



Assiniboin Girl

Kathi Wallace



ASSINIBOIN GIRL

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CHAPTER ONE

MARY TWO DOGS CLUTCHED HER BOOKS TIGHT AGAINST HER CHEST, DUCKING

her head as she tried to walk faster. Maybe they wouldn't see her. Or if they did, they would leave her alone. She had hoped with school out for the summer the teasing would stop. She'd been wrong.

"Do you smell something nasty, Amber?" The voice made Mary's heart sink. "All of a sudden, it smells like dog crap."

Under Mary's feet, the cracked sidewalk seemed to sