimmy’s not someone who’d take that.”

Dale half-cocked his head and looked at him. Bear couldn’t tell if this young policeman was feeling sorry for him or didn’t believe his answers. Then, Dale shook his head and walked back to the other brown uniformed men.

*

Inside Jimmy’s house, Bear headed toward the rows of beer bottles and picked up as many as he could, barely grasping onto all the glass necks, cradling others in his arms. He

hurried towards the kitchen trash but stopped and turned back to look at the way his brother had organized his alcohol. Perhaps he shouldn't have messed with whatever Jimmy had done. His eyes brimmed with tears. Concluding that he might as well throw all of the bottles on the floor away now that he had screwed up Jimmy's work, he turned back and dropped the beer in the trash.

Grabbing more, he wondered why his little brother had left the house without his cane. Jimmy wasn't the happiest of people, but he hadn't been behaving like anything was wrong. On days when he didn't work, he ate lunch at the Elder's Building with the elderly and the disabled. He seemed to enjoy their company. Jimmy also had a group of friends he drank and played Texas Hold 'Em with every Sunday. And, he always said he absolutely loved to baby-sit Bear's daughters. He was good with Akasha and Evi, knowing just how to tease them in a manner that was fun and never mean. They liked to watch horror movies together while eating ice cream mixed with M&M's. Even their mother had said he was a happier version of his younger self.

Several bottles slipped between Bear's arms, causing one to break when it hit the kitchen tiles.

"God damn it!"

He grabbed a broom from the pantry—"Damn it, Jimmy!"—cleaned up the glass, and threw away the remaining bottles on the floor.

What now? There were dirty dishes in the sink as well as breadcrumbs and dried ketchup on the kitchen counter. At some point, he needed to call his mom. Sometime soon. On the other side of the family room window, the fallen maple tree caught his eye. Its roots resembled a photograph of upside-down lightning frozen in time. Humidity had

yet to dry its roots. He was going to have to take out his cell phone and call his mom. But first, he would take the bathroom wastebasket out and deposit its contents in the burn barrel. After that, he'd make the necessary calls.

*

“Haiya, Johnny!” Bear’s mother answered the phone. Reylene still called him by his original name. “How are you?”

“Pretty good.” Bear’s initial greeting response rarely changed. It was like a doctor tapping him on the knee with a reflex hammer. “I mean, no. I’m not.” With his free hand, he poured lighter fluid into the metal barrel, which was filled with empty egg cartons, grocery bags, cornhusks, half-solidified cooking grease, tinfoil, microwave dinner boxes, burnt toast, and now Kleenexes and a pair of underwear. “I’m not doing so good.”

“That makes two of us. It feels like *little people* are stabbing my joints with clothes pins, don’t’cha know?”

“Your arthritis acting up again?”

“Every time the weather changes, I tell ya. And I’ve been worried sick about these winds. I thought they was going to blow all my babies away. I’m really surprised I didn’t have a brain aneurysm.”

Normally, Bear would’ve said, “I don’t think that’s caused by stress, Ma,” but instead, he struck a match, dropped it in the barrel, and watched everything drenched in lighter fluid blacken, shrivel, or turn to flames.

“I could just imagine it happening reeally fast. The wind would’ve picked up speed and *Whoosh!* All my flowers blown right out of the ground. I’d hear a bigger *Whoosh*, and all the homes on the rez would’ve been tossed into Green Bay. All the white people

wouldn't've known what to do with us." Reylene Fisherman laughed. Her puppet-like facial features—a circular head with soft cheeks, a rotund nose, and iron-pressed lips—would occasionally complement her personality. "I can't believe what it did to my vegetable gardens. All my babies. Ooh-la, Johnny. All the visitors for the powwow are going to think Stockbridgers don't know how to garden." She laughed again but Bear didn't breathe. "Johnny, are you there?"

"Yeah."

"Tell me what's wrong."

"No. First tell me what happened."

"My gardens are trashed like the inside of Shawnee's house. My yard now looks like her boys have been monkeying through here." Reylene paused. "The storm didn't damage your house, did it?"

"No, Ma. I've got to tell you something you don't want to hear. Something bad." Bear watched the flames turn green as the plastic grocery bags melted. "Jimmy passed away."

"Oh my god." Reylene gasped. "Oh my god. I just knew something bad was going to happen."

"He died earlier this morning after the thunderstorm."

"Oh my god."

He saw a fox poking around the edge of the forest. Its rib cage pushed against its thin coat and Bear, not wanting to be distracted, turned his attention back to the fire. As he told his mother what had happened, he left out some of the embarrassing details, like the beer bottles on the floor and the dirty underwear in the trash, but he included most of the

other key information, such as the cane on the bathroom sink and the box of shells on the bed. He decided to leave out the gruesome account of Jimmy's body.

"I'm not sure why he didn't take his cane, but he didn't. I really wish he took his cane though." He cleared his throat. "I'm so sorry, Ma."

There was a long pause over the line.

"You should be sorry for telling me this over the phone," she said.

"I know."

"Just exactly how did Jimmy shoot himself with a long-ass rifle?"

"I don't know. That's the crazy thing."

"Ennit the crazy thing? It *is* the crazy thing. It's the craziest, crazy thing I've ever heard in my entire crazy life. Jimmy's been hunting since he was six years old. If you guys weren't drinking, you must've been on dope."

"I wasn't with him."

"Were you doing something illegal?"

"No, Ma. I wasn't with him. It happened when he was cleaning the mud out of the barrel of his rifle."

"He's cleaned his rifle a hundred thousand times. You know what? I don't want to hear it. I don't want to hear it! I already know my sons drink too much. My opinion of you's couldn't be any lower."

"For Christ sakes, Ma! What the hell are you talking about? I wasn't there! Jeez! I can't handle this right now. I really can't. I'm hanging up now. All right? I'm hanging up now. Is that what you want?"

Reylene could no longer control her tears. She hated how they stung her eyes and left hot salty trails around the curves of her face. She tried to bite her quivering lip and heard Johnny cry as well. This caused her to sob. She hadn't heard either one of her sons cry since they were children. She loosened her grip on the phone and felt her fingers seize in a clammy ache. Sniffing up the mucus in her nose, she realized the receiver from her dial-up phone was wet with tears.

She said, "It wasn't some white-ass hunter who thought he was a deer, was it?"

"That would certainly make more sense."

They both laughed from deep within their bellies. Reylene was familiar with laughing and crying in the same breath and understood how these two emotions were close as twins.

She blew her nose and Johnny said, "What's important is that Jimmy's gone to a better place now. In a few days, his spirit will cross the river."

"You think it was an accident though, right?"

Reylene heard a pause over the phone until Johnny finally said, "I think—it's hard for me to guess—but I think his gun somehow went off when he stumbled." His voice cracked. "I think he was drunk."

*

She thought about the time her younger son attempted suicide eleven years ago. Jimmy's wife had left him for a sober man in Milwaukee and to spite everyone in Shawano, she took her son with her. At the time, Reylene's nearly three-year-old grandson had yet to have a haircut and it was already evident that his mother had passed on her beautiful curly hair genes. Reylene never cared much for Lizzy; she was like a

soap opera actress with no hips or backbone, yet she did have the nerve to move to the city without bringing Nathaniel back to visit.

For two years after that, everyone on the rez could see the pain in his eyes and they knew he was drunk nearly every single day. It didn't matter if he was at the Logging Mill or at home. And if he wasn't at work or in his recliner, he could be found at the Eagle's Nest tavern, drinking his daily wages.

One day, he told Reylene he had sworn off hard liquor and then, that evening, her baby boy filled his garage with car exhaust and laid down on the dirty, oil-stained floor. This was when he had a house he had to pay property taxes for and this was when a few gang-banger types from Menominee broke in and ended up saving his life. They said they'd never steal again, and Reylene promised she would never forgive them.

Menom's were such awful people. They were worse than blacks. No one liked them and Reylene had a hard time believing her son was as irresponsible as they were. Jimmy was a sawmill foreman, an Air Force Veteran, and most recently, a casino employee calling out numbers at the Bingo Hall. He even volunteered for many tribal events.

Considering the fact that no man ever wanted to stay with her and help take care of her boys, Jimmy had been a good kid. Shortly after he'd been born, his father had left her and her sons to live a more traditional life in Canada, with a Cree woman no less. It was probably the hardest on Johnny who, only five at the time, assumed his older brother responsibility and adopted a more fatherly role as well as a protective warrior position, always defending Jimmy when he was young and when he had permanently injured his leg while serving in Iraq.

Reylene knew the three-day funeral, which she believed her people based on Ojibwe traditions, would be painful for Johnny and for everyone who'd attend. The ceremonial preparations would be complicated because her son had shot himself in the head. This news meant that people would have a hard time circling his body twice, much less once. And the wrapping ceremony would be equally difficult; everyone would have a difficult time looking at his disfigured face. And then, there was the weeping ceremony, the time when everyone was finally allowed to cry. Their voices would say, "I'm so sorry for your loss," but their teary eyes would look into hers and judge her, tell her that her son wasn't in a better place because he'd purposely shot himself.

Traditional Indians believed that anyone who committed suicide was stuck in the physical world. They would never be permitted to enter the "spirit world," as Kissy Crow Messenger called it.

Kissy was just a few years younger than Reylene but she seemed to command more respect on the rez than the Tribal Council itself. She was a self-proclaimed expert on spiritual matters even though their people had lost much of their cultural heritage over the past three hundred years. Without a doubt, Kissy would show up at Jimmy's funeral and start spouting off her wacky traditional mumbo jumbo.

Because gossip was still the strongest form of oral tradition on the rez, Reylene would have to make sure that Kissy and everyone in the community knew that Jimmy had not committed suicide. He died in an awful hunting accident. It was the sort of thing that happened from time to time.

Twenty years ago, Kissy's brother had driven his truck out onto a lake too late in the winter and as a result, it broke through the ice. He managed to swim out only to die of

hypothermia. These kinds of mistakes happened to non-Indians as well (“How do you know when it’s safe to go ice fishing? When white people stop falling through the ice!”), and it wasn’t uncommon for them to accidentally shoot each other while hunting (“Did you know that vegetarian is an indigenous word? Translated it means, ‘Can’t Hunt’.”). But Jimmy was not a white man.

Because of the embarrassment, she briefly considered having a Catholic burial but then remembered that not all priests would funeral a suicide. If she was able to find a priest who was understanding, that still wouldn’t stop the congregation from talking about her son’s peculiar death. Some Catholic Indian would ask the priest if suicide was an unforgivable sin since the person who committed this transgression was unable to confess the murdering of oneself. He’d believe her son was in hell right now.

Hell. It was a place she didn’t always believe in. She didn’t entirely know what to think about the afterlife. According to most non-religious people, there was “a better place” that good people went to, but then that “other place” where bad people inevitably ended up was never really discussed or fully explained. Not to her anyway. This was either because it was too dark and difficult of a subject for people to address or because it simply wasn’t as discernable and clear-cut as established religions made it out to be.

As a child, she’d been taught Christianity at a boarding school in South Dakota, but as a young adult, she rarely learned the Indian way because her Mohican Nation’s beliefs were almost lost. It was only in the last few decades that her people had worked hard to resurrect their culture.

Since Reylene’s boarding school days, no one in her immediate family attended a Christian service—that is until Lizzy entered their lives. While Jimmy was married to

Lizzy, she had made him go to the Mohican Presbyterian Church twice every Sunday, morning and evening. Only once had she convinced Reylene and Johnny to go because she had said it was a “very important service.”

Lizzy looked at them with excitement and swayed her torso like a little girl in anticipation. “Nathaniel and Jimmy are getting baptized. Together!” She squealed, and it was the closest thing to a pig sound Reylene had ever heard.

Lizzy’s girly enthusiasm continued throughout the church service. After the pastor had performed the ceremony, awkwardly sprinkling water on the heads’ of a grown man and a crying infant, Johnny asked, “So does this mean that Jimmy and Nathaniel are now officially Christians?”

“I don’t think you understand what it means to be Christian.” The pastor smiled wide enough to reveal all the wrinkles around his eyes. Even though he couldn’t have been forty years old, his forehead lines were plentiful. Because his family hailed from Scotland, his complexion was consistently red as a mild sunburn. This was the whitest man Reylene had ever seen.

“Baptism is just a symbol for the cleansing of sins. It means that we believe that Jesus has washed away all of our transgressions when he died on the cross for us.”

“And if we believe this, we’ll be Christians?”

“Yes, and we’ll be seen as blameless in the eyes of God. You see Johnny—it’s Johnny, right?”

“It’s Bear to most folks.”

“Sorry. You see Bear, only the blameless can enter the kingdom of heaven.”

“What if Hitler believed in Jesus?” Johnny asked. “Would he get into heaven?”

“You know? Before the Apostle Paul was saved, he played a part in martyring many Christians.”

“What about Geronimo? He martyred a lot of white people.”

Reylene tugged on the back of Johnny’s shirt like she had done when he was a child. At her boarding school, she would have been slapped on the wrist with a ruler for saying something like this. If she had continued to be disrespectful, she would’ve been paddled.

“You ask great questions, Bear, even if you’re just trying to be funny.” The pastor once again revealed all his wrinkles by laughing, but Reylene couldn’t tell if he was angry because of his red complexion. “In all seriousness though, yes. It is true for everybody, even the greatest of sinners. Once someone has given their life to Christ, his past, present, and future sins will no longer be counted against him.”

Reylene remembered this last sentence clearly. Perhaps there was hope. Did Presbyterian pastors actually believe that people who committed suicide could still get into heaven? If a man’s future sins were already pardoned, then suicide was not an unforgivable sin.

Once again, she tried to picture what Jimmy’s son might look like today: his maple leaf colored hair, his freckles that were sprinkled across his Indian cheekbones, and—to everyone’s surprise—his blue eyes (“Oh my gosh! Look at his eyes!”). His beautiful, calm river eyes that would gaze into hers and never leave, not until she sang a traditional song and rocked him back to sleep.

At two, Nathaniel had started calling her “Gaga” because he could not pronounce grandma and his tiny hands, attached by rolls of fat, would grip onto two of her fingers and not let go.

Even though she did not agree with the Scottish pastor—that God would allow Hitler into Heaven—she hoped Jimmy’s ex-wife would be interested in attending a Presbyterian ceremony in Shawano County once again. Naturally, many people on both the Stockbridge rez and the Menominee rez would be outraged, but Reylene was determined to figure out how to get a hold of Lizzy and Nathaniel and invite them to Jimmy’s funeral. One way or another, they would return.

Chapter Two

When Reylene walked into Johnny's trailer, she found it cleaner than usual. The wooden furniture had been dusted and his brown carpet contained the zigzag strokes of a vacuum cleaner. Someone in her family had been using too much multi-purpose cleaner. The smell would most likely give her a headache.

There were no clothes or shoes on the floor either. For years, Akasha had left all of her Nike basketball sneakers—every single pair she'd worn since she was a toddler—in a pile near the front door. Unlike her younger sister though, she kept her T-shirts and socks off the floor. But, Evi didn't mind wearing wrinkly clothing picked off the hallway floorboards. Her skateboarding shoes were habitually thrown in different places too, sometimes next to the sofa sleeper and sometimes against the back of the cupboards that separated the family room from the kitchen. She was a slob like her uncle.

Only four hours had passed since Reylene had talked to her son on the phone. Why was he in such a hurry to clean his place? Perhaps Johnny was attempting to hide or cover up something. Maybe he and his brother had been dealing dope, and her oldest son didn't want anyone to suspect them. But just when this idea came to mind, she wanted to shake the thought loose from her head. She told herself to stop thinking this way. Johnny had turned around his life before he had kids. He was a new man, a father.

A short woman in overalls walked into the family room and jumped.

"Oh! You startled me!" Kissy Crow Messenger put the rag that she was holding in her hand over her heart. Her makeup-less face converted to a look of concern, wrinkles

furrowed and frown lines visible. "I'm so sorry to hear about your son. I'm so, so sorry, Reylene. He had such a kind heart."

"Thank you."

Kissy hugged her a little too tightly. Although Reylene needed to be embraced, she didn't want to be near this woman.

"And, he had such a great sense of humor," Kissy said. "He was a very funny man. He brightened everyone's day."

"I guess I'm still in shock yet."

Reylene felt Kissy's arms rub her back and she told herself not to soften up to her caresses. Instead, Reylene, who was a head taller than Kissy, looked at the wall behind the couch, staring at the old quilted blanket behind them. It contained the Indian design of triangles and diamonds shaped into a square pattern that represented the sun. Its rays were bright oranges and reds like the colors used in Southwestern Indian art. But, the sky patterns circling around the sun were colored turquoise blue, a feature found in Northwestern Native artwork. Johnny's quilt did not look like it had been produced in the Great Lakes area or the Northwoods region.

"Oh, I'm so, so sorry," Kissy whimpered. "I'm so sorry."

"Please quit saying that. I don't want to cry anymore. Not right now. I want to be useful."

Kissy dropped her arms and took a step back. In a few darting motions, her eyes searched Reylene's.

"Well, oh. Okay. We're just cleaning up a bit here."

"I can see that," Reylene said. "What're you doing here?"

“Bear called me over. He said he needed help.”

Reylene nodded and immediately knew why they were cleaning. There was no point in asking her son to help her with the funeral preparations. Not while Kissy was in the house. She walked over to the kitchen and found Johnny bent over, trying to wipe off a dark cloud of hand prints on the wall just above the kitchen table.

“Good luck getting that off,” Reylene said. “Jimmy’s finger prints will always be here.”

“Guess I’ll have to paint over it.” Johnny stopped scrubbing the wall. “I think these marks are from my daughters’ though.”

“I’m surprised to see you clean for once.”

“Hey! I’ll have you know that once a week the socks get picked off the floor. And, not all of them are mine.”

“That’s because your daughters take after you.” Reylene and Johnny both chuckled. “What’s Kissy doing here?” She didn’t bother to lower her voice.

“I needed help cleaning.”

“Yeah, you do. The whole town knows you do. But what’s the rush? We won’t be having anybody coming over. Not at your place or mine. Not at Jimmy’s either. I’m not settling on it.”

“On what?”

“A wake. What else?”

“I completely understand.” Kissy’s voice and her short, deliberate footsteps were heard behind them, coming from the family room to the kitchen. “That would be hard.

But even though you'll be having a closed casket ceremony, can we still put moccasins and a shawl on his body? I already got an eagle feather that we can place in his hands."

Kissy sure was a different person from her younger years. Despite being short, she was the most desired girl in their boarding school. With her obsidian-colored hair, coffee-with-crème skin, and strong Native facial features, she never had trouble attracting boys. If one of her boyfriends neglected or insulted her, she dumped him and picked up another.

But when she turned nineteen, she chose to move to Door County to be with a white man who owned several boats. Over those ten years, the reflective sunlight off the waves must've aged her skin rapidly. She returned home with wrinkles around her eyes and premature grey hair at a time when hair dye was expensive.

"My husband used to beat me all the time, even when we were in the middle of Lake Michigan," she would say to everyone in the community, even Reylene. "But, there was no point in screaming. That lake's an ocean." Her crow's feet somehow expressed more heartache than her eyes or voice. "I'm never going on a boat again."

Johnny tossed his rag on the kitchen table and wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Yeah, just a little eagle feather would be nice even if no one sees it but us. I think that's a good idea, Kissy." He turned to face Reylene. "We don't have to make a big deal about it or nothing. Just a few touches of Jimmy's heritage would be nice. Appropriate, too."

Johnny and Kissy looked at Reylene, waiting for a response. A moment passed before she heard someone crying in a bedroom.

"I didn't know you had your daughters with you," Reylene said.

“Just Akasha,” Johnny replied. “She asked her mom to drive over here when I told her about, you know, it.”

“I haven’t decided what we’re going to do for my son’s funeral yet,” Reylene said. “I’ll let you know when I figure it out.”

She turned around and followed the sobbing sounds coming from the hallway until she reached Akasha’s bedroom door. Tapping on it lightly, she asked, “May I come in?”

“I don’t know. I guess,” she heard her granddaughter say.

Reylene slowly turned the knob and pushed the door open. Akasha, lying on her bed, raised her head. Her face was red and wet with tears. Her long hair, matted against the side of her face, slowly peeled off and fell to her pillow. Reylene felt an ache beneath her breastbone. Because her granddaughter was suffering as well, Reylene knew she had to stay strong for her.

“Oh, come here, baby girl,” she said as she lay down on the bed beside Akasha. She stroked her granddaughter’s hair a couple times and marveled at how her family’s genes could’ve produced these lush, dark chocolate tresses that required little maintenance.

Johnny, with his emotionless face, and Kissy, with a concerned look, stared at them from the bedroom door.

“This can’t be happening. Why did this happen?” Akaska asked.

“I don’t know, baby girl. I don’t know.” Reylene caressed the middle of her back.

She nodded to Johnny and Kissy and they walked out, quietly shutting the door behind them.

“It’s just not fair, Mimi,” Akasha whispered. “Why did Uncle Jimmy have to die?”

Reylene wanted to say, “He’s in heaven now,” but she knew her granddaughter had been attending Kissy’s Indian teachings. So instead, she replied, “He’s not in any pain no more. His leg no longer gives him pain.”

“Do you know how he died? Dad just told me it was an accident.”

“It was an accident. It was a sad accident, but let’s not talk about his death, okay? Let’s talk about his life and how much he loved you. Remember all those times he took you to Weed Dam to swim? You know he’d done that just for you because he wasn’t even able to swim.”

“I’m going to miss him.” Akasha fiddled with the bed sheets. “I can do whatever you need me to do. I can help you with all the funeral stuff.”

“You don’t need to do that. You’re sixteen. I’ll take care of everything because that’s my job. I’m the mother of this family.”

“I had, like, a dream about Uncle Jimmy,” Akasha’s face contracted and she began to weep. The pain beneath Reylene’s breastbone blossomed. The kind of heartache only a grandmother would know.

“Go on now. Go ahead and cry on Mimi’s shoulder.” She let her granddaughter sob for a couple of minutes before saying, “It’s just a dream, Akasha. I wouldn’t let that kind of thing bother me. You know what you should do today? You should to do something that makes you happy. I’ve lost a lot of people in my life and I spent many years crying. Crying over losing loved ones, over losing men, over being a broke-ass Indian and a single mother. And, you know what I learned?” she stopped to clear her throat. “Working is better than drinking. Gardening is better than counseling. Staying in bed just makes things worse and what you really need to do is get outside and get some fresh air. Why

don't you go for a walk? You like walks." Reylene placed her hand on Akasha's moist cheek. "Mimi hates to see you cry. Uncle Jimmy will always be my baby and so will you."

Reylene squeezed her tightly. She had a strong frame for a teenage girl and her breasts and hips were beyond their budding stage. She worried that her granddaughter's innocence would soon pass too, especially now that she was going through her first real loss of a loved one. Her heart had to be aching. Yet, Reylene knew that babying a sixteen-year-old would only make her vulnerable to the dangerous men in the world and weak to all the troubles in life.

Akasha rubbed her nose pink with the back of her hand, a gesture Reylene still found adorable. Again, she wondered how Fisherman's and Moses's could've birthed such a beautiful Indian girl who'd won the Tribe's Junior Miss Moheconneew crown four years ago. Tomorrow, she would be competing for the Miss Moheconneew, the high-school-aged Indian pageant. With the passing of her uncle, Reylene hoped she wouldn't give up on her dream of representing her Native American nation as their winning princess, but she wasn't going to bring up the competition at a time like this.

"Are we going to have the ceremony at, like, Dad's house?"

"You know, Uncle Jimmy's funeral is going to be really difficult for everyone, especially me," Reylene said as she kneaded her fingers into the back of her granddaughter's shoulders. "I think we're just going to have a quick, short funeral. Nothing elaborate. Nothing long. One of those short Christian funerals that isn't too hard on anyone. It's just—too hard. Our family's going through a lot and I don't want to have to put everyone through a three day ceremony. I know I just can't handle it."

Chapter Three

Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Nation Cultural Heritage Book

by Kissy Crow Messenger, 2008

Introduction:

Ya-hey! Koolamalsi! It's Kissy Crow Messenger. I am an enrolled member of the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Nation and I have spent my life gathering knowledge from the Creator, our Elders, our former medicine man, Simeon Konkapot, and other spiritual leaders from other Indian Nations. Thank you for being interested in learning about your heritage! While it is true that our beliefs are not written down but passed on from generation to generation through oral tradition, there are things that are acceptable to preserve on paper. In this book you'll be introduced to (1) our creation story, (2) traditional gardening, (3) medicinal plants and where to find them, (4) smudging, and (5) ancient songs/chants.

This book is not intended for non-Natives to read. Please take my words seriously. Even today, we are in danger of losing our heritage because non-Natives are trying to take it away from us. What's more, if you tell non-Natives our beliefs and they do not believe our teachings, unwanted spirits or bad medicine may follow them. It is acceptable to explain the basics of our culture to non-Natives, but please do not share with them our deep-rooted beliefs. Anushiik!

*

Chapter Five: Songs/Chants

What you see in the following pages are Wisconsin Indian songs or chants. I first discovered these types of songs in two books by ethnologist Garrick Mallery. He is the author of Picture-Writing of the American Indians: with 54 plates and 1290 Text Illustrations: Volumes One and Two. (Dover Publications, INC., New York, 1972. Original 1893).

Before I show you the songs/chants, there are a few things I have to explain to you first.

In Volume Two, *Chapter XIV: Religion*, Mallery—a white man—writes, “The most surprising fact relating to the North American Indians, which until lately had not been realized, is that they habitually lived in and by religion to a degree comparable with the old Israelites under the theocracy. This was sometimes ignored, and sometimes denied in terms, by many of the early missionaries and explorers. The aboriginal religion was not their religion, and therefore was not recognized to have an existence or was pronounced to be satanic” (461).

White people have the hardest time trying to figure us out. We do not believe what Wiccans or Satanists believe. Contrary to popular thought, which some of our own disinterested members believe, we are also not Buddhists or hippies either. I once took a World Religions class at the University of Wisconsin—Green Bay and this white professor clumped every religion into one of three categories: theism (belief in a God), atheism (no God), and pantheism (everything is god). This instructor put Native American religion into the pantheism category and I—of course—became very upset. Yes, we believe in spirits, but we also believe in a Creator. Yes, we believe in Mother

Earth, but we also believe in an afterlife that is not the same as reincarnation. This afterlife is not the same as the Jewish heaven or the Christian heaven either. White people like to categorize everything, but you cannot categorize us into their categories.

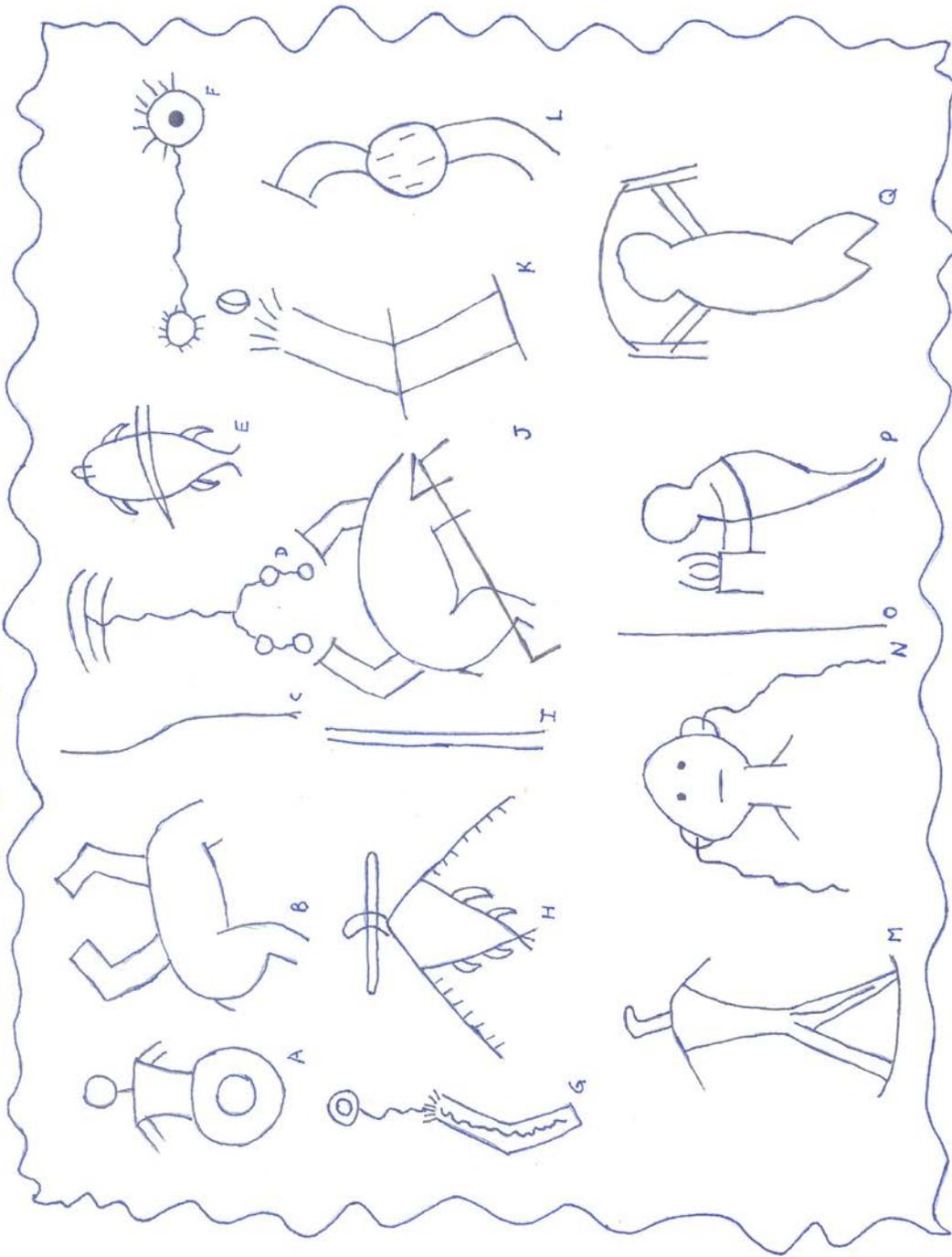
Mr. Mallery is wrong to compare us to the ancient Israelites because Indians lied to him and to his sources. Yes, we had shamans but we also had sachems, other forms of medicine men, and clan mothers who taught our people spirituality and represented the will of the people. Mr. Mallery's own "cultural blinders" were fixed firmly around his eyes and he wanted to believe that our beliefs were closer to Christianity than (what he would call) paganism. And, his non-Native sources wanted to believe this as well. So over the centuries, Indians learned to lie to the white historians, the white ethnologists, and the white missionaries. Our ancestors only told them what they knew white people wanted to hear.

Trust what you hear from your Elders, my reader, and not what you read in the library or on the internet. If you read Garrick Mallery's books, you will see that I made a few corrections to these birch bark songs.

Please see Song #1 on the following page. While the picture writing and their interpretations are real, the Crow Messenger family rearranged various pictures/characters together to form our own songs. The words of these ancient songs have always been interchangeable anyway. They have been used by so many generations that many of them are old-fashioned and form no part of their modern Native language (which in most cases is Ojibwe or Menominee). The sounds were memorized. The characters recalling them were not representations of the sound but of the idea. Stay with me here. The words—or sounds which passed as words—were memorized by the singers,

and their memory was assisted by the charts. The original pictured characters were drawn upon birch bark and preserved first by Indian families and then by white academics like Garrick Mallery.

(THIS SIDE UP)



The Order of Song #1 and its Interpretation

A: As I arise from [slumber].

The speaker is shown as emerging from a double circle, his sleeping place.

B: What have I unearthed?

The speaker has discovered a bear, as shown by the two hands grasping that animal by the back.

C: Bar or Rest

The vertical line denotes a slight pause in the song, after which the chant is renewed, accompanied by dancing.

D: The Creator has dropped medicine from the sky where we can get it.

The line from the sky, diverging to various points, indicates that the sacred objects fall in scattered places.

E: When I come out, the sky becomes clear.

When the otter-skin sack is produced, the sky becomes clear so that the ceremonies may proceed.

F: Let us talk to one another.

The circles denote the places of the speaker and the hearer, the short lines signifying magic influences.

G: I take life from the sky.

The speaker is enabled to reach into the sky and to obtain from the hearer the means of prolonging life. The circle at top denotes the sacred shell.

H: I brought the medicine to bring life.

The thunderbird after bringing some of the plants—by causing the rains to fall—returns to the sky. The short line represents part of the circular line usually employed to designate the imaginary vault of the sky.

I: Rest

J: Down is the bear

The bear is said to have his legs cut off, by the outline of the structure, signifying he has become helpless because he is under the influence of the shamans.

K: Big, I am big.

The speaker is great in his own estimation; his power of obtaining gifts from superior beings is shown by the arm reaching for an object received from above; he has furthermore overcome the bear and can employ it to advantage.

L: You encourage me.

Two arms are shown extended toward a circle containing sacred shells. The arms represent the assistance of friends of the speaker encouraging him with their assistance.

M: I can alight in the medicine pole.

The thunderbird is perched upon the medicine pole erected near the shaman's sacred structure. The speaker professes to have the power of flight equal to the thunderbird that he may transport himself to any desired locality.

N: The Creator, he does hear (?)

The interpretation is vague, but could not be otherwise explained. The lines from the ears denote hearing.

O: Rest

P: I have finished my drum.

Spirit holding drum; sound ascending.

Q: Here me those who are talking to me.

Listening and wanting other spirits to hear.

*

Akasha Moses needed to focus on studying but her uncle's death consumed her thoughts. She kept picturing him in traditional Indian regalia, walking without a cane in the spirit world. It was a painful image she did not want to believe. So, she tried to take her grandma's advice and concentrate on something else, walking and reading simultaneously.

This was her twenty-third time reading Kissy's cultural heritage book from cover-to-cover this week. By its third read, the book had become ridiculously dull, but she had dedicated herself to winning. Over the past two years, she'd attended nearly all of Kissy's ceremonies as well as her Mohican history presentations. Akasha even joined the language camps that were instructed by Kissy's friend, a Munsee-Canadian man who taught Daniel Day Lewis how to speak their language for the movie *The Last of the Mohicans*. But now that Uncle Jimmy had died, would it be disrespectful to the Tribe to give up everything she had worked hard for in order to help her family arrange his funeral? Even though Mimi had told her to get some fresh air, Akasha still wanted to help her grandma with the funeral preparations.

She closed Kissy's book when the loose gravel trail she'd been walking dispersed into lonely stones. As she left the town of Bowler, only a trampled grass path remained.

A mud-splattered Jeep Cherokee passed by and its passengers, three soon-to-be high school Seniors, screamed out inaudible words. If the yellow-haired passenger, Nancy Brittman, hadn't been imitating war yelps, Akasha may have been able to make out what the others were saying.

Several months ago, when the flowers were budding and the snow banks bordering the school parking lot had melted down to molehills, Akasha stopped taking the bus home. Instead, she walked back almost nine miles every day. It would've been thirteen if she hadn't cut through the woods rather than follow the angular roads, which had been paved around farm fields and offered no direct route. Although she had been warned that it was dangerous to walk by herself, she discovered that this was the only part of her day where she could be alone in her thoughts.

The school bus, reeking of body odors and forgotten lunches, was always full of yelling and laughing, kicking beneath the seats and kneeing through the fabric of the cushions. Several times a week the driver would stop the bus and scream, "Sit down and behave!" then turn around and drive again.

From behind, Nancy Brittman, a pasty girl with a narrow nose that slanted slightly to the left, would tug on her ponytail. Usually it was a light, quick pull, not enough to hurt. But once, for some childish reason, she yanked Akasha's head back hard as she whispered "Bitch" into her ear.

Akasha swore.

"Hey, what's going on?" the bus driver yelled. "You do not use language on my bus! You guy'es better behave or I'm going to stop and no one will be getting home on time. I'm talking to you, Akasha. You hear me?"

Nancy's best friend, Divinity Starr, was sitting beside her. In fifth grade, she was the tallest student in their elementary school. She didn't have to stand up in order to peer over the green, cushioned seat. Instead, she leaned forward, looked down on Akasha, and said, "You deserved that. What? Are you going to cry now? Go ahead and cry."

Akasha looked up from the grass path to see the same dirty jeep moving towards her in the opposite lane. Suddenly it swerved across the street, headed right at her. It drove off the road billowing dust and grass from its tires. Grit bombarded her legs. Akasha closed her eyes and screamed, certain she was going to be run over.

When she heard laughter, particularly a familiar laugh that resembled a machine gun, she opened them again. The jeep had stopped about twenty feet in front of her.

“Gotcha!” The driver said from behind his aviator sunglasses. She could tell it was Anthony by the way his black locks of hair in the front of his face curled around his right-angle jaw.

“Look at her face! It looks like a circus clown.” Nancy Britzman said and blurted out another machine gun giggle.

“We really gotcha.” Anthony pointed at her in mockery. “We gotcha so bad.”

“You got my legs with rocks, youse psychopaths,” Akasha shouted. “I got pelted all over. Look at my legs. They’re all bruised.” She pointed to a visible blue spot below her knee. “Ow! That really hurt, you guys!”

“Are you all right?” Nancy asked. “Sorry. We saw you reading and we had to scare you.”

“Yeah, what are you doing studying?” Anthony took off his aviators. “It’s freaking summer.”

“Because I have no life, but you already knew that,” Akasha said. “No, actually I was bored, so I decided to get some food at JP’s.”

“You walked all the way to Bowler to eat, like, gas station food? I think someone has way too much time on her hands.” Nancy’s large hoop earrings spun around as she talked

breathlessly. “Maybe you should go to school all summer long. You’ve got nothing better to do.”

“Where’re you headed?” Anthony asked. “We could give you a lift.”

Akasha watched him flick his unbraided hair out of his eyes with two jerks of the head. Anthony had dark-colored eyes, not brown eyes, but dark Native American irises. She thought she couldn’t say, “No” to him until she saw the yellow-haired, white girl place her hand behind his hair and massage the back of his neck.

In just one year, Nancy had transformed herself into a beautiful girl. Her eyelashes were long, her hair had what commercials call “volume,” and her now brace-less teeth were straight and white. Her only physical flaw seemed to be her off-kilter nose. For a moment, Akasha thought if she had money for expensive beauty products, she could look as beautiful as her. But, this thought was soon replaced once she saw Anthony sit back and uncomfortably pin Nancy’s arm to his headrest. Akasha didn’t need all the crap that white girl needed to look pretty.

“Well, is there room?” Akasha asked. There was an Indian boy with a Marine haircut sitting in the middle of a cluttered backseat, surrounded by fast food wrappers, tackle boxes, even fishing poles. “Blink’s already sitting in the back.” He had kind eyes but she didn’t know a lot about him, aside from the fact that he’d missed two semesters of school due to some kind of juvenile delinquent behavior.

Anthony said, “He can scootch over. Make room, man.”

“Yeah, hop on in. There’s plenty of room. I don’t have STD’s.” Blink said while his Adam’s apple moved around like an accessory. His grin suddenly turned into a look of

concern. “Just kidding. Really. I was just joking. That was a stupid joke.” His voice trailed off.

“Yeah, I don’t know, you know,” Akasha’s confidence in her beauty returned when she saw this boy’s eyes fall away in a shy fear. “I just feel like walking.”

“What are you, like forty? Whatever.” Nancy’s pirate earrings spun again. “Let’s just go. She’s such a weirdo.”

“Well, her uncle did just die,” Akasha heard Blink say before the jeep’s tires turned in the dirt. As their vehicle pulled away, leaving behind the smell of exhaust, she watched the boys laugh at something Nancy had said. Lonely, negative thoughts swirled through her head yet she told herself that she only needed a few, solid friends to be happy.

Nearby, a sparrow chirped. Another sparrow answered in the distance.

Again, she thought about Uncle Jimmy and realized she probably had lost her best friend. No one loved her the way her uncle had loved her. He was by far her favorite relative. When she was seven years old, her dad moved out of their home because her parents were going through a divorce. Only once did he stop at her mom’s house for any lengthy period of time: when he and his brother came over to drop off firewood. Despite his bum leg, Uncle Jimmy was able to unload the logs off their truck by handing them to his brother who then stacked them into a pile. When they were finished, her uncle called Akasha and her sister over to offer them jelly-filled doughnuts while their Dad kissed their mom. She grabbed him tightly by his flannel coat and kissed him back like they were still in love.

“It’s not your fault—your parent’s quitting on each other,” Uncle Jimmy said. “They will always love you even if they don’t always love each other.”

Three months later her parents were officially divorced, and Jimmy became Akasha and Evi's weekly baby-sitter, indulging them with candy and movies. He even made sure they did their homework, helping them with math problems and vocabulary.

Looking back, Akasha realized he wasn't the best role model for her younger sister. Generally, he sipped on beer while they were at his house. But, occasionally he'd drink one too many and his words would slur and his jokes became crass. While his dirty humor was never directed at the girls, it was still inappropriate for children. Sometimes Akasha understood his vulgar jokes and sometimes she would laugh even when she didn't know what was funny.

He loved to look outside the window, watch the neighbor tilling his garden, and say, "Well, isn't he getting down and dirty with his hoe?"

Evi, resting her chin on the windowsill, once asked, "Where can I get a hoe?"

Akasha's eyes stung with salt water until she blurted out a mortified laugh.

"And his hoe's red too," Uncle Jimmy cracked. "Red headed hoes are the best. They're feisty in the garden bed."

But, who could blame her uncle for drinking? He was a brave war survivor, handicapped and damaged. His ex stole his son from him, so if anyone deserved forgiveness, it was her Uncle Jimmy. He was one of Akasha's few friends.

She knew she would cry at his funeral on Sunday and she knew he would want her to wear the black "Miss Moheconneew" sash this weekend. He would've been in the crowd cheering her on as she danced. Tomorrow night, the current princess, Divinity Starr, would crown the next winner for the "Thirty-eighth Annual 'Honoring All Veterans'

Mohican Powwow.” Akasha wanted that crown for her Uncle Jimmy. She was determined to have the biggest smile that night.

There were many requirements she needed to focus on but she was more interested in impressing the judges with information they hadn't taught their contestants. This was the reason why Akasha poured over every ancient song in Kissy's book. Three days ago, she'd decided that she was not only going to recite a song, but she was going to recreate her own. While she was supposed to be babysitting her younger sister at Bear's house, Akasha came up with the idea and screamed with excitement.

“What're you watching?” Evi yelled. Her bare feet pummeled the trailer's floor as she dashed out of their bedroom and into the family room. Her twelve colorful bracelets, one for each year of her life, slid up her forearms before piling back down around her wrists. These bracelets stood out among her ugly, black clothing intended for boys. “Are you watching a scary movie without me?”

“No, I just figured out how I am going to win Miss Moheconneew!”

“Your brain is a scary movie. My gosh,” Evi said and walked back to her room, saying, “We need *Jigsaw* to cut your head open and take the nerd out.”

Yesterday, Akasha was one hundred percent certain that during her first year of eligibility she would be crowned Miss Moheconneew. Today, she was having trouble reciting the first song she had already memorized one month ago. How could this be happening to her all at once?

She needed a distraction other than walking. She pulled out her cell phone and called her friend Onatah.

“Wanna hang out before my uncle's doings tonight?”

*

A muggy breeze, no more refreshing than a stale drink, rattled the leaves around Akasha and Onatah, both standing in the thick of the forest. At the brim of the horizon, the orange sun looked like a diluted mirage in the humid air.

“Listen Akasha,” Onatah said, “I’m telling ya. You should take a hit with me. It’s the only way to get through sometimes.” Onatah lit a wad of weed and dropped it in an empty Mountain Dew can. Then she huffed the hole she had poked in the bottom of the can as she crumpled the middle of the aluminum container. She coughed. “Oh, gawd! This is awful. This is not a good—shit.” Onatah coughed some more, causing her substantial lips, swollen and protruded, to quiver. As she bent over, the hood to her Cookie Monster sweatshirt fell loosely over her head. Year round, no matter what the weather, she wore that nauseating blue hoodie. Akasha figured there were invisible sweat stains around its collar and armpits.

“Well, don’t oversell it,” Akasha said. She had dressed appropriately for the heat wave with a yellow spaghetti-strap shirt and jean shorts. Northern summer evenings usually required a jacket or sweatshirt, but tonight proved to be an extreme exception. “I don’t want to blow my chances for Miss Moheconneew. Did you know the written test this year, like, actually included a piss test? Literally. They gave us this piss test and I didn’t know if I could pee on command. They’re probably checking my pee right now. You really made your mark.”

Onatah was last year’s Miss Moheconneew winner and she somehow managed to represent the Tribe at a few local events even though she talked like a foul-mouthed boy. She was fat, with most of her weight settling in her hips, but she was also a nimble

dancer. She lacked motivation, yet she was one of the smartest girls Akasha knew. She never had to study. When she heard something, anything, she remembered it. Three months into her Miss Moheconneew position, she was fired for drinking liquor and smoking weed with her full-brother. The crown went to Divinity Starr. According to the rules, Indian royalty were required to live a substance-free life during their year of service.

Akasha had never abused a substance. Not a drop of alcohol or a puff of marijuana had entered her body. But the more she hung out with Onatah, the harder she knew it would be to follow the rules.

“Hey! Everyone knows what I did when I was Miss Mo-fuck-a-canoe, and you know what? I don’t regret it. I really don’t. And I don’t miss it. Now listen, little miss perfectionist: I’m not going to tattle on you if you want to hit whatever’s left,” Onatah shook the aluminum can, “but if the community finds out, so what? I will jizz all over their faces.”

Her large, beautiful, round eyes—an exceptional characteristic among Indians—were only a third of the way open. She looked sleepy and stoned. Akasha could tell her friend was trying to be expressive with her facial gestures, but her eyelids wouldn’t open wide enough. Instead, they fluttered like dirt was trapped underneath them.

Akasha laughed at Onatah’s dirty joke. Her friend loved to create problems for herself and for everyone else. Adventures happened to her and this was why Akasha occasionally hung around her. She didn’t want Onatah’s life—her father had eight children with five different women—but she enjoyed living vicariously through her. Akasha’s life was extremely dull and this seventeen-year-old was one of her few high school friends.

Despite being one grade above her, she was the only one who'd actually call Akasha to hang out instead of the other way around.

She had become increasingly hurt by the fact that her so called friends never called her first to spend time with her. This was why she wouldn't feel sorry for them if they lost Miss Moheconneew. Although the yearly competition was not a beauty pageant, her physical appearance gave her an edge over some of her opponents. She believed American Indian beauty should not have been a factor in choosing each year's royalty, but she was too competitive to ignore the unfortunate reality or nature of the competition.

She was prettier and more graceful than Peaches and Daryon. Unlike these two tomboys, Akasha's posture was ladylike and her dancing was elegant and fluid. She had the strong jawline and prominent cheek bones Hollywood Indians were supposed to have. With her brown skin, hair, and eyes, she looked more Indian than Tatiana and Wasalaangweew. Tatiana was a Black Indian who probably had almost no Native American blood in her. A century and a half ago, her ancestors decided it was better to live with Indians than with whites.

Wasal, on the other hand, was a pale-faced Indian or a "quarter-pounder" with blonde hair and blue eyes. Even though she looked white, she was considered one-quarter Indian by the enrollment department. This was the minimal requirement to receive free health care from Indian Health Services and an annual per capita payment from the casino. She also had the legal right to carry an eagle feather, which was particularly meaningful at powwows. But, her benefits didn't stop at the federal and state level: she could vote at tribal polls, hunt and fish on Native land, and own property on the reservation when she turned eighteen. Her friends who were less than one-fourth Indigenous would have to

move off the rez when they became legal adults. Some of those friends looked more Indian than Wasal. Akasha believed this was one of the reasons why skin color was such a popular topic among students at her school.

Even if someone with a trained eye could tell Wasalaangweew was an Indian—her narrow eyes and off-white skin were total giveaways—Akasha did not think the Tribe would want a blonde hair, blue eyed girl representing their nation at powwows and ceremonies. Four years ago, Kissy gave a pale-skinned girl with black-ink hair the Junior Miss Moheconneew crown and several gossipy moms remarked that she looked too white to be royalty.

Other contestants—like Rachel, Sage, and Dakota—would probably beat Akasha in an actual beauty pageant. They were all very pretty, each in their own way. However, they were too boy-crazy and unmotivated to be considered serious threats. While these girls threw themselves at losers, Akasha had decided that she would wait for a gentleman to come along, one who liked smart Native girls.

“Holy shit!” Onatah jumped and broke Akasha away from her thoughts. “There’s a humongous owl watching us. You see it? I hope it’s not following us.”

Towards the eastern sky on the opposite side of the sunset, Akasha looked over her shoulder and saw a great horned owl. A few yellow beams somehow managed to shine on the animal in between clusters of tree branches. Its eyes were ominous and they stared directly at Akasha. She looked at them and felt like she was staring into a pair of magic eight balls.

“Owl,” Onatah said, “you look very creepy right now and it’s probably because I’m stoned. But, my friend’s uncle just died, so just leave her the hell alone.”

“Shut up, Onatah,” Akasha felt her throat shudder as she whispered. “I heard owls could be protectors against evil. That’s what Ho-Chunks say. It all depends on what you believe.”

“Not with me, they’re not. One time my mother and I drove up to the Lac du Flambeau rez and the same bugged-eyed owl followed us for, like, most of the trip. When we got into Tomahawk, my brother calls me and says that we have to meet him at the Indian hospital. His girlfriend OD’d. I’m dead serious! An owl followed us and my brother’s girlfriend OD’s. It was, like, so crazy.”

“And what happened?”

“And what happened? She didn’t make it ’cause it was an Indian hospital. Cause owls are messengers of death. Come on, Akasha! All you do is study. You need to get with it.” She stared down the owl again before putting her Cookie Monster hood back over her head. She reached for her drawstrings but they had torn off months ago. “And, we need to get out of here. I hope that owl doesn’t follow us to the ceremony.”

*

The brightest stars had just begun to wink behind the owl. Still the Sun Chief refused to surrender the day’s oppressive heat. It had sunk beneath the tall trees to the west and the tips of its glowing feathers were ceding to the rising yellow light of a quarter moon. There were no clouds to hide the birds of prey from attacking the quick-footed rodents. The owl, with its nocturnal eyes, perched on a maple tree’s branch and watched the fiery light dance around the seated silhouettes. The smoke from their bonfire rose and the wet wood underneath the fire snapped and hissed as the smell of sage consumed the air. The

ceremonial plant was being burned and passed around in an abalone shell for smudging. Its smoke ascended beyond the sky, sending the prayers of the people to the Creator.

One by one, Mohicans, Menominees, and Ojibwe's gathered the smoke into their cupped hands and bathed themselves with it by "splashing" the smoke upon themselves or moving their hands across, around, and down their bodies as if the smoke were water.

Then, tobacco in its earthen form was passed around. All of the nineteen people present pinched a piece off one of its leaves. They clenched the sacred medicine in their hands and quietly said a prayer. After each person had finished, they rubbed the tobacco against the bark of a living tree.

Akasha and Onatah were the last to say a prayer and when they returned to their seats, their silhouettes were cast around Jimmy Moses' backyard as the ceremonial fire danced and recreated their shadows continuously. The fire needed twenty-four hour tending because it had to burn without cessation until Jimmy crossed the river into the life after the known life.

Divinity Starr, now a Senior at Bowler School, had been responsible for passing around the spiritual medicines, and she carefully put away the sage and tobacco.

Akasha, sitting in a camouflaged, fold-out chair, scanned the group. Some of her cousins and relatives were present. For whatever reason, her dad did not show up. Neither did her irresponsible sister. Reylene did not attend because she said Indian ceremonies were "kind of long and spooky."

Onatah, who was sitting to the left of Akasha, whispered, "I'm tripping like a motherfucker. Are you feeling any second-hand tripping?"

"Shut up," Akasha said.

“The fire looks like it’s like all over the place. Like the flames are alive.” Onatah’s eyes were still only halfway open. “That’s so trippy.”

Akasha dared not open her mouth.

After the fire keepers finished poking the fire and turning over the wood, Divinity Starr began to walk towards them. Did they smell like weed? Hopefully, the fire and the burning tobacco masked that smell.

“Awee!” Onatah, apparently unaware that the current Miss Moheconneew was approaching them, leaned over to her and whispered, “That guy sitting across from us looks like Jesus.”

Akasha quickly put her hands over her face to conceal her snickering. Only Onatah could make her laugh at a time like this. Her cousin Thunder, who was from Minneapolis, really did look like the Indian version of Jesus with his sparse beard and long hair.

When Akasha dropped her hands back into her lap, she found Divinity Starr staring down into her eyes and then into Onatah’s. Because of her height, Divinity Starr had to bend at the hips.

“Staying out of trouble?” Miss Moheconneew asked with words that were no louder than the crackling fire.

“Not when I’m with your boyfriend,” Onatah responded.

For a moment, Divinity Starr appeared as if she was going to growl at her, but then a self-righteous look came over her face. “This is a traditional ceremony. Show some respect.” Divinity Starr turned her head away and was about to walk back to her camping chair when Onatah grabbed her deer bone necklace and yanked her close.

“What I don’t get is,” Onatah’s voice grew a tad louder, “if this smoke really carried our prayers to God, wouldn’t he answer them? Or does the bearded man in the sky answer white people’s prayers more than our own?”

“Hey, what’s going on?” Martha “Kissy” Crow Messenger yelled from the other side of the circle. The sixty-seven year old Elder stood up and rewrapped the Pendleton blanket that was around her shoulders. It was gifted to her by the Tribe’s former medicine man.

Martha, the name given to her during the Tribe’s boarding school years, was Biblical. Akasha knew that this clan mother had hated her thirteen years of displaced education, and she said she could still recall every verse she had to memorize. But, she hadn’t gone by her Bible name for as long as anyone could remember. The name that everyone knew her by now was her permanent nickname, Kissy.

Akasha asked many people how this Elder acquired her nickname but no one knew. Not even Reylene could remember. Akasha eventually went to this Clan Mother herself who bluntly told her that her boarding school classmates started calling her “Kissy” because she was a slut.

“But you weren’t really a slut?” Akasha asked. “You just kissed a couple of cute boys.”

“No, I was a slut.” Kissy shrugged. “I slept with all the white boys in town. South Dakota cowboys. Hoh-lee-WAH!” She flicked her eyebrows on “–wah.”

When Akasha relayed this story to Onatah, they erupted with laughter. This knowledge completely changed the way they viewed this spiritual leader. Yet, Kissy’s grey hair and weathered face, resembling a wind-burned earth, still demanded respect.

As she advanced, walking around the fire towards their direction, Onatah let go of Divinity Starr's necklace and Akasha stiffened up. She looked at Onatah, and the best her friend could do was smile like a stoned teenager.

"What on earth is going on?" The Elder asked again. "We're in the middle of a ceremony."

"Onatah doesn't want to be here, Kissy." Divinity Starr's crooked teeth flashed as she spoke. "She doesn't believe in what we're doing. I think she should leave. She's going to bring bad medicine."

"That's awfully harsh!" Kissy said.

At least Divinity Starr's ugly teeth drew attention away from her abnormally large mouth, Akasha thought.

Then Kissy bent down, put her face in front of Onatah's, and talked softly. "Were you close to Jimmy?"

"Me?" Onatah partially whispered. "Not particularly. I barely knew him."

"Then, please shut your trapper. This is not a youth group activity, young lady. There are people here mourning the loss of their friend and family member."

"I know. I—" Onatah paused, "—I don't know. I'm sorry. Sorry. I'm stupid."

Placing one hand on her knee, Kissy stood up carefully. She exhaled, clasped her hands together, and closed her eyes. Perhaps she was praying. Akasha thought this woman was as Indian as an Indian could be, from the way she accented her "O's" and her "A's," to the way she laughed from deep within her belly, to the way she pointed at things with her lips.

When Kissy opened her eyes, she said in a voice loud enough for the entire group to hear: “Through oral tradition our ancestors taught us that when we die, our spirits spend three days in this physical world. Three days before we cross the river and enter the spiritual world. Today is Jimmy’s first day as a spirit and he is still adjusting to the understanding that he must leave this physical world. On the third day, Jimmy will search for the river and he will eventually find it. And on the following day, Sunday, he will cross this river and enter into the spirit world. That is, if his family is able to correctly prepare for his funeral. I hear from Akasha that Reylene does not want an Indian burial, and that’s okay. We will respect his mother’s wishes, but that doesn’t mean we cannot tend this fire and throw a plate of food into the fire for Jimmy’s spirit to eat. When I die and I become a spirit,” in the flickering light, Kissy’s nostrils sharpened and Akasha knew this clan mother was about to tell a joke, “please feed me banana cream pie. Lemon meringue will not do.”

This joke received a few chuckles.

“Yes, we will respect his mother’s wishes, but because we do not want him to become temporarily stuck in this physical world,” Kissy stared directly at Akasha, “we will tend this fire and we will play the traditional drums at his Christian funeral service.”

“Aho,” said the campfire group in unison.

Akasha had nodded when Kissy addressed her but she didn’t know if playing drums at a Presbyterian service was a smart idea. It could cause a fight between the minister and the people who followed the traditional Indian way. It would be better if everyone could just agree on what kind of ceremony they wanted to have, Indian or Christian.

Kissy continued, “We need to bring healing to everyone in this community, especially at the Presbyterian Church. Divinity Starr will you pass around the sweet grass? Everyone please take a pinch of sweet grass with your left hand and as we pray, place the sweet grass in your right hand to symbolize how our prayer, our medicine, is passing from one hand, through our hearts, and onto the other side of our bodies.”

After everyone had taken a pinch of medicine, Kissy said, “Let us pray:
“Pahtamawaas, Sacred One,
Anushiik for the brief time Jimmy spent with us. Please put his feet on the trail that will lead to you, past the darkness he has endured, across the river into the world beyond the physical. Bring healing to his family, this very day, this very hour. Bless them and instruct them in their time of loss. And give them strength. Teach them to search for you. Pahtamawass, teach our people to search for you, that our children will search for you and our children’s children will search for you. Cain nom mau too Putahmowus. Cain nom moo waim uh keenjaub yayk. Thank you for listening to our prayer. Anushiik.”

“Aho.”

Divinity Starr concluded the ceremony by sprinkling everyone with water from a cedar branch that she occasionally dipped into a bucket, which had been drawn from the Red River. She made sure to sprinkle Onatah several times in the face before she moved on to sprinkle everyone else in the circle.

*

Tonight, Akasha could see all the stars twinkling. The cloudless, airless sky was to blame as well as the quarter-moon, which provided little light for her and Onatah to walk back home down Camp 14 Road. The mosquitoes were traveling in clouds visible only

underneath houselights. These pests were always worse when thunderstorms were over, and now that Akasha was no longer near a fire, they were treating her flesh like an I.V. She counted her bites.

“Now you understand why I’m wearing this kickass hoodie?” Onatah asked. “I don’t have any mosquitoes biting my cleavage. By the time we’re home, you’re going to look like you’ve got chicken pox. But, whatever’s, Akash’. At least you looked good for Indian Jesus.”

“Hey now, that guy’s my cousin. And even if he wasn’t, he’d be too scrawny for me anyhow.”

“Not even Jesus is good enough for you, huh? Well, don’t you have it all figured out.”

“Shut up, Onatah. Isn’t there some kind of rule about not picking on the person who’s in mourning?”

“No, not for Indians,” Onatah said.

Akasha felt a mosquito land on her knee and she slapped it.

“Keep slapping away, pretty girl.”

“Keep sweating away, Cookie Monster.”

“Hey, you wish you had this hoodie. It’s gangsta,” Onatah flashed a fake gang symbol before the tone of her voice became serious. “You know, this tribe is so weird.”

“Um, you’re so weird.”

“Well, no duh. But, what I mean is, like, what’s up with Kissy? Is it just me or does she pray like a white minister?”

“Ugh!” Akasha exclaimed from the back of her throat. “You were so embarrassing. We were at my uncle’s ceremony and you were acting like such a—bitch head.”

“Bitch head? That’s a new one.”

“Just shut up.”

Onatah stopped talking for a brief moment. “I hope we don’t see that damn owl again.”

Akasha could feel her body temperature rise. Why couldn’t her friend ever keep her mouth shut? “Since when did you become the expert of ceremonies?”

“I’ve been to a bunch in Lac du Flambeau. Ojibwe’s aren’t wannabe Indians like we are.”

“Really?” Akasha asked. “Because an hour ago, it sounded like you didn’t want to be an Indian.”

“I don’t want to be anyone’s definition of Indian. Okay? Why can’t anyone understand that?” Onatah became animated with her hands. “We live in a concentration camp, Akasha. Not even the Menom’s wanted this dumpy land.”

“Didn’t I tell you to shut up? Why don’t you just shut up or I’m not going to be your friend anymore!”

“Jeez Louise! I don’t want to live here anymore. Sorry.”

Many angry thoughts circled around Akasha’s brain until she felt her legs run ahead of Onatah’s. The strands of her hair that had stuck together pulled apart and large sweat droplets flowed around her mosquito bite mounds. Her legs continued to move faster until she arrived at Mo He Con Nuck Road. Her grandma’s house was not too far way.

Onatah could be cruel. The rez was their home even if it was a concentration camp.

“I’m sorry already! You know I’m too fat to run like you!” Onatah yelled but Akasha was already turning down the street and sprinting to Mimi’s house.

Chapter Four

Bear drove up to his mother's log cabin-style house and turned off the engine and brights. The front of her yard was filled with oak trees, but the back of her property gave way to a small dairy farm owned by one of the three Indian farmers on the reservation. Bear hated that her house was decorated with classic country-living ornaments. A cowboy silhouette was glued to her sidewall and a pair of wagon wheels leaned up against the log-cut walls on either side of the doorframe between the two windows. There was even a rooster weathervane on the peak of her roof.

He closed his eyes and pressed his thumbs into them steadily. Underneath this uncomfortable pressure, behind his eyelids, kaleidoscopic spots appeared to explode in the black nothingness.

He thought about his brother and wondered what the spirit world was like for him, if there was in fact an afterlife. Then he wondered at the many different beliefs there were of the afterlife. Each faith, reinforced by a religion, influenced its believers and directed their lives. People were willing to die for what they believed in, and his ancestors had died, by the thousands, for their way of life. But how did this advance his people and why hadn't God honored their sacrifice?

Their God was like their government, never rewarding and always taking away. When his brother signed up for their military, he had sworn to give his life for America, and America could not have cared less. For all of his injuries, he'd only received a small

disability check every month. And to add to this insult, no one granted him a job based upon his service, his expense, alone. Employers were afraid of his P.T.S.D.

Bear began to pray for Jimmy but stopped after the address, “Dear God, Creator of all living things—” Today he didn’t know what he believed in. He just knew he had to honor his brother.

Fireworks continued underneath his eyelids. When he let his hands drag down his face, he had to blink his eyelids rapidly in order to readjust to the light. The kaleidoscopic spots still flickered around Reylene’s house like fairies, or ghosts perhaps, until they faded into the lights that were shining from inside her house. He wanted those colorful orbs to be ghosts.

He stepped out of his car. The air didn’t smell like wet leaves, but rather like cow manure. For the first time, this odor seemed somewhat pleasant and refreshing. The atmosphere was returning to its normal state.

He walked up the stairs of the front porch he’d built for his mother a dozen years ago. He’d restored nearly everything inside and outside of her fixer-upper, from the roof to the heater to the hardwood floors. The railing wobbled a little underneath his hand. So, he felt around for a loose screw and was pricked by a splinter instead. It lodged itself under his skin in the center of his thumb.

“Shit!” He felt the sliver with his ring finger. “The things I do for my shitty family,” he said, furious with his mother for only telling his daughter that Jimmy’s burial would be conducted by Christians. “Calm down, Bear. Got to calm down.”

Taking in a deep breath, he exhaled everything he could before entering her house.

*

Bear leaned against the kitchen counter, yellow like a 1960's bathroom. Her sunflower wallpaper, which he'd helped put up decades ago, looked hideously out-of-date. He amused his mother with small talk while she, without asking, began to cook up an Indian taco for him. He thought about telling Reylene that he'd just eaten a big dinner but he knew their discussion would run smoother if she kept her hands busy. He shifted their conversation from the construction on their casino to the upcoming powwow.

"I really hope Akasha doesn't give up with everything that's happened," Bear said. "She's worked so hard for that Miss Mohican position."

"You know, it's a good thing we're having a simple funeral, ennit?" Reylene said. "I just don't think she'd be able to handle it all. I know I definitely couldn't."

"Handle all what?" He pushed his weight off the counter and stood up straight. The debate he'd been anticipating, the real reason why he'd stopped by his mother's house, was about to begin. She must've assumed Akasha had told him about her funeral plans for Jimmy.

"Three days' worth of cooking and cleaning and people coming in and out of my house and—oh, you wouldn't understand. You're a man!" Reylene threw her hand up in the air and smacked it dramatically against her thigh. "You don't have to worry about those kinds of things."

"I'll help you with all that stuff."

"With what? Cooking and cleaning? Ha! I'd like to see that day. I mean, days-ss."

"I'll do whatever I can if it means honoring Jimmy and respecting him. He's your brother and he's my son." Bear had been rehearsing that line for hours and somehow he still screwed it up. "I mean, wait, you're his son—he's your son and he's my brother."

“Ha! What? Now you, too? You’re probably the sixth person who’s come over here to convince me to have a long-ass ceremony. This community’s really changed.”

“Look, I don’t care if you believe in this stuff or not. I just want Jimmy to be honored in the right way, the Indian way.”

“Well, I wasn’t taught the Indian way, Johnny. I was taught the Christian way.”

“No, the Christian way was forced down your throat, Ma. And, now you want these dictators to conduct Jimmy’s funeral? I mean—what the hell? That Presbyterian Pastor doesn’t know nothing about our ways. He probably thinks we’re into voodoo magic, and he secretly wants all the men to cut their hair. Ignorant bigot.”

“You’ve never met the man, so how would you know?” Bear watched Reylene knead the dough like it was a living being who needed discipline. He could see her fingertips turn purple and her knuckles turn white. “When I called Pastor Thomas he was very nice and he talked like a gentleman.”

“So what? Jimmy only went to that church a handful of times,” Bear argued. “Do you think this is what he would’ve wanted?”

“I don’t know.”

The front door swung open and a wave of manure-smelling heat entered. He knew his Ma was used to the farm stench, but he had never grown accustomed to it himself. He always preferred the smell of the forest.

“Jimmy never got into the traditional way either. So, who knows what he would’ve wanted? Who knows?” Reylene turned to the entranceway and yelled, “Who’s that?”

“It’s me,” Akasha said and coughed a few times.

Reylene turned back to Bear, “It’s too late to change things now. Just let it go.”

Akasha walked into the kitchen with a flushed face and a yellow shirt soaked in sweat. She began to fold her hands over her head but quickly bent over, resting her hands on her knees, breathing hard.

“Holy smokes, baby girl. Are you all right?” Reylene grabbed a cup out of the cabinet and began to fill it with water. “What happened?”

“Nothing, Mimi. I just wanted to run,” Akasha said between breaths. She took the water from her grandmother and finished it in three gulps.

When Bear patted her on the back, he found his hand sweaty. “Jeez. You must’ve been running pretty hard. You never run, ’cept when you’re playing basketball.”

“He’s right,” Reylene said. “Maybe if you ran more often, your hips wouldn’t come out of those cut-off jeans.”

“Seriously Mimi?” Akasha said. “Very funny! People have been making fun of me all day. I could just scream right now.”

“Yeah, that’s not very nice, Ma,” Bear said, rubbing his hand over his mouth, trying to conceal his smile. He wanted to stay mad at her. “Akash’ is pretty darn skinny. She doesn’t need to be hearing that from her family.”

“You don’t want to make yourself too attractive to Menom’s now.” His Ma said to Akasha. “They like the fat frybreaders.”

“Well played, Mimi. Ha. Ha. Ha. But, I don’t care. There’s nothing wrong with dating Keshena boys. Not all of them are bad.” Before she could drive, Akasha’d met a fourteen year-old-boy from that reservation town. Through text messages, they’d called each other boyfriend and girlfriend for two and a half weeks.

“Baby girl, you won’t think that way once you date them.”

“All right, all right.” Bear said. “Did you go to the first night of Jimmy’s ceremony?”

“Yep.”

“Funny thing you didn’t go,” His mother said to him. “Aren’t you into all that voodoo magic?”

Bear felt his teeth grind together. He was trying not to cuss. He told himself to count to three, but stopped after *one*. “Better not make those kind of jokes, Ma. I can’t believe you made all of these plans without me. I could snap right now. I could just snap. Is that what you want? This is serious.”

“Well, my serious answer is ‘No’. We are not going to have Kissy lead the service. Pastor Thomas will. I already asked him and he said, ‘Yes.’ Now it would be disrespectful to call him back and—”

“That’s it!” Bear slapped the yellow countertop. “Holy Mother of God, that’s it. You don’t want to let Kissy be in charge of things. Do you?”

“No, I’m just saying that I’m more comfortable with the Christian way. I’m used to it. I grew up with it. I’m not going to change it.” Her terse sentences sounded both masculine and matriarchal, with a finality behind them.

Bear glared at his mother and felt a vein above his eye twitching. Was he really that mad or was it the result of him firmly pressing his thumbs into his eyes? “I’m going to get drunk because of you.”

Reylene’s eyes glared back at him as if to say, *I refuse to be intimidated.*

“If you haven’t written your will yet, you should. Be sure to include what kind of funeral you want to have.” His ma turned away from him to put her fry bread dough in the oven. “I already called the Country Store and ordered three hundred dollars’ worth of

ground hamburger and flour because I don't know how many people are going to show up on Sunday. We could get twenty or we could get fifty, easily." She turned back to face him. "Now how much do you want to spend on sides? Three hundred dollars too? That'll be enough food to last one meal, don'tcha know. One Christian funeral meal."

His mother's dimples vaguely appeared on either side of her lips, but she wasn't smiling, not quite. She must've known that he'd give up fighting once money was brought up.

"I've got a few six packs in my car," Bear said and walked out of the kitchen.

"Can I get a ride?" Akasha followed her father.

"Hey now, stop!" Reylene yelled. "You better not drink. I said, 'Stop!' Don'tcha want an Indian Taco?"

"I don't want my hips to get any fatter." Bear heard Akasha say, before she added, "Sorry. I think you should save them for the powwow," and then she closed the front door.

Chapter Five

Johnny was obviously hurting, so Reylene had consciously put all her energy into being the mature adult during their argument. She'd responded to his disagreements with love and yet, he still cut deep into her heart with his words, "I'm going to get drunk because of you." She knew it wasn't her fault he battled alcohol, yet she still doubted herself as a mother every time one of her sons fell off the wagon. What could she have done differently?

I've got a few six packs in my trunk.

Johnny had to be faking. He'd been sober for so long there was no way he'd give up everything—his daughters, his driver's license, his sobriety—over a funeral. It was just a funeral, yet for some members of the community it seemed to be a rebellion, a revolt against the white man.

It was scary to think that Kissy could have so much power over the rez and it was foolish of her to make such an ass-stink of things. Dangerous too. This crazy woman was a rabble rouser, no different than Dennis Banks or Russell Means and the other men of the American Indian Movement. Reylene didn't care if they helped Indians get their rights or not. People had been killed or imprisoned because of their cross-country protests, from Washington D.C. to Wounded Knee II to Gresham, the town bordering the Stockbridge-Munsee rez.

She vividly recalled a time in the 1970's when the Menominee Warrior Society, which was a part of AIM, had seized a Catholic novitiate in Gresham and held its members hostage for a month-long stakeout.

Her boyfriend at the time, Orville Elk, was part of the movement and so were his four sons. She only agreed to move in with this older Menom man because he had a job and his mother was a Stockbridger. Reylene's looks and insecurities also played a part in this foolish decision: her nose was fat and her lips were flat. When she was a younger woman, she was terrified of what the opposite sex would think of her naked body. She couldn't even hold a conversation with them. Her friends ended up marrying the boys she liked. Despite all this, Reylene should've known better than to *run with* Orville.

He had made a horrible parenting decision when he encouraged all of his sons to join the Warrior Society. In the evening, they'd leave the house for two to three hours, (a few times they were gone for five hours straight) and they'd come back reciting propaganda about how Indians needed to rise against the government using whatever means necessary. This lasted for weeks until one day, without warning, they left for their daily brainwashing of retarded, backward hoop-la and didn't return.

The next day the Logging Mill called, wondering where Orville and his two oldest sons were. Reylene worried to the point of drinking three pots of coffee a day for an entire week. She begged people to tell her where her family was until her boyfriend's sister confirmed her fears: Constance's husband and his friends were holding a religious institution hostage, fighting for all Indian's rights, both 'Bridger's and Menom's, Ojibwe's and Oneida's.

Several weeks later, the National Guard was called in and thirty-nine Indians were arrested, including Orville and his family.

Supposedly, the Menom's won the fight or at least that's what AIM and the Elk clan told themselves. The owners of the novitiate chose to sell the 200 something acre property to the Menominee for one dollar. And, Constance threw a party to celebrate the "momentous occasion! The historical event!" But, the Tribe surrendered their claim to the property several months later. All because they couldn't maintain it.

This should've been a lesson to Orville but he wasn't humbled. Instead, he stuck his stubborn, distinct chin in the air and told the stakeout story as a historical battle of Indian bravery.

"This was the time when Indians beat the white man," he said to anyone who'd listen.

She couldn't believe that he'd bragged about the very thing that cost him his job. He spun the tale like a drunken man at a tavern.

Meanwhile, their bills multiplied. Their fighting became a daily ritual until she argued, "You're just a broke-ass nigger who needs a woman to provide for you."

Without speaking, he marched into their bedroom and came out with dresses and bras in his arms. He pitched them out the front door and went back into the room to remove more of her belongings. While he threw all of her clothes and pictures and pots and pans out of the house, she didn't stop him nor did she cry. Having grown up without a mother, she was stronger than all the women she knew. Her skin wasn't just thick; it was calloused. She folded her arms and watched him tear down her curtains and strip her linen, thankful that he wasn't an abusive man and later, grateful that his middle-aged sperm hadn't gotten her pregnant.

Kissy's propaganda wasn't much better than Orville's leanings or AIM's indoctrination. This cultural leader only believed in non-violent demonstrations, which she helped organize. Generally, they were protests of Indian mascots or various governmental laws that hurt the environment's natural resources. But, white politicians paid no attention. Her efforts never made a difference. Reylene's son and granddaughter were foolish to listen to her.

Earlier in the day when Reylene had called Pastor Thomas, he'd spoken with the manners of an old-fashioned upbringing.

"Yes, Ms. Fisherman. I will have enough time to prepare," Pastor Thomas said over the phone. "It would be an honor to conduct your son's funeral."

"You don't have to prepare a big speech. Jimmy's friends will talk long enough because Indians are really longwinded storytellers."

"I understand, Ms. Fisherman. But if it's going to be at my church, with your permission, I would like to give a little homily."

"Yes, sir. That'll be fine."

"Oh, please. Call me, Pastor Thomas."

"Thank you, Pastor Thomas. You don't have to call me Ms. Fisherman."

"All right, Reylene. Do you have any hymns you would like the congregation to sing before the homily?"

"*His Eye Is On The Sparrow*, please."

"Oh yes, that's a good one. I'd forgotten about that hymn. It's so beautiful. I haven't sung that one in years."

"It was my favorite as a child."

“Did you go to boarding school? If I may ask?”

“Yes, Pastor Thomas. I learned a lot while I was there. They taught me hospitality, like cooking and cleaning, and um, good table manners and how to entertain guests. I learned a lot of valuable lessons that I still use today.”

All this was true. If she hadn't gone to the Christian boarding school, she wouldn't have learned how to perform household chores or how to be a reliable, responsible mother to a family. Her own mom had died in a house fire when she was two.

“Oh. Wow.” Pastor Thomas replied. “I don't always hear good things about those old boarding schools.”

Reylene thought about how to respond to this but couldn't come up with something fast enough. The minister of the Mohican Presbyterian Church continued to ask her questions about the funeral. At the end of his questioning, he said, “Thank you again, Reylene,” as if she were doing him a favor.

“Before you go, Pastor Thomas, I have one more favor to ask you. Jimmy and his son were baptized in this church about maybe fifteen years ago. And, I thought it was a very beautiful ceremony because—well, because I was there and I found it—oh, what's the word? Uplifting. It was very uplifting. But not long after that, I'm sad to say that Nathaniel's mom ran out on him.”

“Is Nathaniel Jimmy's son?”

“Yes. Sorry, I should've made that clear. And, his mother's Lizzy Ferguson. She was Jimmy's wife. So, you understand how I need to get a hold of her, so Nathaniel can go to his father's funeral.”

“Hmm. Okay. Well, let’s see here. Colin Rankin was pastoring then. Maybe he’ll remember. Hmm.”

“If I may interrupt, sir. Don’t you have a member’s book with all the members’ names and contact info? Do you think you could find Elizabeth Ferguson in there for me?”

“Well, we’re careful with who we give that kind of thing out to. And besides, I don’t know if her phone number has changed since then.”

“It’s very important to me that Nathaniel’s able to go to your service. I want him to hear your message and I want him to know what kind of man Jimmy was. I believe he needs to hear it firsthand from his own people.”

“Was she friends with anyone at the time? They’d probably be a more reliable source than a fifteen year old contact book.”

Reylene had to think for a minute. “Priscilla. She used to always chum with Priscilla Singer.”

“Oh, yeah. Okay. Now we’re getting somewhere. She still goes to this church.”

Pastor Thomas gave Reylene Priscilla’s phone number and ended their conversation with, “I’ll see you later” because he knew a lot of American Indians did not believe in saying, “Goodbye.” Once he hung up the phone, a feeling of gratitude worked its way from his gut to his face, forcing a smile as wide as his lips could produce. Praise the Lord for this witnessing opportunity.

On average, twenty-five people filled his pews every Sunday morning, which was down from thirty-three members when he first began. Eight faithful churchgoers, all in their seventies and eighties, had deceased in the past four years. Seven years ago, the

Orthodox Presbytery had stationed him in Stockbridge-Munsee and since then, he only converted four children during Vacation Bible School summers. Even though he knew God wasn't concerned about the number of his converts or the size of his congregation, he still doubted that he was making a difference in the Father's Kingdom.

He also worried about his family's financial future. Could the Presbytery's assistance and the congregation's tithe money continue to support his family of six? Of course, it was wrong of him to think this way. He needed to trust the Lord more, yet it was hard to stay close to Jesus when he barely had any Christian friends in the community.

And why did Reylene ask him to conduct her own son's funeral? She must've not hated Christians. On the reservation, Ms. Crow Messenger was a typical alternative to Protestant services. Therefore, it was safe to assume that Ms. Fisherman did not follow the Indian way. Maybe she was seeking something deeper in her life that she remembered from boarding school.

Hopefully, the people who'd attend her son's funeral would be seeking truth as well. Thomas Shaughnessy prayed that all the attendees would be open to hearing the Gospel and that they would not try to slip Indian spirituality into his service. He wouldn't allow anyone to incorporate a different system of beliefs in his church, the House of God. That was syncretism. Jesus was the only way, the truth, and the life. No one came to the Father except through Him.

Chapter Six

When Akasha opened the passenger door to her father's Oldsmobile, she found a six pack of PBR and a six pack of Milwaukee's Best on the floor next to her seat. She'd thought he'd been lying to Mimi to make her feel miserable. Placing her feet in between the beer, she asked, "Are you really going to get drunk? Jeez."

"No, that was just talk." Bear turned his key in the ignition and began to pull out of Mimi's driveway. "I'm just going to have a couple of drinks while I hunt."

A thought crossed her mind, "Was Uncle Jimmy drunk when he died?" and for a moment she worried that she'd actually said that thought out loud. Out of impulse, she asked, "Can I come hunting with you?"

Her dad brushed back a few loose strands of hair that'd escaped his ponytail. He stuck out his lips, thinking, then said, "It's not going to be a joyride. I'm going to be honest with you." In his Oldsmobile, they passed by a far-off house with a strong floodlight and she thought she could see her father's lips tremble. "My world's upside-down, Akasha. I'm just trying to make it by tonight."

"I'm sorry." She played with her hair as well, attempting to come up with something that was adult and sincere. "I know it must be hard. I loved Uncle Jimmy so much."

Akasha scanned her dry, thirsty mouth with her tongue, trying to produce saliva, and then pressed down on her lower lip with her teeth. There was something she had to tell her father. She knew she had prepared so meticulously for tomorrow's competition, in part, so she wouldn't have to think about her premonition.

“I dreamed that I saw the thunderbird the night before Uncle Jimmy passed away.”

Once she freed these words, she felt a tension in her lungs release.

“You’re kidding me?” Bear said with what she thought was a breathy voice of shock and wonder.

She felt her lungs constrict again but she couldn’t stop now; she had to speak through this and finish detailing her dream. She told him about how a vault in the sky opened and the world’s most magnificent bird, the thunderbird, flew out of the hole, which was like a white void in the middle of a blue heaven. The image looked similar to the ancient drawings of her ancestors. The flapping of the creature’s wings began to produce wind, which swirled about in a violent undertow until it became thunderstorm clouds, billowing behind the flying beast. Her dream had come twenty-four hours before the record-breaking storm hit Northern Wisconsin. Lightning bolts struck the tallest tree branches. Many of them broke, crashing down on the smaller forest plants. And then, the thunderbird, followed by the storm, swooped down low and attacked Uncle Jimmy.

“Stop. It attacked Jimmy?” Bear asked.

“Maybe I should say it flew into him. It was all very strange and just crazy. I saw Uncle Jimmy walking without his cane as normal as anyone, and he was wearing regalia made out of buckskin. His hair was like, you know, in a traditional Mohican haircut. All shaved except for the back, with a braided ponytail. Actually, he had two braided tails.”

She explained how he was wearing war paint as well. His jowl was painted red and the top of his face was painted black. Twin feathers hung from the side of his hair.

“What happened when the thunderbird swooped into him?” Bear asked.

“I don’t know. He was swallowed by the storm I guess. I guess that’s when he became a spirit. I didn’t really know what the dream meant until I heard Uncle Jimmy’s body had left his spirit.”

“That’s one way to put it.”

Akasha tried to study his face but it was difficult to see since there were no streetlights or houselights around. Except for their car’s brights, the quarter-moon provided the only light and it was trailing them.

“Tell me I’m not crazy,” Akasha breathed, remembering how she felt when she woke up. It was as if the lightning in her dream had struck her. The hair on her arms stood straight. Her blood shoot through her veins like electrical currents. “I’ve never had a premonition before.”

“First tell me you’re not lying just to make me feel better.”

Akasha opened her mouth to say something but could only wonder why her father would ask her something like that.

“I’ve never had a vision that’s come true,” Bear admitted. “My dreams are just so crazy that I never think they mean nothing. They’re just too random, and when I hear people telling other people their dreams and they want them to interpret them, I just think, it means nothing! Can’t you see? Your frigging subconscious made it up.” Akasha felt her father stare at her. “But then later, I think that maybe if one night I had one of those visions—just one night I had one of those clear, without a doubt, visions like you had—then maybe—” Bear sighed heavily and said in a quieter voice, “Maybe.”

“You’ve never had a vision?”

“Well, why did you have a dream about my own brother and I didn’t? Sure I’ve had visions while I was in sweat lodges but I just—I don’t know.” Akasha heard the sound of the material around the steering wheel being twisted. “I just don’t know if I can believe them, not when I’m in that, ah, state. That sounds bad, I know. Sounds like I’m a white guy talking about his sweat lodge experience.” He adopted a nasally voice, “I only hallucinated because I was delirious.” Bear let out a snort.

Again, Akasha tried to study his face from the dashboard lights. Her father had never spoken of belief, not like a spiritual leader would, not like Kissy Crow Messenger. Sometimes he’d talk about God watching over his family and sometimes he’d pray, but his conversations about spiritual things had never gone deeper than that. Akasha figured his beliefs simply agreed with his heritage and nothing more.

She wanted to comfort her father, so her lips slowly unglued themselves, “I—I wasn’t lying. My dream means that Uncle Jimmy is with the Creator right now and that he’s in a better place.”

“Tell me, what does the thunderbird look like?”

“It’s like—I don’t even know how to describe it. Like take the most powerful, magnificent bird you can think of, like a golden eagle, but multiply it by a thousand times. Heck, a million times even. It’s that awesome. It’s that, like, I don’t know, indescribable and incredible.” She heard the sound of the steering wheel being twisted again. “I wish you were the one who had my vision.”

Bear slowed the car down until it stopped right in front of an old logging road. In the vast darkness, surrounded by the forest, she felt as if she were sitting far away from her

father. Was he staring at her from the corner of his eye, judging her? She had to break the silence.

“Mimi could’ve had an Indian burial ceremony. They’re always pot luck. Three days of pot luck food from the entire community wouldn’t’ve costed us that much.”

“Your grandma wants to honor Jimmy in the quickest, cheapest, most simplistic way possible. Pisses me off.” Akasha could tell he was upset and crushed by the way he breathed out of his nose like a horse. “You sure you want to be around me tonight? You don’t have to go hunting if you don’t want to.”

“No, no. I want to.”

At first, she wasn’t sure if she had wanted to hunt, but now, at this very moment, she was certain of her obligation to her family. She had prepared enough for Miss Moheconneew.

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“So, this is kind of crazy,” her dad said. “Never thought you’d be doing this with your old man, did ya?”

A few hundred feet into the forest, the two tire mark trails became difficult to drive through. They were not maintained or well-traveled. On either side of the logging road were fallen trees and overgrown bushes that extended into their driving space, ruining what was once a natural tunnel. Small branches scratched along the roof and the side of her father’s Oldsmobile. A couple of them made screeching sounds and even snapped as they were pulled back by his vehicle.

“Oh, my gosh, Dad! We’re going to get caught. Someone’s going to hear us.”

“Reeelax. Old Man Pepper’s place is a long ways off, and even if it wasn’t, it wouldn’t matter anyway. He’s deaf and his wife’s dead.”

The person he was referring to was an eighty or ninety year old white man who owned something like 100 acres in the middle of the Stockbridge-Munsee reservation. At a time when Indians were all dirt poor and could sell their land to non-Natives, a young Michael Pepper purchased a plot for his new family. He had cut down the trees around his house, but he’d kept the rest of his property forested. The Red River streamed through his land and flowed out near the back of Uncle Jimmy’s five acres. Akasha remembered Bear telling her that Old Man Pepper wasn’t the only white man who lived on their *checkerboard reservation*, but “He’s certainly lived here the longest of all the honkeys.” Her father continued, “Once he passes away, the land will have to go back to the Tribe. Most white people I know are infuriated by this law, but he seems to be okay with it. He always got along with us Indians real well.”

Akasha remembered that Old Man Pepper had a pair of watchdogs in his backyard. She asked Bear about them, worrying that their nighttime hunt would awaken them.

“You mean Smokey and the Bandit? Aren’t they as old as the movie? They take after their owner, so they’re probably deaf too.” Bear said as he pulled the mirror in on his side of the car. “Do me a favor, will ya? Pull yours in.”

Akasha tugged inward on her side’s outside rearview mirror. “What about the Old’s paint?”

“Don’t care about this rez runner no more. If I did, I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing right now.”

His car drove over a large branch laying on the ground. It didn't crunch underneath the weight of his tires. After his Oldsmobile climbed the limb, his car dropped hard against the trail. At that moment, his tires became jammed between the end of that branch and another fallen limb of the same tree. Her dad had to work the gas pedal to make sure his car could scramble over the next one and not remain trapped between the wood.

"Jeez, Dad. By the end of the night, your rez runner will be stuck here forever. Old Man Pepper will probably use it as a hunting shelter."

"You know what? You're right." Her father concluded. "This is stupid. Let's park the car here and wait for a deer to come."

"We've probably spooked them all already."

"Any other complaints you'd like to give?"

"No, that's it."

"Good."

"No wait. I lied. It's illegal to hunt at night because it's dangerous. And it's illegal to shine-and-shoot because it's way too easy. It's so easy it's something only white people do." Akasha said. "It's like really, really disrespectful too."

"I know, I know. I'm not really planning on bagging a buck. Just wanted to get out and act like I'm hunting, you know? This ain't a normal thing for me."

"I just wanted to say that."

"Well, do me a favor and do as I say. Not as I do."

"That was random. You haven't given any advice yet."

"That's probably because I wouldn't've given you good advice anyway."

Akasha laughed with her father because it felt good and necessary to laugh.

Flipping his pony tail over his shoulder, her dad lowered the back of his seat and snuggled into the headrest.

“Get me a beer.”

Akasha pulled a PBR can out of one of the six pack rings and handed it to her dad. She'd only seen him drink a handful of times, none of which had been in her early years. Before she became a tween, Dad used to say, “Don't drink like your uncle, okay? Never, ever, drink. You won't see me touching a beer bottle because I quit that nasty habit years and years ago. Beer makes you fat and sloppy. Beer turns you into a different person, an awful person who's mean and not very nice at all. When you get drunk, you start acting like a dummy and nobody likes you, not even your very best friends.”

Throughout her childhood, Bear made her promise that she would never drink a drop of alcohol and she'd kept that promise strictly. He'd never made that promise himself however.

When she was nine, she caught him drinking with his brother late one night and he simply threw up his hands and cocked his head to the side.

“You caught me. Sorry.”

Akasha ran into her bedroom and slammed the door. But, her dad didn't bother to console her or explain his actions. Four days later, she was back at his house, yet this time he didn't attempt to hide the beer bottles he'd been drinking.

“Took me a week to drink all those, so don't worry now. I just drink one beer at a time. There's a saying that goes ‘One and done.’ I follow that advice because there's nothing wrong with drinking one beer every now and then because it's not enough to get you drunk.”

If only she hadn't been too young or shy to respond. She'd been taught at school that once someone becomes an alcoholic he was an alcoholic for the rest of his life. It only took one drink, the school nurse explained, for that person to become addicted again. That evening, Bear left the house and didn't come back until the next day.

When she saw him again, he said, "I'm going to have to apologize to you girls. I did what I said I'd never do again." His eyes were aloof but the tips of his lips were pressed downward, creating a distinct frown she'd never seen so clearly. "I drank too much, but what's worse yet is that I drank and I drove," he sighed. "Saw the sirens behind me. Knew I was a goner. The law caught me and took away my right to drive for the better part of a year. I'm so sorry, girls. I let you down. Promise me you won't be like your old man."

Akasha remembered thinking this entire episode was her fault. She wished she had said something but didn't know what had needed to be said.

For the next three years, she never saw her dad with a beer in his hand or a beer in his house. But on her thirteenth birthday, she found his refrigerator full of six packs.

"This is just for the parents at your birthday party," he said.

When her friends arrived, their parents drank. Some nursed their drinks but a few got drunk and laughed too loudly as they swapped stories about their strip club experiences. Peaches' dad asked Bear if he wanted a beer and he shook his head.

"Come on, pussy," Tim Tiller yelled as he threw the can at her father. It smacked against his chest. He laughed, picking it up off the ground.

"All right. All right," Bear said as he pointed to the dent at the bottom of the aluminum can. "Now that's alcohol abuse."

“Damn straight, Bear. We’re alcoholing here. Now you’re going to have to chug it as it explodes.”

“Oh, come on!”

“You come on! Man up and be an Indian.”

“I hate you, Tim.”

All the adults laughed. Bear shook the can, opened it, and gulped the foam as it erupted out. Both adults and kids cheered.

Akasha watched her dad finish that one beer and made sure he knew she was watching him. To his credit, he didn’t have another one.

Now that she was getting older, she discovered him drinking the occasional beer with his brother or his friends, and she was old enough not to judge him. Whenever Onatah’s dad visited the rez, he was shit-faced and stumbling all over. And, Peaches’ father went in and out of jail for his drunken stupidity. At least her own father wasn’t that bad.

Bear—loosened and relaxed like a child in the car seat—burped after he finished his second PBR in five minutes. “Excuse me. Not used to drinking of late. Hand me another beer, please.”

Akasha complied with rebuking eyes, the kind of look her mother would give her when she was in trouble.

“I’m only doing this because my world’s upside-down, Akasha. Sorry you have to see this.” Her dad took a large swig. “Oh, that’s good. The problem with beer is that it tastes go damn good.”

“My world’s upside-down too. What if I took a beer right now, huh?”

“You can’t. You not twenty-one yet and you’re going to be Miss Moheconneew.”

“What if I don’t win? What if I don’t care about being princess?”

“Oh, stop with the negative Nancy talk. You’re a shoo-in. Of course, you’re going to win.”

“I said what if I don’t care about winning anymore? I’m being dead serious, Dad. I really don’t care about that stupid competition anymore.”

“You’re just talking out of your ass to keep me from drinking, aren’tcha?” Bear fixed his eyes firmly on her as he finished his beer. “You wanted to come with me, so you’re going to have to put up with this.”

Maybe Akasha and her father weren’t bonding as well as she’d previously thought. Even though her uncle would usually drink in front of her, he was never mean to her, drunk or sober, not like her father was right now. She recalled the times Uncle Jimmy took her and Evi to Weed Dam. They were fond memories. Some of the best memories of her life. He taught them how to catch crawdads without getting pinched and he convinced them, after a lot of coxing, to jump off of retaining wall and into the Red River.

“What do you mean you’re scared? I’m the one who went to war. I’m the one with P.T.S.D.” Jimmy said, shirtless, tattooed, and rubbing his beer belly. “I should be the one who’s afraid and worried that you’ll jump into this water and there’s going to be Iraqi towelheads underneath. Shit. Just hold each other’s hands and count to three. Anyone with two good legs needs to take advantage of their two good legs.” He patted the tattoo of a voluptuous cartoon moose near his bellybutton. “Don’t worry now. There’re no roadside bombs at the bottom.”

Once she and Evi had mastered their fear of heights and routinely jumped off the wall, Jimmy taught them how to throw a football. For a handicap man, he still managed

to toss an impressive spiral. Sometimes they'd stand in the shallow part of the river to play catch. One time, a few boys walked by and made fun of Akasha's weak throwing arm.

"Don't let them get to ya," Uncle Jimmy told her. "Keep practicing with me and you'll no longer be throwing like a girl."

"Hardy har har."

"I'm not kidding. Before you know it, you'll be throwing better than those teenaged tepee-creepers."

"I think I'm done. I hurt my rotator cuff," Akasha lied.

"Rotator cuff?" Uncle Jimmy put his hands on his hips. "Why don't you just say shoulder?"

Akasha threw the football short and it fell into the river, splashing water in his eyes.

"Ahh," Jimmy blinked rapidly. "I think I just got H₂O in my optical nerves."

They laughed.

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Two or three hours later (or was it longer than that?), Bear's hands, which could palm a basketball, rested on his throw pillow of a stomach, the only place where his weight seemed to collect. It moved like the tide as he slowly whistle-snored out of his nostrils. He'd told her to watch for deer but his wheezy snorts were probably scarring them off. She had no idea how many hours had passed since they'd stopped the car.

The night was finally turning brisk, closer to a typical Wisconsin summer night, yet Akasha couldn't fully appreciate the cool air because the Oldsmobile windows were rolled up to prevent mosquitos from flying in. If Tribal law and wild animals couldn't

stop them from hunting, *skeeters* certainly could. Their buzzing grew with the night. The air trapped inside of the car stunk of beer breathe and body odor.

What had she gotten herself into? This wasn't fun. Despite her best efforts, her father was drunk. She wanted to sleep but had too many thoughts racing through her head: the death of her uncle, the drunkenness of her father, the Miss Moheconneew pageant, the dangers of hunting at night, the alcohol at her feet. What did it taste like and why was it so appealing? Maybe if she drank tonight she could forget all her feelings of loss and stress and worry. But, would she be able to open the last PBR without waking him up? Because her pupils had adjusted to the shadowless night, Akasha was able to catch a glimpse of her father's eyes dashing underneath his eyelids. He was deep into a R.E.M. cycle. She wrinkled her nose in disgust because his forceful breaths smelled like beer'd been poured into a fast food fryer.

She reached underneath her legs and felt around for the six pack ring. When she found it, she picked up the plastic slots by one of its empty circular holes. The only attached aluminum can slipped through its ring and dropped on her foot.

"Ffff—" she almost cursed out loud.

Her dad's hands fell off his stomach but he continued snoring.

Again, Akasha reached below her legs and searched for the beer can. Once she had it in her hand, she wondered how she was going to open it quietly. She looked at her father's silhouette, watching his stomach tide and his lips purse in and out. Beyond his face, fifteen or twenty feet from the car, something unnerving caught her attention. It was a pair of animal eyes, glowing the way eyes glow when a camera's night vision is turned on, making every living creature look like a demon or a ghost. The eyes hovered through

the forest, high enough in the air to be a deer, not a fox or a coon. The animal didn't make a noise as it glided through the black night.

She decided to put the beer can back on the floor. Moving slowly, she reached behind her and felt around the backseat, like her father had instructed her. As her fingers touched the handle of the plastic-shell of a portable floodlight, she told herself to move as slowly as possible. She didn't want to spook this beast. Once the robust handheld light was in front of her, she pointed it in the creature's direction and slide the switch forward. The L.E.D. torch blasted the inside of the car and the forest with a burning, bright visibility.

"What?" Bear startled in his seat like an old dog would, jerking his arms and legs, first opening his eyes widely then squinting them in the light.

"Shh." Akasha whispered, "Nine o'clock."

He slowly turned his head and saw the deer staring into the light, mesmerized or terrified, frozen stiff. In the floodlight, its eyes were glassy, no longer glowing.

"Well, I'll be. We've got—we got ourselves a deer in headlights. No need to be quiet," Bear said in a sloshed, sleepy voice as he pulled out his rifle behind him. He turned the electricity on in the car and rolled down the window. Pointing the weapon at the animal, he said, "Knew I could count on my very own" and clicked the safety off.

He slowly breathed out like he always did before he took a shot, but for some reason, he didn't pull the trigger. His shoulders slacked. He breathed out again but this time it sounded like a disappointed sigh.

"That's just a spike buck," Akasha said, referring to the two-year-old deer with an antler point on either side of its insignificant rack. "Do you think it's wrong to kill such a young buck? I'd feel bad."

“Turn off the light, Akash’. I’m drunk and I can’t even get myself to shine-and-shoot. So yeah, killing something in this—you know—will make me feel bad too.”

She was unaware of the knot in her stomach until now. It unraveled itself with her relief. When she turned off the floodlight, the night seemed even darker than it had before. Everything was pitch black with the exception of the deer’s ghost-eyes, visible again. They turned to the left. Bang! A loud blast shot off like a canon near her ear drums. They rang for a moment. The ghost-eyes collapsed and branches snapped like they had snapped in the thunderstorm winds. Her father’d smoked the Bambi.

She felt the air in her lungs move up her wind pipe and rest on her tongue like thick humidity. She couldn’t scream.

Then, a scream came from the forest, but it wasn’t hers or at least she didn’t think it was. It couldn’t have been. Who had screamed? Or was it two cats in the middle of mating?

Bear forcefully pulled her head down and she was suddenly looking at the steering wheel. He yanked the floodlight from her white-knuckles and flashed the light in the direction of the screeching, which was somewhere in front of their car.

She lifted her neck up just enough to see above the window ledge. The image of a wrinkly, shirtless man standing on the logging road appeared about fifty feet away. The distance of the traveling floodlight gave the illusion of a backwoods man in a yellowing photograph. He was screaming but it wasn’t because he’d been shot. He shielded his face with his hand and yelled, “Get that off of me!”

“Who’s there?” Her dad yelled back.

“You devils! This is mine.” He pointed to the ground.

“Tell me who are you? I’ve got a gun.”

The man screamed again. “Get that off me! It’s in my eyes. Oww, god damn it,” his watery voice poured down his tongue and out of his mouth rapidly. “You’re going to burn in the fiery pit of hell for doing what you did, you godless heathens. Just read Revelations. It’ll tell you where you’re going, you filthy red devils. Curses upon you!” The man lowered his hand to make a cross with both of his pointer fingers. “Ttiss! Ttiss!” His lips stuck out like a frog mid-croak as he made the sound of fire sizzling.

“Michael Pepper? Is that you?”

“It’s been Michael Pepper since the day I was born,” the old man yelled at her father. “I’ve lived among you heathens and now the fire and the brimstone are upon you. Ttiss! Ttiss!”

Bear turned on his car’s overhead light and lowered the floodlight to shine on Pepper’s skin-stretched belly, still appearing washed-out like an aging photograph.

“It’s me, Bear! Remember me, Bear Moses? I helped you chop firewood years back.”

“You believe bears are sacred like holy water. Screw that.”

“What the hell is wrong with you, man?” her father said. “You’re messed up in the head. This is unbelievable. Crazy!”

“Get away from me or I will be forced to take righteous judgment.”

Akasha craned her torso up but couldn’t see a gun on Old Man Pepper. His hands were empty and his jeans didn’t have the handle of a gun jutting up. She felt her father push her head back down.

“It’s okay, Akasha,” he whispered. “He’s gone senile. Probably got Sundowner’s or something. He’s harmless though.”

Michael Pepper continued rambling his nonsense after Bear set down the floodlight and started the engine. His Oldsmobile coughed and she heard him shift the gear one notch. He turned on the headlights.

“Ow! God damn it!” the old man yelled. “Damn you redskins to hell. Good for nothing. You’re all drunk and lazy. Greedy with your casinos. ‘Mine, Mine, Mine.’ You can’t even watch your own kids. Just let them run about all over the street in front of cars. I almost hit one. That little snot.”

“Don’t listen to him,” her father said. “He’s gone crazy.”

They drove slowly in reverse until they ran over a familiar limb and hit the larger limb they had trouble clearing earlier. Once again, the car’s tires were stuck in between the same two branches.

The saggy-chested, insane man started jogging towards them. His belly rippled and his disheveled hair flopped around like a grey squirrel’d been driven over.

“Shit,” her father said in a frightened voice, which scared her. He slammed the gas pedal and his car made a revving sound before it died. “Oh, come on!” He smacked the steering wheel and quickly turned the keys again, working the gas. Exhaust overwhelmed the air. “Come on. Come on. Come on. Come on!”

“You dirty Injuns!” Michael Pepper reached them. He stretched his arm in the sky and punched the car’s hood with a swift downward swing.

“Ow!” He cradled his punching hand in pain, wincing. “This is my land, you trespassing devils.”

Akasha sat up and their eyes locked together into a dead stare. Pepper's pupils were the size of pencil erasers and were as menacing as the rez dogs she'd typically avoid. The ones that were ownerless and territorial.

"Dad," Akasha yelled. "Dad!"

Old Man Pepper shook his hurt hand and began to walk over to her side of the car with one side of his mouth hissing, "Ttiss!"

Akasha screamed. Bear switched on his brights and the old man screamed too, shielding his hands in front of his eyes.

"Get off of me! Get off." He crouched down and writhed like he was being beaten over the head with a baton. "I hate you. I hated you since the day I was christened," he whimpered. "Please! Get that off me."

After a pattering sound turned into an old cat's purr, her father got the car going again. Then, it sounded like he pressed the gas to the floor, sending out fumes and bark. The tires climbed the large branch, dropped hard against the ground—causing Akasha's teeth to knock together—and drove backwards onto the trail, snapping every small branch into pieces.

"Lock your door," Bear instructed her too late.

He continued driving in reverse through the dark with the skill of an outdoorsman. The scare must've spooked him sober. In the forest, he couldn't drive fast but he didn't need too. Michael Pepper continued to writhe in place like a man bitten by fire ants.

*

Whenever Akasha shifted her weight, bedsprings prodded different places in her body. She'd been attempting to sleep on her father's sofa-sleeper but it felt old enough to

sell at an antique store. This seemed more annoying than sharing a bed with her younger sister.

When Bear purchased his two bedroom trailer home, he bought a used sofa-sleeper for one of his daughters to lay on, thinking they wouldn't get along in the same bed. He told them they could alternate between their bedroom and the family room each night. But, Evi was too scared and too young, supposedly, to sleep by herself in the dark. So, Akasha had to put up with sharing a double bed. At first she didn't mind because their parents were getting a divorce. As sisters, they needed each other.

This arrangement worked for about a half a year until her elbow "accidentally" connected with Evi's nose. Her sister couldn't stop pestering her ("Are you asleep? I'm not touching you. I'm not touching you. It's not opposite day."). Bear, of course, didn't believe it was an accident and found a bunk bed at Goodwill the following day. The sofa-sleeper remained for guests. Tonight, however, she wished Evi was sharing this uncomfortable mattress with her.

Because she was still terrified of what had just happened with Old Man Pepper, she asked her father to sleep with her. He agreed but a short-snooze later, she awoke to find herself lying on the sofa-sleeper alone.

She heard someone talking in angry whispers. It was her father slouched in the love seat.

"You can go to hell too. See if I care, Ma. See if I care. You know what your problem is? You want to be white. Admit it. You think they're better than you."

She didn't move. If she did shift her weight, her bed would make squeaking noises and she wouldn't be able to hear what her dad was saying. Was he as crazy as Old Man

Pepper? Akasha squinted and could see a beer in his hand and a few bottles near his feet. She worried that he was becoming an alcoholic again but was glad he didn't have whatever mental illness Michael Pepper had, whatever made him say those things, scaring the hell out of them.

“I don't know how to be an Indian man no more.” Her father sounded like he was close to crying. “I really don't. It's just too hard.”

When she heard the sound of a glass bottle chinking against teeth, she got up and walked into her bedroom, slamming the door.

“Don't leave me, Shelby!” Dad's voice carried through the house.

Something inside Akasha that felt like anger, curiosity, and shame came out in the form of a yell, “How did Jimmy die? How? You need to tell me right now! Tell me or I'm going to leave this house.”

And, she heard her answer through the drywall as clear as the night sky, full of stars, “He couldn't stand being Indian no more. He couldn't.”

Chapter Seven

Bear's head pulsated like a beating heart, so he brewed Folgers and came up with more metaphors for his hangover: his brain was trying to push itself out of his skull and his body was so exhausted that it'd been hibernating for months. He hadn't suffered this feeling in years.

He took a much needed sip of caffeine.

There was a time in his life when he thought he'd never drink again and therefore, he'd never wake up with a hangover again. But, he had to admit to himself that there'd been hundreds of times when he believed he'd never swallow another ounce of beer.

Did this make him a failure? A typical middle-aged Indian male failure? Just another statistic the Tribal clinic nurses reduced his people to: sixty percent of Northern Indian men drink, eighty percent of Indian youth experiment with alcohol. What else? "The death rate for alcoholism among Native Americans was four times the national average and the rate of fetal alcoholism for their children was thirty-three times higher than for whites." Why were these statistics part of the nurse's prevention speeches and quizzes? These numbers did not help his people's self-esteem. God! Indians needed help. He needed help. He felt miserable. He'd forgotten how bad hangovers were, especially now that he was over-the-hill. Maybe when his head no longer felt like a volcano erupting, his spirits would lift.

What exactly had happened last night? Hopefully, he never hollered at Akasha but he was told he always raised his voice when he drank. As far as he knew, he remembered

the bizarre night in its entirety. He'd murdered a spike buck even when his conscious spoke louder than his boozy thoughts. And then, Michael Pepper scolded them, rightfully so, but with bigoted, racist slurs. He'd always been an even-tempered, easy going man, so he must've developed some mental disorder in his old age. Bear wondered if his dementia, or whatever it was, made him say hurtful things or if his illness brought out his suppressed hatred.

But, there was more to this man to consider: his land backed up to Jimmy's property. Could Old Man Pepper have come across Bear's brother and shot him with his shaky hands and arthritic brain? It was a crazy, terrifying thought. Pepper would've needed to have a similar rifle to Jimmy's.

Bear's brain continued to pulsate. He swallowed more coffee.

While drinking last night, he'd told himself, "This is only going to be a one-time, isolated event. After tonight, I'm done. No more boozing." But, a strong desire to drink off his hangover nagged his thoughts. It plagued him to the point where he had a mean-spirited idea: Michael Pepper needed to be shot because he was now a threat to the community. But, this was just a foolish, passing thought. He knew the psychotic man would save him from getting ticketed with a large fine; tribal law would think the old man had shot the deer. Hopefully they'd take him to a mental institution or a nursing home.

"Morning, Dad."

"Jeezus!" Bear's left hand came off his forehead and his right hand knocked over his coffee mug. Its sugar rich contents spilt across the kitchen table and onto his lap. "Ah!"

he jumped out of his seat and felt unsteady, a tad dizzy. He grabbed his chair for support and realized its legs needed tightening because it wobbled.

“You scared me.” Self-conscious, he hand-combed his unkempt hair. “Thought you were sleeping in.”

“It’s already nine freaking thirty. I’ve got to get ready.” Akasha’s tapered eyes were open just wide enough for him to see her pupils.

“For what?”

“Uh, hello! I’m competing for—”

“Oh right, right, right. I know. Miss Indian pageant. Sorry. I just, ah, I’m just—”

“Hung over.”

Bear breathed out heavily and hoped his sigh sounded embarrassed and apologetic. “Exact-O-Mondo.” He chuckled and walked towards the sink to get a washcloth.

“I’ve got to go to Mom’s.” She looked at her cell phone. “Looks like she’s called me eight times since seven o’clock.”

Akasha sported a white T-shirt and athletic shorts, a practical outfit that most women wore the morning of the powwow before they put on their regalia. His daughter’s hair was also down and combed, ready for his ex-wife’s braiding.

“Course. I’ll see you at the powwow. Good luck,” he said as she approached the front door. He began to wipe the spilt coffee off the table. “Oh, Akasha.”

“Yeah?”

“Knock ’em dead.”

She tried opening the door without much force but it caught on the weatherstripping, as it always did. “Whatever.” She yanked the door open, stepped through, and jerked it shut, all without looking at him.

It shouldn't have been difficult to apologize to his daughter but it was. Probably because he'd been a colossal failure. Shelby had divorced him because he couldn't stop drinking, or more accurately, because he hollered at her whenever he drank, which typically happened every night.

But when they separated, something bizarre happened. Something too puzzling for a shaman or a psychologist to predict. Thinking of his daughters, Bear mustered the will to sober up (for the most part) but his recently divorced ex started hitting the taverns to find a new man. She'd leave her daughters at her friend Shawnee's house or alone in her low income housing unit while she frequented the bars in Gresham, Bowler, and Keshena. Small town gossip told him that she joined a pool league as well as a darts team. Putting on the persona of a fun, giggly gal, she drank as much as the boys in the bar. Shawnee told Reylene who told Bear that whenever Shelby came to pick up her daughters, she was drunk-as-a-skunk, cussing impatiently at her children to pick their shit up. When Bear confronted Shelby on her hypocrisy, she blamed him, saying her actions were a result of all the hurt and pain he'd brought on her during their six years of marriage.

“Who're you to talk anyway?” she yelled. “You're a drunken Injun! You'll always be a drunken Injun!”

He threw the coffee-leaking washcloth in the sink.

Yes, he was sorry for yesterday's drinking but he was more upset at Reylene. And, admittedly, Jimmy too. But, maybe he didn't commit suicide. Maybe there was a reason

for the events that happened last night. If Old Man Pepper had shot his brother, Bear needed to gather sufficient evidence so there was no doubt in anyone's mind how Jimmy died. Because there was hope within reach, the powwow would have to wait. After finishing his coffee, he threw deer jerky, an apple, and a Sun Drop into a lunch bag before he remembered to shower and change his clothes.

*

The Stockbridge-Munsee Safety House could fit three fire trucks inside its garage. At the end of this brown brick building were office rooms reserved for firefighters, emergency medical responders, administration workers, and Tribal police. Bear's Indian nation shared joint jurisdiction of a few law enforcement workers with the surrounding county of Shawano. It wasn't uncommon for him to see a cop car parked out front but that didn't necessarily mean there was a policeman sitting inside the office room.

When he pulled into the building's parking lot, he saw a light on in the office behind the police vehicle that was positioned directly on the other side of the window. He parked next to it and recognized Officer Dale's boyish face, appearing washed out from behind a computer screen.

"What's going on, Dale?" he asked once inside the tiny room with bland white walls, showcasing prevention flyers and maps of the county.

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

For the first time, Bear gave the law a courtesy laugh.

"You hanging in there?"

"Like a red man at the gallows." This time it was the officer's turn to laugh uncomfortably. They shot the shit for a few more minutes until Bear decided to make

their exchange more awkward. “Hey. Got to ask you something.” His voice cracked out of dejection and nervousness. “Will you be ’trolling the powwow?”

Dale nodded before he reached for his Lone Ranger coffee mug.

“Well, I’ve been thinking.” Bear’s voice was shaky but it wasn’t because he was still drunk. “Don’t want to bother you but do you think you could ask around to see if anyone heard my brother’s gunshot go off. I mean, it’s just to learn about all the details surrounding what happened. You’d only have to ask his neighbors and the folk’es whose property backed into his. So, it wouldn’t take too long.”

“Listen Bear, I’m sorry your brother passed away. I really am.” Dale’s face looked and his voice sounded as if he was attempting to be sensitive, with one ounce of concern and three cups of persuasive indifference. “I know you’re grieving Jimmy’s death and you probably don’t think you’ve gotten closure with—” Dale searched for the right word, “—the situation, but there’s sufficient evidence to conclude the cause of death. Everyone at the scene said the same thing. Everyone. Now I know this must be hard on you—”

“I’m just saying—check into every possible scenario before you close the case.” Bear could feel his hands shaking again. “Now that’s all I’m saying, okay? Will you do that for me, please? Officer Dale.”

Dale stared at him with his ruddy, girly, gay cheeks. His hint of concern had left. “What’s your motivation for this, Mister Moses?”

“Well, come on now. I think the mystery surrounding Jimmy’s death is motivation enough.”

Vertical rumples in between Dale’s eyebrows surfaced. “You suspect somebody you know. I can tell.”

Bear glanced at the door behind him but felt his feet remain in place. He sighed and told the young officer that he suspected Michael Pepper because he had Alzheimer's and was mouthing off bizarre, racist things. Bear, of course, did not tell the policeman that he saw the elderly man the night before.

“Well if he has Alzheimer's, he's going to have to be taken care of by somebody.” Dale picked up a pen and began to click the spring-loaded top up and down. “I'll swing by his place when I have time. Trust me when I tell you this: no man with Alzheimer's could remember how to shoot a gun. Please don't try to be the detective here, Bear. You're not qualified. That's not your job.”

Remembering that he didn't want to be suspected for illegally shooting the buck, Bear left the office politely as his diaphragm as well as his head pulsated irritably.

When he sat in his Oldsmobile, he felt his fingers tapping the steering wheel like a keyboard, trying to will his hung over brain to compute. “Why not question the old man yourself?” he thought.

*

Michael Pepper's driveway was constructed out of the same large gravel rocks used for railroad beds except they were smoother because the powdery stones had been driven over for decades. His road bent like a creek and contained sudden drops of erosion, currently filled with mosquito-breeding puddles.

The entrance into his narrow driveway was easily overlooked and his artless, rusty mailbox didn't advertise his name or address number. His house was far enough down the street to be hidden from the road during winter months when all the empty trees

offered the seasonal sights of what were hidden by summer leaves: broken down vehicles, soggy-roofed cabins, non-perishable litter, and animal habitats.

Bear reached Old Man Pepper's home and was surprised to see that it was as well-kept as it had been years ago when he'd helped him chop firewood. Pepper had always been a hardworking man who took pride in his home, tiling his roof, scrubbing his windows, powerwashing his siding. This kind of dedication, which required time and money, made Bear envious. Yet, the old man's road wasn't as well maintained and his overgrown lawn suggested that no one was helping him keep up his property. Bear concluded that he was living alone but he hadn't lived with Alzheimer's long enough for his house to fall apart.

Bear parked his car by the doghouse, which looked like a miniature version of Pepper's house: clean yellow siding and crisp green trim. But, the dogs that came out had not aged as well. Smokey and the Bandit—unwashed, with caterpillar eyebrows and gnarly goatees—shambled past their designated doggie doorways. Their eyes conveyed sadness, not curiosity or territoriality for the newcomer's car.

For his own protection, Bear contemplated bringing a gun but as he stared at these mutts, he thought better of it. He didn't want to frighten the crazy, elderly man. He needed to question him.

Placing one foot on every available steppingstone, he approached Pepper's house while Smokey and the Bandit gave his boots apathetic sniffs. He knocked on the door and then knocked on it harder, remembering the homeowner was hard of hearing.

"Michael Pepper!" he hollered.

“Come on in. Come on in already,” a watery voice yelled. The sound did not come from inside the house but over Bear’s left shoulder. He turned around and realized that Pepper was in his garage. Its descending door was shut but the side door was propped open by a cinderblock. Dandelions grew through its holes.

He stepped towards the metal building and said, “It’s me, Johnny Moses. You remember me, don’t you? I’m a good friend of yours. Used to eat lunch together every day.” Bear had no experience in talking to a forgetful man, so he assumed he might as well lie. “I came to see how you were doing.”

“No one comes to see me anymore.”

When he walked into the garage, he found Michael Pepper shirtless and skinning the young deer that’d dropped the previous night. It was hard to tell what speckles on the man’s forearms were liver-spots and what were deer guts.

How could he have had the strength to lift and drag that carcass? Maybe it was because the deer was young and light and Pepper’s body was as fit as an old man’s body could be. Still, his elbow moved slowly like an ungreased hinge as he rested his long, reflective knife on the animal.

“They don’t call. They don’t stop by.” Pepper’s eyes filled with tears. “No one even bothers to call me no more.”

“Well, I remembered you. It’s so good to see you again.”

“Thank you, young man. Thank you so much!” Pepper pulled his lips inside his mouth and looked at Bear with sincere gratitude. He rested his bloody utensil on the cutting table and with a slight hunch walked over to him. Taking hold of his arm, the

white man caressed Bear's forearm muscles with his fingers, slimy and wet from the deer.

"See what I did? I might be old but I can still bag a buck."

"That you can, Michael. That you can. When was the last time you shot your gun?"

"Well, I don't know." He put his shaky hand to his mouth, trembling his lip in contemplation, not fear. "I've been so busy. Haven't had the time."

"Looks like you still remember how to prep a deer. Do you remember how to shoot a gun?"

"Do I? Ha! I once smoked a—ah—one of those, whatchamacallits. Oh, I can't remember, but it fell to the ground so I thought it was dead, you understand? So, I walked over to, ah, it and ah—Oh!" His lips trembled this time without the assistance of his shaky hand. He seemed to be afraid of his forgetfulness.

"You stood over the deer because you thought it was dead. And, as you looked for the bullet wound, you straddled it with your feet." Bear remembered this infamous hunting story, decades old and first told by the old man himself. It had echoed through the bars like a Big Foot tale.

"Oh, yes!" Pepper's eyes sparkled like a child's. "And, the deer popped back up, alive and angry. I was lifted off the ground and I rode it like a horse for a hundred feet 'til it bucked me off. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hey, don't forget the second half of that story now. As you were bucked in the air, you managed to grab onto a tree branch and you hung onto it for dear life because that ole' buck decided to turn around and charge at you like a bull, trying to attack you. But at

the last second, you lifted your legs in the air and it ran underneath you and rammed its head into the tree.”

“Yes, yes, yes! And, there it collapsed dead as ever. Ha! I remember that story like it was yesterday.”

Bear laughed with him, wondering if he could draw information out of this man whose mood was 180 degrees different from a few hours ago. He seemed to have schizophrenia more than dementia.

“Do you remember yesterday?” Bear gently placed his hand on his shoulder. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“I know that no one came to see me.” His watery voice was sad again. “No one ever comes to see me.”

For the next half hour, Bear continued to ask him questions: “Do you remember the big storm we had? What kind of guns do you own? Did you see an Indian man walking in the forest? He had a limp.” But, his interrogation was pointless and cyclical.

When Pepper said, “You’re the only one who comes to see me,” for the umpteenth time, Bear sighed with frustration but patted him on the back. How could he be angry at an elderly man dying from a mental disorder?

“I’ll make sure your kids come see you. Don’t worry.”

*

Instead of eating an apple and jerky for lunch, Bear choose to go to the Eagle’s Nest, which was a bar in Bowler but not a bar-and-grill. It did however offer pretzels the size of dinner plates and baskets full of nachos and cheese. He ordered both along with a Milwaukee’s Best to wash everything down.

Not including the second floor, which was where the owner lived, this tavern was as spacious as his doublewide trailer. The room-length oak counter, which matched the oak walls, ceiling, and floors, separated the drinks from thirteen barstools, also made of oak. Past the stools stood a pool table, a juke box, a pinball machine, and a couple of fake wooden panels that screened a toilet and a sink. Because the bar was owned by a white woman, no antlers or taxidermy fish were used as decorations.

Bear remembered the advertisements for alcoholic drinks, which unevenly lined the inside of the building. But, the one ad that left an imprint in Bear's mind, after all these sober years, was Budweiser's classic "Custer's Last Stand" painting. How could a tavern six miles off reservation land get away with such a historically inaccurate, racist picture? Either no alcoholic Indian cared or his people were comfortably numb to all the culturally inappropriate images they saw every day.

Because he enjoyed catching up with the owner and because he was the only patron in the bar, he thought he might as well order another beer, yet he knew he'd order another one after that even if customers did not stroll in and tempt him to drink more. The fact of the matter was that he was going to get drunk today and there was no avoiding it. He knew he could try to fight the desire all day, but he'd still fail. He decided he might as well give in to the addiction. In fact, it was probably better for him to get hammered earlier in the day rather than later. He could sober up in time to watch Akasha's princess competition later that evening.

On his sixth or seventh beer, one of the Alcoholics Anonymous speeches came to mind: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change

the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.” What a bunch of horseshit! God had never granted him anything. He would always be poor and drunk and lonely.

“Another Milwaukee, Sam Kat,” Bear said with the last mouthful of cheese-dipped pretzel.

“Another?” Samantha Katherine said in her masculine voice.

Her appearance partially fit the stereotypical single-and-burly bar owner while contradicting it at the same time. She wore blue-collar shirts that highlighted her broad shoulders, but her tattoo sleeves were feminine: ivy wrapped itself around fairies with baby faces and well-endowed bodies. Her hair was dyed red and cropped into a low-maintenance haircut, but her makeup was carefully applied. It somehow concealed her wrinkles, plumped her lips, and narrowed her eyes like an Indian’s. Her eyeliner continued past the outer edges of her lids and curled upward. Bear wondered if she extended her eyeliner to look like a Native or to disguise the fact that both of her eyes were centered a tad too close to her nose. Lastly, she smudged blue eye shadow above her eyes, so when she closed them in laughter, slanted teardrops appeared, resting on top of her prominent cheekbones like the rims of a drain. These cheekbones were her only claim to her great (or was it great-great?) Indian grandmother. “I swear I have a little Indian in me,” she liked to say.

Had this gal ever had a boyfriend? If he remembered correctly, she was two years younger than Bear. That would make her thirty-nine and single, and most likely lonely.

“Do you really want another, Johnny Bear?” Sam Kat asked. “I thought you were on the wagon.”

“Indians don’t ride wagons, sweetheart,” Bear stared into her eyes. “We attack them. Haven’t you ever seen *Stagecoach*? We’re wild savages who ravage white women.”

Sam Kat must’ve noticed his gaze because she seized a Milwaukee’s Best bottle as if her only customer had waited too long to be served. Maybe after all these years, after serving him on a regular basis a decade ago, she had developed a thing for him. Why else would she still call him, Johnny Bear? When they were young, he thought she had a crush on him.

“I like all the color you put around your eyes.” He rested his chin on his hand. Recalling a recent beauty product commercial, he asked, “Ever tried that glitter make-up?”

“Ha! That crap’s for kids. My niece wanted some, so I bought some the other day. It’s really bright and—too much.”

She popped the bottle’s cap and was about to pour the beer but stopped when he asked, “Do you still have it?”

To his surprise, she answered, “Yeah, but I’m giving it to my niece. She’s a real girly girl.” She leaned against the back wall and took a sip from his bottle. “I’m concerned about you, Johnny Bear. You’re not supposed to drink no more.”

“I know, but what the hell? Eat, drink, and be merry.”

Bear continued to stare directly into her eyes. They looked more attractive today. And as he worked his gaze downward, her hips—yes, her hips were distinctly curved, perfectly round in her snug jeans. Indian men like him could appreciate wide hips and hers were fairly broad for a white woman. Why had he never noticed her hips before? Probably because he was drunk right now. But, what did it matter? He was horny.

“Know what you should do? You should go upstairs and get that glitter makeup.”

“Why?” She raised an eyebrow, tilting one of her painted teardrops. “You want to put it on?”

“No, you put it on.”

Now Sam Kat was gazing in his eyes, but she caught herself and straightened up. Bear found himself looking directly up to her and from this perspective, her boobs, even in her baggy button-down shirt, seemed to swell. They could control a man if she ever knew how to attract one.

“You’re not listening to me, Johnny Bear.” She put her free hand on her hip, her feminine hip. “You need to get yourself home, all right? I’m really sorry. I heard about your brother and—” her eyes looked concerned, “—I’m not good at this. Look, just stop drinking, ’kay? I know why you’re falling off the wagon.”

“No virgin’s chance in hell do you know why. Can you please just make me happy by—” he belched “—going upstairs and getting your glitter crap and putting it on in front of me?”

“No. You’re drunk. Really drunk.”

“Why not? No one’s here but me.”

“It’s for my niece.”

“No shit. You don’t—you don’t have any kids to give it too.”

“That’s it. No more beer for Johnny Bear. You can thank me later.”

“Put it on and no one will notice that your eyes are too damn close.”

In response to this, Sam Kat took what was supposed to be his beer and poured it down the drain. Her cranberry lipstick lips moved, probably muttering something mean.

She grabbed his plate and silverware and clattered them in the sink, trying to make as much noise as possible.

“What the hell, Sam Katty Kat Kat? I’m your customer, ain’t I? Your paying customer.”

“Get,” she punched the bar like a man. “Out.”

“If you didn’t act like such a dike, you could’ve gotten married.”

Her eyes narrowed so that her mascara drops materialized. She turned around and bent over, searching for something.

“Nice ass.”

During one of his drunken blinks, the bar owner spun around and struck his hand, which was resting on the countertop, with what looked to be a broomstick.

“Ow!” A burning, stinging response forced his fingers to curl up while inhibiting them from clinching the bar. The assault hurt so much that he wondered if his hand was broken. As he shielded himself, he noticed that he’d been attacked, not with a broomstick, but with a trucker’s club, almost as thick and long as a baseball bat.

“I put up with a lot of shit but I’m not putting up with your drunk ass!” Loose strands of hair hid part of her eyes, making her look more menacing. “Just because your brother committed suicide doesn’t mean you can piss on me.”

“Jimmy did not commit suicide, god damn it! He’d never committed suicide. Who told you that? Who? Some drunk Indian? You get this straight: Old Man Pepper shot my brother and—oh shit!” Bear bent over and tugged the hair that was above his ears. “Shit. Shit. Shit. I forgot to search his house for guns. Shit! What the hell is wrong with me? I could’ve proved that Jimmy didn’t kill himself.”

The words “kill himself” set off emotions he could no longer control: sadness, heart break, loneliness, failure, and now helplessness and embarrassment.

With his unharmed hand, he flipped over the barstool in front of him, but it wasn't enough. He charged her other stools and began to kick down every single one like an angry child, like the stools were his younger brother's childhood enemies. But, his foot got caught in the center of one of the connected legs of a collapsed stool, causing him to trip and fall. His funny bone knifed the floor, electrocuting all the nerves in his body. But, his mission wasn't finished. Once he got on all fours and managed to shake his foot free, he clamored back up and finished leveling all her barstools as furiously as possible.

“My brother didn't—he never would!”

When he caught Sam Kat's jagged lips, clinched teeth, and raised hands, he was frightened of her terrified expression. What was wrong with him? He didn't know what to do next yet he still had anger left to burn. So, he paced around the pool table, breathing heavily. After his seventh cycle around the room, she sprinted around the counter toward the back of the building. She swung open the door to the staircase leading upstairs. He heard her feet dash up. He continued to pace the bar. Several minutes later, he listened to her footsteps coming down slowly. His breathing slowed down as well.

“I-I got it,” she said at the bottom of the staircase. “The glitter makeup.”

Sam Kat carefully walked back to the bar, avoiding the fallen stools, and put the makeup jar on the countertop. Then, she produced a white towelette from her pocket. As she wiped off the eye shadow below her eyebrows, the towelette turned blue. Her breasts rose and fell with her breathing.

“Is it all off?” she asked.

Spotting a few smears of blue near the creases of her eyes, he replied, “Close enough.”

She nodded and cleared her throat as she unscrewed the lid to the small, almost travel-sized, makeup container. She dipped an empty ring finger into the green, glittery cream and rubbed it above her eyes.

“I-I can’t see what I’m doing.”

“You’re good.” He felt his body calming down. His blood turning warm. “Doing just fine.”

“Maybe I should go into the bathroom.” Her manly voice was trembling.

“Don’t. Stay.”

Sam Kat, for whatever reason, continued to apply the makeup. Its jar had bubbly, colorful letters that read, “Diva Glitter: Get Your Diva On.”

“Is it—does it look okay?”

Bear studied her. She was right. The green glitter was gaudy and out-of-place for a middle-aged woman. It didn’t make Sam Kat look like a commercial model or a sexy stripper, just an outlandish, comical Sci-Fi B-movie alien.

“Beautiful,” he found himself saying. “You look beautiful.”

A purplish hint spread across her cheeks. “Oh, shut up. I probably look stupidly gross. Heh, heh.”

As Bear approached her, one soft step at a time, her throat moved nervously. He covered her violet cheeks with his hands and said, “I can’t believe I never noticed you before.”

Their lips pressed against each other and shifted positions, pausing then maneuvering, waiting then attempting something new. But, they couldn't find a way to communicate together, to dance in sync or spark electricity. Was this Bear's fault? Did Sam Kat find their make-out to be as awkward as he did? Obviously, they both were rusty kissers, so he began to caress her arms and peck her ear softly.

"Umm, I think you should go now."

He said in between pecks, "When was. The last time. You were with. A man?"

"I'm not—I don't do pity sex." Her body felt like it was cringing, her shoulder muscles tense. "Please stop. I can't do this."

"Please, Sam Kat." He gripped her arms tightly. "Just—I know I look pathetic right now but—"

"I don't know who looks more pathetic, you or me."

"I do. You're the one who looks terrific. Like a diva." He moved his hands to the small of her back. They stroked their way down to her ass, but she managed to seize the hand that she'd hit with her club.

"Don't."

"Oww!" He cried and instinctively smacked her chin with his free hand, forcing her head back. Like finishing a shot glass, her hand fell off his. He saw fear in her eyes and a tear squeezed out, dripping past the rim of her cheekbone. His hands came off hers. Once again, he was terrified or being terrifying.

"I'm so sorry," Bear said. "Been going through a lot, a real lot."

"I know," she sniffled.

"I'm drunk."

“I know.”

“I’m not one of those kind of Indians. That’s not me.”

“Just go.”

But, Bear turned around and began to pick up her bar stools.

“I’m going to call the cops if you don’t get the hell out.”

“Okay, I’m going. Just don’t tell anybody about this.”

She grabbed a stool and swung it in his vicinity. He hightailed it out of Eagle’s Nest the best he could, but his shoulder hit the doorframe, disorienting him for a few moments.

Once outside, Bear felt the record-breaking, triple-digit heat stick to his skin. The sun was blinding. A mother and her kids were staring at him from across the street. Had they heard the whole thing? He tried to clear his throat but there was nothing to clear. Looking away from them, ashamed, he wanted to act casual but didn’t know how. So, he pretended to yawn as he walked to his car. A belch came out mid-yawn.

Chapter Eight

“Stay strong. Stay strong.” Reylene repeated. “Everything’s going to be all right. We’ll get through this. We’re going to make it through. I promise you now. We’re going to be all right.”

While she drove to Shawano, she continued to speak to herself as if her children or grandchildren were in the car. Even though the town had a population under 10,000, she referred to it as “the city.” Granted, it had traffic during rush hour but anyone from Green Bay or Milwaukee would not consider those streets to be busy. She was bread-and-buttered in the sticks. Early every Saturday morning, she traveled a half-an-hour into town to “beat the hustle-and-bustle” and buy her weekly necessities, mainly groceries from Wal-Mart, Country Store, and Aldi’s. Today she would pick up her 300 dollars’ worth of ground hamburger and flour from the Country Store as well as baked beans, egg salad, potato chips, and whatever else she thought would function well for a crowd of unclear numbers.

Before purchasing this meal, she had to visit Priscilla Singer, a self-righteous suburban lady who lived out her Christian faith with an outspoken zeal. If a familiar face bumped into this “Jesus freak” at Wal-Mart or wherever, she would find a way to preach the gospel to that individual. It wasn’t uncommon for Reylene to get this earful too. No one liked a grocery store preacher any more than an Indian liked a reservation evangelist.

After she’d received Priscilla’s number from Pastor Thomas, she massaged a tight pinch in her neck and gave Priscilla a ring. The Bible believer, who was in her thirties

and too young to have gone to boarding school, told her she could probably rummage up Lizzy's digits if Reylene would come to her house for a cup of tea. Priscilla was part-white but she wasn't white enough to be inviting Indians over for teatime.

"Tea? That's a weird request. It sounds hoytie toytie," Reylene said to Priscilla over the phone. "Haven't you ever heard of the Boston Tea Party?"

"I thought it was white men dressed as Indians who were tossing the tea overboard," Priscilla answered.

"Yeah, but the joke still stands. I'm honestly too busy to visit with you. I've got my son's funeral to plan."

"How about just one cup of tea? One cup and maybe a sweet pastry."

"Did you hear what I just said? I'm too busy. You shouldn't be so pushy."

"It'll be Native American Tea."

"Oh well, now I want to go. Are the pastries going to be made out of blue corn too?" Reylene paced the floor as she clenched her dialup phone. "Just give me Lizzy's number. That way she can have more notice."

"I wasn't lying when I said I didn't have her number. Goodness. I haven't spoken to her in years."

Priscilla explained to her how she was word searching Elizabeth Ferguson's name on the internet and coming up with too many possibilities. "But, do not be dismayed. Just give me a little time here." Priscilla said. "It's a small Presbyterian world. Much smaller than the world wide web. Wink, wink."

Reylene had no idea what "Wink, wink" was supposed to mean. Priscilla was too religious to make jokes with sexual puns.

The townie said that she was friends with several Presbyterians in Milwaukee who could probably point her in the right direction. Once she found out what church Lizzy went too, she would contact their office and explain the situation. Because this denominational detective work seemed like a lot of trouble, Reylene agreed to tea.

As she entered into a section of cookie-cutter homes in Shawano, each with two stories and two car garages, even the same wooden window shutters, she thought about how much of a waste of time it was to be traveling to Priscilla's house. Once Reylene was at her residence, she would be overwhelmed with Christian catchphrases: "You got to have faith. Jesus Christ died for your sins. God has blessed us so much." Then, Priscilla would try to force several pastries on her until she finally released Lizzy's contact information.

*

"Please help me understand why you chose to have a Christian funeral. I don't believe you did it for religious inclinations," Priscilla said. As usual, she talked with her hands, waving them in sync with her lively voice. Her orange fingernail polish, which matched her headband and skirt, flashed about the air like crowns atop her beautiful, moisturized hands. Although she was happily married to a white man who owned a meat factory, she never quit trying to look energetic and youthful, as if she desired to win another Miss Moheconneew competition sixteen years later.

"I really don't understand why this is such a big deal," Reylene said. "Why does it matter whether it's a Christian funeral or an Indian burial or an Egyptian mummification? Who cares?"

“Apparently, the living do. Obviously, the living do or there wouldn’t be so much commotion about it. Now would there?” Priscilla smiled. “Now I hope what I’m about to tell you, Reylene, makes sense. I don’t believe that a funeral is for the dead. It’s actually for the living, you see. Whenever a person dies, their soul leaves their body, right? So, what you do with their physical remains is irrelevant. And by that I mean, it’s irrelevant with regards to eternity. Does that make sense? I hope that makes sense. I know it’s a bit confusing. A ceremony is performed only to help the living grieve.”

This conversation was clearly important to Priscilla, who earlier in the morning had arranged for her neighbor to watch her triplets and yorkies. Reylene didn’t need to ask her what age they were or how tall they’d grown because Priscilla’d decorated her walls with photos of all of them wearing formal clothing as well as Packer apparel. It was ridiculous. Even her dogs were wearing green and yellow. Eying Reylene, she took a sip of tea out of her ceramic cup, which had a handle too tiny to put a finger through.

“Exactly.” Reylene had yet to touch her tea. “At least we can agree on something. I’m having a Christian funeral because it’s the only way I know how to grieve.”

“And because you want to see Lizzy and Nathaniel again too, right?” Eyebrows pinched underneath a ruffling forehead full of makeup, Priscilla had an expression on her face that Reylene couldn’t decode.

“Yes, that too. Whatever answer you want to hear. Can I just have Lizzy’s number now?” Reylene asked, already tired of staring at this woman’s *Precious Moments* figurine collection that decorated her dining room. She had ceramics of children and angels with white faces, large eyes, and ballooned cheeks.

“You need to know something first, Reylene. Lizzy wanted to raise Nathaniel in a good Christian home. She didn’t want to expose him to debauchery, okay? At the time, your son was struggling with alcohol and it was hurting everyone he loved. Please try to understand that when you talk to her. Okay? Be nice to her please. And, remember that she was thinking about your grandson when she choose to leave Jimmy.”

“Yeah, well, she didn’t have to cut us off like that.” Another old wound in Reylene’s heart reopened. Just exactly how much more pain could the muscle underneath her breastbone bear? She knew Priscilla didn’t have the capability of being sensitive to what she was going through. “Jimmy wasn’t perfect but he was trying to be a better man. He would’ve made a good father. If you saw him with my other grandchildren, you’d’ve know that. They loved him to pieces. They didn’t want to go home whenever they was with them. And now Nathaniel’s going to grow up without ever really knowing his real dad. You think that’s better for my grandson?”

“I’m not taking sides here, Reylene. Just know that Lizzy made the decisions she made based upon whatever situations were going on at the time. Okay? She tried to make the best choices possible. I wish you’d understand that.”

“I wish you’d keep your beliefs to yourself.” Reylene massaged her neck again.

“All right, fine. Point taken.”

Priscilla handed her an index card. It contained Lizzy’s phone number written in thick ink and calligraphic handwriting. Below the number was a Bible verse: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. - Romans 8:28.” What was that verse supposed to mean? Was there some kind of hidden meaning? This perpetually happy woman with her suburban

home, shiny Ford Thunderbird, and pretty family thought she knew better than her because her life looked better than Reylene's.

She watched Priscilla take another sip of tea before saying, "I already talked to Lizzy and told her the news."

Reylene's thoughts screamed, *What? I could just kill you!* Why did Priscilla think this was her news to share?

"Of course, you did." Reylene tore a piece off her Danish pastry and dropped it into her tea. "White bitches like to stick together."

"My goodness! I went through a lot of trouble to find Lizzy for you. I had to talk to seven different church employees at three different churches just to get a hold of her." Her eyes blinked like a camera's shutter. "The least you could do is refrain from calling me names!" She put a hand over her heart. "That hurt! That really hurt! Please be kind to me, Reylene."

"How did Lizzy react?"

Priscilla slammed her eyes shut and breathed in through her mouth loudly. "Over the phone, it's hard to say." She looked down and fixed her skirt. Her nails became camouflaged in the fabric. "I think she tried to sound indifferent."

"Do you think she's going to come to the funeral?"

"She hadn't made up her mind when I called."

"Thank you for this, Prissy." Reylene waved the index card. "I'll give that bitch a ring."

"Oh, stop it! Just stop it with your hurtful names."

Reylene stood up.

“Now, you just wait a moment!” Priscilla emphasized each syllable. “I know the real reason why you’re having a Christian funeral. It’s because—” she breathed out, “—I’m trying real hard to be nice here. Real hard! I don’t know how to put this nicely, but— Have you ever heard of the saying, ‘Water under the bridge?’ You know, ‘It’s all just water under the bridge.’ Well, now, I just think—no, I know—I just know you’re always treading the same water. You’re always swimming in the same pool.”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re trying to say. I just got to move on.”

“Seriously? You thick-headed—uh! You thick-headed woman. Don’t you see? That’s exactly what I’m saying. You need to move on! You don’t ever move on.”

“Me? Ha! You don’t know what it means to move on. You don’t have a fucking clue what that’s like. I’ve been through more hell than you’ll ever experience in your entire lifetime. Do you really think it was your faith and good deeds that got you this nice house? This nice fucking family in argyle sweaters and Favre jerseys? Hell no! It was the roll of the dice. Dumb luck. You was born beautiful, your parents was always there for you, and you didn’t grow up on the rez like me. Trust me, if you went to boarding school, you wouldn’t be a Christian because the things that happened there are unforgivable. Unforgivable in ways you’ll never understand because you’ve never went through hell.”

“Now you just—” but Priscilla couldn’t finish her thought. “Ahh! I wish you could listen to yourself right now.”

“Well, I’m not listening to you no more,” Reylene slung her purse over her shoulder and turned her back but paused when she heard what Priscilla said next.

“I don’t believe they taught you *real Christianity* in those schools. If they didn’t teach you love, they didn’t really teach you the Gospel. Love is fundamental to Christianity.”

Reylene—for the first time in years, probably since she'd given birth to Jimmy—lifted up her shirt in front of someone else.

“What on earth are you doing?” Priscilla demanded.

“See this? See this scar? Look at it!” Along the left side of Reylene's back, from the bottom of her shoulder blades to her pants, was a rash of horrific scars, like undesired tattoos in searing colors: maroon burn rings, rivers of white zippers, splashes of pink stains, all raised and ridged like terrain models detailing mountainous regions on a miniature scale. But it wasn't geography on her back. It was history.

“Do you want to know how I got these scars?” Reylene's vocal cords trembled. Her knees wobbled. Her ears went hot. “Do you really want to know? A pastor did this to me, Prissy. A goddamn pastor did this to me and my friend at boarding school. She was teaching me how to speak in Ojibwe because that was her native tongue. And, the pastor overheard us even though we was trying to whisper. Do you know what he said to us? He said, ‘I will not lift up a girl's shirt.’ That's what he really said. Word for word.” She spoke in a male, authoritative voice, “‘I will not lift up a girl's shirt. Reylene, you will lift up your friend's shirt. Lift it up. Now!’ And then, he poured a ladle of boiling soup on her back. I can still hear her cry. It was a horrible, piercing screech that I'll never forget. She was only seven-years-old for Christ's sakes! And, I was only nine. But Pastor Phillip wasn't done yet. He still had to punish me. So, he said, ‘Ruth, now it's your turn to lift up Reylene's shirt.’ And, I wailed harder than I ever had in my entire life. I wailed because I didn't want Ruth to have to feel the guilt of hurting me. She was younger than me and I felt like a criminal, like a horrible murderer, the worst person on earth. I had helped torture my friend and it was the worst feeling I've ever felt in my entire life. And now,

Sarah was going to be forced to torture me while she was—” Reylene bit her lip afraid that she might cry.

“You know what I did?” Reylene pressed forward. “I kicked and I screamed and I fought back, so she didn’t have to lift up my shirt. I clawed him. I bit him. I kicked him. And, the pastor was so furious with me that he got a couple of teachers to help pin me down. And, they poured soup, straight out of the pot, onto my back. And, it permanently scarred me. See it? Are you looking at it? It scarred me for life, Priscilla. It scarred me forever. But, these scars reminds me of how strong I am. I’m stronger than you and I’m more callous than your goddamn pastors will ever know.”

Over her shoulder, Reylene saw Priscilla’s stoic expression, like a proud Indian mascot. It remained resigned until Reylene’s shirt draped back into place. Priscilla’s eyes once again blinked rapidly. She smoothed out her skirt as if she still needed to look presentable to her guest until she said, “I’m so sorry!” and she put her head in her hands, crying.

“Yeah, well, I wish I heard that from Christians more often.” Reylene walked out of the dining room. Before exiting the house, she turned around again and said, “Where are my manners that I learned at boarding school? Thank you for the tea, Mrs. Singer.” She bent her right wrist and put her fingers daintily on her chest. “It was a delight to talk to you. I wish you a good day.”

Chapter Nine

The time had arrived. Soon Akasha would be competing for the Miss Moheconneew crown. If she could focus on her training, the moment she'd been visualizing for almost ten years would come, waving a teaspoon wave like Miss America, smiling modestly in front of the applauding audience, earning the respect and admiration she desired. While sitting in a four person tent, her mother braided her hair. The sun shone through the orange waterproof fabric, intensifying the color of its rays. Shelby's brown skin took on the hue of southwestern clay.

"Nancy Brittman's been bullying me again." Akasha told her mother as she braided her hair. "She hates me. She's always hated me. She's, like, been making fun of me since elementary school."

"Still? That girl's horrible. She takes after her mom. I can tell you that."

Akasha could thank her mother for her beautiful features. Shelby had naturally silky hair, brown skin that wasn't too dark, and a pretty face: tapering eyes, a slender nose, and cheekbones that could be seen in her silhouette. It was a wonder that she couldn't keep a man. Sometimes she said she preferred to have boyfriends as opposed to husbands. Other times she'd complain that she couldn't find a guy who was good enough for her. When she drank, she'd slur, "Indian men just can't be domesticated."

"I mean, like, Nancy even said that my face looked like a circus clown," Akasha said.

“Really? That girl’s a piece of Brittman work. She’s only saying that because she feels insecure about her looks. Have you seen her nose? It’s bent to hell, like a car sideswiped her face.”

They laughed.

While representing her Indian Nation, Akasha would be graceful and beautiful on the inside and out. Her hair’d be braided into pigtails with bone jewelry and mink pelts dangling from the ends. Her makeup would give her the appearance of a mature, young woman. There would be a little rosy blush to accent her cheekbones, a dark shade of lipstick for a new, fiercer look, and the application of an eyelash extender her mom had saved up specifically for this occasion. If everything went the way it was supposed to, Akasha would look more stunning than she ever had before.

“You are a really, really beautiful girl, Akasha, and I’m not just saying that because I’m your mom. I know for a fact that Nancy’s envious of you because her aunt told me so. She did. I’m not joshing. You’re so beautiful that sometimes you’re going to have to take the high road. You can’t be mean to other girls and steal their boyfriends. You know why? Because ‘what comes around, goes around.’ It’s called karma and it’s a real bitch. It’s a real thing. Believe me. So, don’t take your pretty hinny for granted or karma’s going to come and bite it off.”

At the powwow, there would be a lot of boys watching her. They’d express that they liked her, but in their backwards, shy way. They’d tease her about her regalia, her strong work ethic, and her Munsee pronunciation. The majority of the boys on the rez would be there along with tribal members from Shawano, Green Bay, some even as far away as Appleton. Also in attendance would be a handful of Native boys from other Nations:

Menominee, Oneida, Ho-Chunk, Potawatomi, and Ojibwa (who are also called Chippewa or Anishinaabe).

Akasha felt her mom snap a hair band in place.

“All right. There. I’m done,” her mother said, referring to her pigtails.

Akasha responded by reaching for a bottle of hair spray and handing it to her. Shelby misted her hair with the only substance that was stickier than the air inside the tent.

“A bit more,” Akasha said. “Or my hair’s going to be a disaster by the time of the competition.

“Mhmm,” Mom said as she doused her.

“Hey! Not so much. I don’t want it to be obvious that my hair’s been nuked.” Akasha dabbed her braids. They felt gooey. “Hmm? Do you think we should rinse it off and respray it?”

“And redo your braids? Don’t be ridiculous. It looks fine.” Her mother took out a pair of mink pelts from Akasha’s sports bag. “Your hair’s going to look as beautiful as these precious minks.” She petted the silverblue fur as if the animals were still alive. “Uh, they’re to die for! When I’m done primping you, you are going to look so amazing. So, so pretty.”

“I wish my mother’s vote counted.”

There was a pin attached to the tail of each mink. Shelby fastened the fur to Akasha’s pigtails.

She would win for her uncle, her imperfect parents, her lazy sister, and her people. They needed a role model who wouldn’t disappoint them by drinking and getting caught up in the wrong crowd. She would listen to her guidance counselors and never use drugs.

She'd be a strong, proud, successful Native American woman. She would, as successful people say, rise above it all.

Hopefully, Anthony Fond du Lac would at least make an appearance. It wasn't just his looks she was attracted to. There was something about him that she couldn't define, some kind of dignity he carried in his shoulders and expressed in his eyes. Although he wasn't point guard, he displayed leadership on the basketball court and never got in fights with the other team. He walked and talked with confidence, never afraid to speak his mind. Sometimes he could be disrespectful to teachers, but at least he spoke up when he disagreed. She preferred someone who was outspoken to a boy who was too nice or passive aggressive. Even with her uncle's passing, her thoughts drifted to Anthony, rambunctious and full of energy.

His adventurous personality was worse now that his family was letting him cruise around in a Jeep, with Nancy Brittman of all people. Obviously, that white girl liked him but Akasha had yet to see him warm up to her neck massages and arm rubs. Akasha hoped he only liked Indian girls.

"Oh, my stars!" Her mother's eyes opened as wide as her mouth. "I've got to sit back and take a look at my beautiful daughter. You are going to impress every single person at the powwow. Every single last one of them."

But, Akasha couldn't take her mother's compliments. They both were sweating. Shelby's forehead was greasy-looking from the humid air. This meant Akasha's skin must've looked shiny too, as if her face was breaking out in acne. What if her skin did break out right now? Not only was the weather excruciating but her primp-time was hurried, all because her father'd kept her up late by drinking and illegally shooting a

Bambi at night. Although his brother had died and she felt genuinely sorry for her father, she was still upset at his behavior. And, why did her uncle have to die right before the powwow, the biggest day of her life? Did the Creator have something against her? Was He testing her, wanting to see if she would still dance for him despite all of the hell that she'd been through?

"Holy crap!" she said. "We forgot the jewelry. Crap. I don't have time for this. The bone jewelry goes on first. Then the frigging pelts."

"Don't overreact now. I'll just take them off, put on that stuff, and put them back on. It's no biggie."

"What about the mirrors?" Akasha asked. "Those large mirror discs. We could like slip those on instead."

"That'd work."

"Oh wait. No. My earrings have mirrors. I don't want to have too many mirrors on my regalia."

"That many mirrors would really keep away the bad spirits."

"You think so? Or are you joking? I can't tell. Please don't joke right now."

"I think the large mirrors will clash with your earrings. Your bone jewelry is so much prettier."

"Okay. I think you're right. Well—" Akasha paused, thinking, "—yeah, okay, you're right. Hurry up now and take off the mink thingamajigs. But, don't mess up my hair, okay? Be like gentle but fast. We've got to get this done before everything starts. I can't miss Grand Entry."

"Yes, master. Your personal slave will do whatever you say."

“Mom! Stop it. I don’t need your, like—*whatever* right now. I need to concentrate on the competition.” Akasha was so nervous she could barely think. “Sarcasm! I don’t need your sarcasm right now.”

“Okay. Ooh-kaay. A little please and thank you would be nice.”

Her win at the powwow would earn her the position of the most beautiful Mohican girl of the year. But, she had to remind herself that she wasn’t competing for Tribal royalty in order to win a boy’s heart. That would be the wrong reason to get into this pageant. Her people’s cultural beliefs and traditions needed to be preserved through events like these. There were more important reasons to win the Miss Moheconneew crown because there were larger forces at work. The Creator would be pleased by her dance around the drum and by her understanding of her ancestral teachings. But, the more she thought about the importance of this day, the more nervous she became.

After Shelby finished putting on Akasha’s bone jewelry and mink pelts, she said, “Howah! It’s so stinking hot in here. We’re going to have to do your makeup outside or your beauty’s going to melt away.”

“Mom! You’re not helping.”

“It was just a joke. You roll out of the bed beautiful. Come on now. Let’s go outside.”

“But, what about my jingle dress?”

“We can go back in the tent for that.”

“Ugh. Fine. I didn’t want anyone to see me as I got ready. Jeez. This whole day is, like, my worst nightmare ever.”

“Take a chill pill, Aksashy.” Her mother chuckled. “You’ve got this in the bag. You’re a shoo-in.”

“I knew we should’ve put on my jingle dress before we did my hair. Maybe I should put on my dress right now, and then wash my face, and then put on my makeup.”

“Calm down. You’re usually not this nervous. Just remember, tonight’s dance is just like any other dance. You’ve powwowed before, a hundred times.”

For whatever reason, this made Akasha edgier. “Oh-my-gosh-Oh-my-gosh-Oh-my-gosh! Why am I so nervous? I’m never this nervous. Ah! This can’t be happening to me.”

“Shoot me now,” Shelby muttered. “Something tells me our makeup appointment is going to be less fun than our hair appointment. God help us all.”

They stepped out of their tent, which rested on top of the arena bowl. It had five grassy levels built into the hillside where people could either set out their lawn chairs or lay out their blankets and watch the ceremony. On the fifth tier, between the wooden retaining wall and the forest, was enough flat land for popup tents and tarp shelters. Akasha and Shelby made sure to reserve their spot weeks ahead of time. Most overnights pitched their tents or parked their RV’s in designated camping lots in front of the powwow grounds.

The Many Trails Campground also included a picnic shelter, a playground, and walking trails, which followed one of the most scenic stretches of the Red River. Here there were plenty of good fishing holes created by large rocks, fallen trees, and islands for fisherman to *hit*.

Photographers liked their subjects to stand on the wooden bridges that connected the inlands to the shore or to other islands. Underneath these bridges were flood-stage rapids, carving away at the banks slowly, remaking the soil. A golden eagle understood how

these waters were the veins and arteries of the living earth. There was a potent smell of minerals in the atmosphere.

The eagle circled back around the campground listening to the drummers warming up. This sacred bird knew the demeanors of the land that humans could never comprehend. In the air, in the soil, in the waters, the presence of the five day storm was still being felt, a female presence of the current's rhythmic speech interrupted by lapping waters, the soft spring in the ground and the squishy noise it made from four-legged animals, the moisture in the wind lustering the leaves, the resounding Doppler Effect of circling flies, and the croaks of frogs, impregnating their throats with reused humidity. This week every living thing, including the eagle, had endured great weather. It was time for a lull in the land.

It sensed a break from the weather that Akasha needed.

She stood, makeup and all, at the front of the line of Jingle Dress dancers. She wondered if she was the only one progressive enough to question the gender roles of Native American culture, which played an important part in powwows and ceremonies. The men always danced in front of the women. Women weren't allowed to drum or be fire keepers and they never exceeded either. Was this part of her people's spiritual beliefs or their old-fashioned customs? Ultimately, it didn't really matter. Asking people to change their traditions, her mother had told her, was like asking them to change their lives.

Veterans were the first categorical dancers in every Grand Entry. They carried in the Stockbridge-Munsee flag, the Mohican Veterans flag, the American flag, the MIA-POW flag, and the Eagle Staff. Veterans from other Indian Nations followed them retiring their

colors as well. Next came the Male Head Dancer and the Female Head Dancer. They led the Inter-tribal dances and other various dances throughout the ceremony. Next to the Head Dancers were the Royalty: Miss Moheconneew, Junior Miss Moheconneew, Little Miss Moheconneew, and Maskaniiteeheew. Then came the men categorized by their regalia: Braves, Fancy Dancers, and Grass Dancers and Smoke Dancers if they showed up; followed by the Tradition Women. After them came other female dancers wearing Jingle Dresses or Fancy Shawls. Children danced after the adults, boy first, girls second. Lastly, were the Tiny Tots who were toddlers dressed in regalia and led by their relations.

“Oh wow! You look so pretty,” Peaches said who wore a black ribbon dress containing various shades of blue and green colors that zigzagged their way around the outfit’s sleeves, three-tier skirt, and yoke. “How long did it take you to make your regalia?”

“Three months. I rolled every single bell by myself. My mom only helped me do a little sowing.”

Chapter Nine events continued:

I'd like to express more of a strained relationship between Akasha and Shelby

Akasha dances at the powwow, Bear shows up drunk and tries to dance (go into Bear's POV?), Blanket Ceremony occurs where people put money in a blanket for the Moses family, Akasha competes for the Miss Moheconneew

I'd like to develop Evi, Akasha's sister, a bit. Maybe this is the chapter to do so?

(I'm not sure where to put the phone conversation between Reylene and Lizzy—Jimmy's baby mama)

Chapter Ten (*Ch 9 included events of Day 1 of powwow, so Ch 10 contains events of Day 2, and Ch. 11 will begin on Day 3 of ceremony*)

Akasha wins Miss Moheconneew and gives speech about how her people did to rise above alcohol, drugs, domestic abuse, and poverty

Akasha discovers Bear on a hill overlooking the ceremony. He says he's waiting for an eagle to circle the drum, so he can shoot it. He's drunk again.

Akasha visits a "49," which is like a powwow after-party with plenty of drinking and substance abuse. Onatah is there and tries to get her drunk but Akasha refuses. Anthony and Blink are also there. Akasha flirts with Anthony but in a drunken slur says he's in love with Nancy (blonde girl). Blink, with a little alcohol courage, awkwardly tries to flirt with Akasha and she begins to think she likes him. (Not sure where this is going. If anywhere)

Chapter 11 and Maybe Chapter 12

Day 3 of powwow ceremony and day of the funeral—many people at powwow show up to funeral. Lizzy and Nathaniel show up as well. Pastor Thomas gives a homily.

After the homily, everyone goes outside for the burial. Pastor Thomas won't allow the drummers to play, saying the "Christian God is different than the Indian God or the Creator or Great Spirit or whatever name you give him."

Reylene shares a few things about Jimmy. (Should Akasha too?) Bear shares a few things as well. Sings "Witchi-tie-to," a song that combines traditional with pop jazz. Other people join in singing. The drummers play and an eagle circles the drum. There are multiple POV's: eagle, Pastor Thomas, Kissy, Reylene, Akasha, Bear, (Is Jimmy's POV a good idea?)

Do I need a flashback chapter of Jimmy when he was alive?

Chapter Eleven

As long as Reylene kept herself busy she knew she could get through her baby's funeral. Sometimes she worried that her heart would erupt in front of everyone, surrounded by her family and the obnoxious church walls, which displayed inspirational Bible verse posters she didn't believe in: "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you. Matthew 17:20." "Where two or three are gathered in my name there I am with them. Matthew 18:20." "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Matthew 5:3-5."

For her family's sake, she had to keep it together. An hour before the funeral, Pastor Thomas led her into the Stockbridge Presbyterian Church's kitchen where she put the non-perishable food on the countertops and the perishable food in refrigerator. She set out the paper plates, plastic silverware, and disposable cups, so she would be at least half-way ready for the meal following the burial service.

After pacing the church's dining room seven or so times, she decided to make sure all the tables and chairs were evenly spaced and lined in flush rows. With time to burn, she walked into Pastor Thomas' office where she found him printing out paper copies of the bulletins for Jimmy's memorial service. Inside each pamphlet detailed the order of the procession as well as the lyrics to the hymns the congregation would sing. Pleased to find "His Eye is on the Sparrow" typed out, she read the words. Memories of childhood came

back to her. What a comfort it was, when she was young, to trust in the beliefs the song declared.

“Why should I feel discouraged? Why should the shadows come? Why should my heart be lonely, and long for heav’n and home, when Jesus is my portion? My constant friend is He. His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.” And then came the chorus: “I sing because I’m happy. I sing because I’m free. His eye is on the sparrow and I know he’s watching me.”

This hymn had gotten her through boarding school. Its straightforward words coupled with a simplistic yet uplifting tune promised her joy in the midst of the institutional hell that she had attended for thirteen years. She found it ironic that she’d memorized every line, every note of the hymn. As an adult whenever she felt lonely or nostalgic in a masochistic kind of way, she’d listen to the song on a record or a cassette player, but she wouldn’t sing along with it. She couldn’t anymore. She was afraid that it would make her soft and sentimental. Again she read over the words and had to close the four-fold bulletin and move on to other business. Even the back flap, which presented an image of a sparrow with twigs in between its beak, couldn’t be looked at it. Nor could the front page, a photograph of Jimmy’s smiling face. Although she had no input in the content of the handout, she thought of the extra touches the pastor included were nice, yet she couldn’t afford to have a break down right now. How could she keep herself preoccupied? She thought about helping the minister fold the bulletins but thought better of it.

Benthall’s Funeral Home were placing flowers around the building. Reylene decided to assist them as they carried floral displays from their black Chryslers. The morning heat

felt just as miserable as yesterday's humidity. Northern Wisconsin's heat wave stuck around like a stubborn flu. The funeral home had put Jimmy's body in what was called a trinity oak casket. Its lid resembled a six panel bedroom door. The section for the head had two raised panels and the section for the body had four. But neither portion of the lid would be open for people to see. No one would see her son's corpse and therefore no one put an eagle's feather in Jimmy's hand or a blanket on top of his body or anything tribal in nature. With the exception of the actual burial, the entire procession would take place inside the church, which meant no one would even think about mentioning the traditional Indian practice of carrying the departed through the window of the deceased's home.

- (Reylene meets Lizzy, her husband, and Nathaniel before the funeral begins.

Describe sanctuary. Maybe Lizzy brings step-kids?) *

Pastor Thomas stood in front of the assembly of fifty-two people, wearing a solid green, button-up dress shirt, not a multi-colored ribbon shirt or a hat with a feather hanging down. His shoes were black Dockers, not moccasins. A Bible was in his hand, instead of a smudge stick. Reylene was able to tell herself to breathe. There was nothing in her baby's funeral that would make her uncomfortable. There was nothing detailed in the bulletin that was unfamiliar to her either. Pastor Thomas began the service in the most traditional way possible by introducing himself, welcoming the visitors who were new to the church, and explaining how Jimmy Moses was a beloved uncle, brother, son, friend, and coworker to the community. He never said father.

"Everyone keeps telling me how much of a funny man Jimmy was and I know his humor will always be remembered by his friends and family," Pastor Thomas preached. "He also served our country bravely in the armed services and went on several tours in

Iraq. And, he served this community in his work and in his relationships with other people. I wish I would have known Jimmy. I'm sure I would have liked him." He talked about Jimmy's life in a positive way for a few minutes before preaching the Gospel message: "I'm glad Reylene Fisherman chose to sing the hymn, "His Eye is on the Sparrow" because it speaks of the great love God has for us. You may not believe that God is good enough to send his son to die on the cross for your sins. You may ask yourself, why would the Creator of universe even think about me? I am just a nobody. Or perhaps you think, I have done too many bad things in my life to deserve his forgiveness. Well, that is a good place to be. In fact, that's exactly where God wants you to be. And, that is where Jimmy Moses was when Colin Rankin visited him in the hospital one cold winter night. Reverend Rankin was the pastor of this church eleven years ago when Jimmy had an accident that almost took away his life. Our friend Jimmy didn't believe that anybody loved him anymore because of the poor choices he had made. But, Reverend Rankin told him that sin was an unconquerable addiction in every man's life. In order to be free from this sin, he had to put his faith in the sacrifice of the son. Jimmy had to believe that Jesus died on the cross so that he could have life. I know this because Reverend Rankin told me yesterday, over the phone, that that night Jimmy Nathaniel Moses let Christ into his heart. And, I would encourage everyone here to accept this free gift from God. He is the God of the Bible, not the God of Islam or Mormonism or any other spiritual creed that calls people to smudge their homes and manufacture visions through sweat lodge experiences. He is the only way, the truth, and the life. No one gets into heaven without his grace."

Reylene scanned the congregation. No one in attendance was upset. They probably all expected a sermon like this, just as she predicted and wanted. But, she questioned whether or not this homily was what she wanted. The pastor had told everyone that her son was a Christian. How could he say this as a fact? As far as she knew, her son had never stepped inside a church in years. This would make Indians think that she was a Bible believer. But, on the other hand, wouldn't this kind of information about his conversion prevent anyone from thinking that her son was in hell? Perhaps this "change of heart" would cast a positive light on Jimmy and the community would picture him asking the pastor for forgiveness and saying how much he hated his addictions.

But her thoughts circled back to her son's conversion. Jimmy, a Christian? It couldn't have happened. Or maybe it had happened only because he was at the lowest point in his life: no wife, no kid, and an unsuccessful suicide attempt resulting in a trip to the hospital. If her son really had some kind of transformation experience, he would've cleaned up his act.

Reylene took a peak at Lizzy whose attentive yet emotionless face offered no insight into what she was thinking. She most likely had no idea that her ex-husband had attempted to end his life. Her husband didn't have any decipherable facial gestures either. But, Nathaniel did. His steady gaze, eyes opened slightly wider than what was comfortable, suggested that he was more than interested in learning who his biological father was. Perhaps he would give his mother an earful, a guilt trip that was eleven years in the making. Reylene would love to be a fly on the wall for that quarrel. If only she could hire a private investigator to bug their hotel room.

- Congregation goes outside for burial.
- Reylene shares some thoughts about Jimmy.
- Bear shares some revealing thoughts about Jimmy (what the revealing thoughts are, I don't know yet). He sings, "Witchi-tie-to," a song that combines traditional with pop jazz. Other people join in singing. The drummers play and an eagle circles the drum.
- *(Also, I want to incorporate Reylene's thoughts throughout Pastor Thomas' homily, so it's not so boring and irrelevant)*

Chapter Twelve

The golden eagle experienced the drum beat in the same way the grasshoppers experienced vibrations in their legs, in the same way rez dogs' ears perked because of the tingling sensation in their eardrums, in the way chipmunks collectively steadied their gaze as deer rested their heads on the forest floor and trees stretched their branches, glorifying their creator. The eagle experienced the drum in its heart and in its bones. It rode a river of humid wind and felt compelled to be near the pulse of the music of the earth. The sound overwhelmed all the distractions around the sacred bird. What good medicine it was to listen to and rest in the language of the earth, the honor beat that percolated the undercurrents of the soil, flowing through the roots of the plants and the weeds. Every living thing praised its Creator.

The song and dance at this burial was different from that of a usual powwow. Everything was rawer, heartfelt, less concerned with the procedures of the ceremony and more concerned with the heart of the song, the emotion behind the rhythm, and the reason for adoration.

The eagle doubled back to see the pastor of the ceremony. He stood with his hands behind his back while rubbing the ends of his shirt cuffs with his fingers as if he was a toddler learning how different fabrics felt. For a moment, he ran his freckled thumb and index finger through his caterpillar eyebrows. Sweat emptied from them. It reminded the eagle of water pouring out of thunderstorm clouds. The skin on the minister's face, resembled melting snow and looked sickly and ill-suited underneath so much

perspiration, too much sun. It didn't help that his slacks were black and his dress shirt was long-sleeved.

Thomas Shaughnessy needed a sports drink to replace all the salt and water his body was losing. Weather like this helped him remember why he didn't go outside often.

He couldn't ban the heat any more than he could prohibit the ceremonial drums being played. Not a fourth time. Certainly not now. Hopefully the Indians in attendance wouldn't believe that spirits were circling these drums during an old jazz song of all things. But why was everyone gawking at the sky? An eagle, a ginormous golden eagle was above them. Interesting. How astounding to see such a magnificent creature hovering over them, but was it circling the Native's drums? Thomas had once heard a tall tale of such a random occurrence, but as he looked upward and watched the animal intentionally turn its wings so that it flew in spirals around them, he couldn't mistake this circumstance as coincidence.

What was it about the repetitive sound of the drums that made the bird circle the players? Perhaps it was some type of animal instinct that God had hardwired in the eagle's constitution, like a sheep dog's nature to herd sheep or a salmon's disposition to jump waterfalls during migration. Or perhaps whatever phenomena was happening right now was too profound for him to grasp. This event was probably beyond his understanding. But, God was beyond his comprehension too, and so was His creation and so were certain aspects of the American Indian community. God couldn't be contained in a box any more than Indians could be suppressed on a reservation. If mankind was the crowning achievement in the Lord's creation, if man was created in the image of God,

than the more the pastor learned about the Lord's people, about different folks like the Native Americans, the more he discovered God.

But, why would God allow an eagle to circle the drum at a time like this? Pastor Thomas yearned for his audience to clearly understand how the Christian God differed from the Indian God. But what if today the Creator wanted him to learn something as well. In Scripture, God showed Elijah that He wasn't in the wind or the earthquake or the fire that He fashioned. Instead, He was in a small voice that whispered, "You are not my only believer." Similarly, God was in this eagle, telling the Indians, in their own understanding, that He was with them, that He was watching over them, protecting them because He cared for the oppressed, the downtrodden, the occupied, the lowliest of the low. Pastor Thomas would use this incidence in a sermon. God worked in mysterious ways.

The eagle saw the leader of the funeral transfer his weight from his left foot to his right. It turned its right wing down and circled to see Kissy Crow Messenger dancing a one-step with every bone, every fiber in her body. The eagle could tell she was experiencing the music in the same way the rocks praised their maker. Both knew their place in the world before their God.

Akasha swiveled her hips, sashaying the bells on her jingle dress. The ribbons on her regalia moved in unison. She sang, "What a spirit feeling ringing round my head" unaware that the lyrics were "Water spirit feeling ringing round my head." But, her vocal cords expressed an enthusiasm in her heart. Some kind of pent up emotion that could only be expressed in song.

She felt the back of her throat become tingly than tender. Akasha knew singing this loudly would cause her to lose her voice but she didn't care. She wanted to honor Uncle Jimmy because he'd been good to her, because he always made her laugh even when her parents were going through a divorce. It didn't matter if he cheered her up when he was drunk or sober. He had helped her and her sister get through many difficult times and that was enough to honor. If only people could remember him for his affection instead of his addiction. Hopefully, Nathaniel would see the love that was present in his father by seeing the love in her for this man. And hopefully, Lizzy would stop holding a grudge with Reylene's family and let Nathaniel visit their tribe. She didn't care if the eagle, which was abnormally large and looked like the thunderbird's offspring, circled around them for their performance or for something completely unrelated. Either way, Jimmy was being honored. She felt the music in her bones, danced, and sang:

Witchi-tie-to, gimee rah/Whoa rah neeko, whoa rah neeko, Hey ney, Hey ney, no wah.

The eagle circled around the ceremony to watch an elderly woman it had its eye on for a long time. It could sense the scars on her body and in her heart, battle wounds from childhood and adulthood. She was a fighter, a survivor. She didn't know why she continued to struggle against each catastrophe, one after the next. She thought she refused to be broken but what she really refused was healing. She thought she hated weakness but what she actually hated was to expose her weakness and in turn be helped by her people and by her Creator.

As Reylene Fisherman watched the organized chaos around her, the Indian song performed, she felt uneasy, afraid. For her entire life, she'd been told to not rock the boat,

not to be a victim but a volunteer. If she stepped out of line, if she spooked white people, she would be punished and her Indian friends would be hurt. Yet, Pastor Thomas had given up. He'd let the drummers play.

As her eyes reached the sky and the legend presented itself in the flesh, a golden eagle, with a wingspan that was longer than the tallest man, soaring gracefully, orbiting Jimmy's body, a hint of joy trembled in her blood and in her tonsils. Was there something in this life she could make sense of? She desperately wanted there to be one.

She was an old woman now and her son had given up the burden of being Indian, which she continued to carry. For a Native, she was particularly old, and yet she felt like she didn't understand this world any more than a child. "Shit happens" was one of the few truths she believed in and it disgusted her that shit happened more to one person than another, more to one tribe than the next. "Life's unfair" was another truth she could put her faith in.

Closing her eyes, Reylene felt the beat reach her soul. Why would the Creator of the earth consider the least important person in the world, of the most insignificant people of the earth, and communicate to her by sending an eagle to honor her son, an alcoholic who'd wasted so much of his life and potential? She felt joy pickle her throat and warm her cheeks. With unpredictable seasons of despair, came unpredictable joy, another truth she could hold, yet a truth in disagreement. How could joy originate from nothing? There were seasons where she had gone without it, years where it was absent: Orville Elk kicking her out of his house and out of his life, Isaiah Moses leaving her to take care of their two sons alone, her sons rebellious behavior time and time again, and that period in her life where she looked for love in the wrong places and in the right places and still

couldn't find a man. But, her boarding school years were the worst years of her life. They were filled with joyless nights, tears wetting her sheets, pillows muffling her screams. Yet, joy always returned to her even when she didn't want it to. How could joy materialize when her body left her spirit to drift across the day, when her mind become lost among ghosts it chased, when she reached into the base of her heart and came out empty-handed, when horrible events unfolded beyond her control? Joy, from whatever well it came from, was draining drip-by-drip, beat-by-beat, into her spirit, not replacing her pain or healing her heartache, but coexisting in her being. It was there, for whatever that was worth, at her baby's funeral and inside her now.

On the other side of Reylene stood Priscilla Singer bouncing, clapping to the beat, repeating "Hey ney, hey ney, hey ney, hey ney" throughout the song. She picked up on the English verse and sang, "Holy Spirit feeling springing round my head/ makes me feel glad that I'm not dead." Either she heard the "Holy Spirit" rendition recorded decades ago by folky hippies or the practice reworking of songs came naturally to her.

But, Bear was singing the loudest, leading everyone at the ceremony, not caring if he hit the notes or not. He regarded the eagle and the eagle regarded him. Who was Johnny Bear Moses without his little brother to raise and protect? Jimmy had been a grownup for two decades now yet Bear had never stopped looking out for him, providing for him. When they were children and their father left, Bear helped his ma raise the baby of the family and later taught him how to gut a fish, how to throw a punch, how to rest his wrist on the steering wheel like a cool, collected teenager in control of the road.

He never wanted Jimmy to go to Iraq and when he did, Bear drank himself into a bar fight, cracking a man's rib and breaking another's jaw. He left that fight uninjured unlike

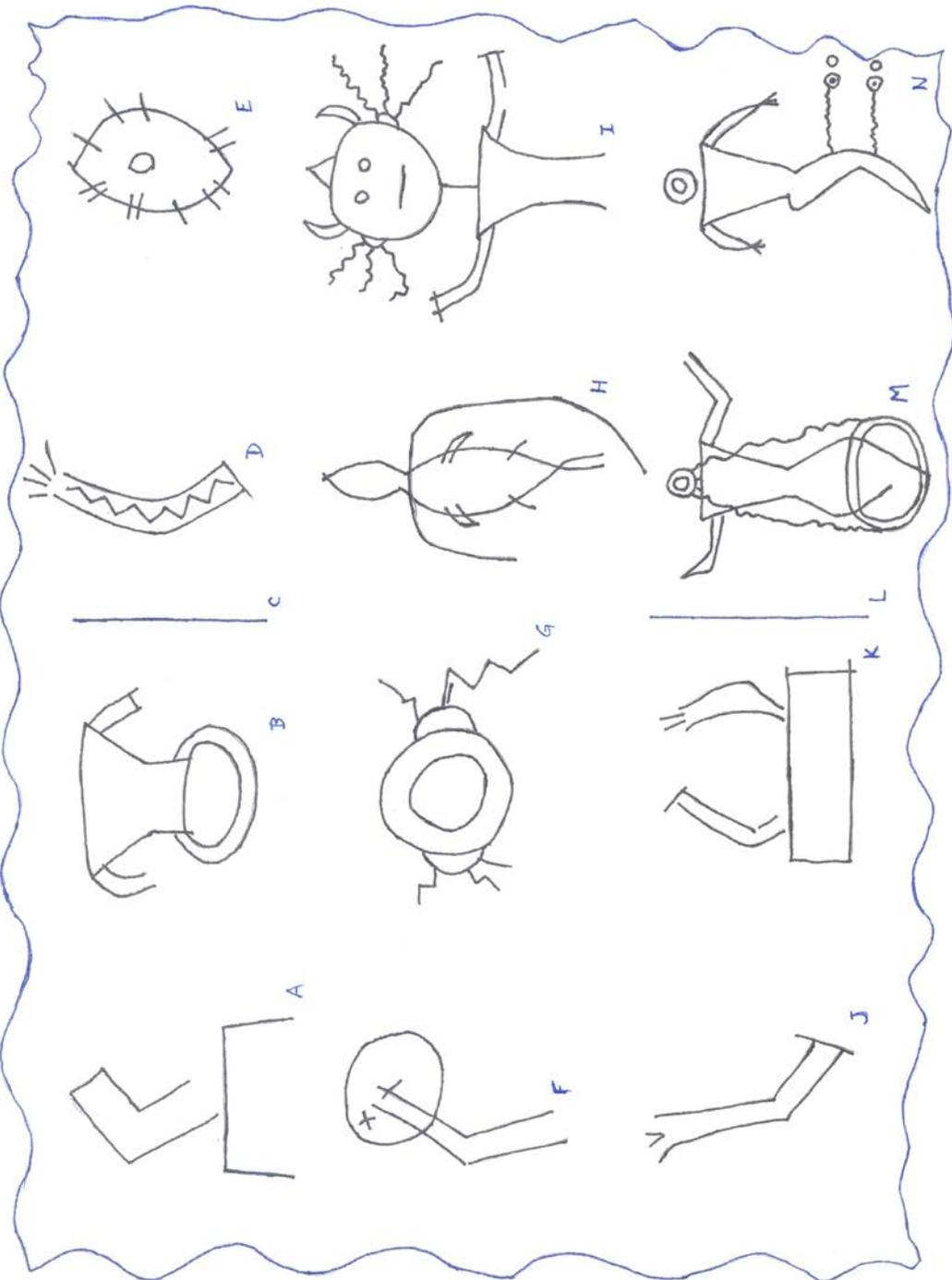
the way Jimmy left Iraq three years later. How long would Johnny Bear fight for his brother after he was dead? Could he, the older brother, transfer all of his love and worry to his daughters or would there always be that Jimmy-sized hole?

As he fought with song, he heard his friends and family singing too. He felt his tribe joining him in remembrance: Akasha, Evi, Kissy, Priscilla Singer, Thunder Shawano, Officer Dale, even Pastor Thomas and his ma. Some power other than his own was channeling through his blood. His ma was closing her eyes, dimples appeared on either side of her unbent lips. He felt his people with him collectively in the beat and in his bones.

Their spirit lifted with their song to the circling eagle and to the listening Lord. Their singing, in the absent wind, carried past the graveyard, beyond the powwow grounds, along the Red River and throughout the reservations, permeating the moss on the rocks, the termites in the trees, the dancing blades of grass, and the fish in the waters that are never still.

Jimmy heard his people's words as well before his spirit ascended into the sky to be with the other believers beyond the river, the boarder of the physical world. He was humbled that anyone would honor him, the least admirable of all people, an addict in need of grace, a fatherless fool, a red-skinned savage in the eyes of man and God. But, God loved him like the father every son wants and deserves. Jimmy was on his way, singing and dancing with his maker.

(THIS SIDE UP)



The Order of Akasha's Song and its Interpretation

A: The earth, spirit that I am, I take medicine out of the earth.

The upper figure represents the arm reaching down toward the earth, searching for hidden remedies.

B: (Because of) a spirit that I am, my son.

The headless human figure emerging from the circle is a mysterious being, representing the power possessed by the speaker. He addresses a younger and less experienced listener or shaman (called a *Mide'* or medicine man).

C: Bar or Rest

D: I lied to my son.

The signification of the phrase could not be explained by the informant, especially its relation to the character, which is an arm, reaching beyond the sky for power from the Creator. The waving line upon the arm denotes mysterious power.

E: They have pity on me, that is why they call us to the Grand Medicine.

The inner circle represents the speaker's heart; the outer circle, the gathering place for shamans, while the short lines indicate the directions from which the shamans come together.

F: That is what ails me, I fear my brothers.

The arm reaching into a circle denotes the obtaining of mysterious powers.

G: *Mide'* friends, do you hear me?

The circles denote the locality where shamans are supposed to be congregated. The waving lines signify hearing when attached to the ears.

H: The first time I heard you.

The speaker asserts that he heard the voices of the spirits when we went through his first initiation into the society. Here, he is represented as the otter.

I: I hear the spirit speaking to us.

The shaman singer is of superior power, as designated by the horns and pointer upon his head. The lines from the ears indicate hearing.

J: They, the *Mide'* friends, have paid enough.

The arm in the attitude of giving to the Creator signifies that the shaman have made presents of sufficient value to be enabled to possess the secrets, which they received in return.

K: They have pity on me, the Chief *Mide'*.

Arms are extended to the shaman lodge, which give assistance as besought.

L: Rest

M: Almost crying because the medicine is lost.

The lines extending downward from the eye signify weeping; the circle beneath the figure, the place where the "medicine" is supposed to exist. The idea of "lost" signifies that some information has been forgotten through death of those who possessed it.

N: Yes, there is much medicine you may cry for.

Refers to that which is yet to be taught.

(I'm thinking of putting this song in somewhere during Akasha's competition)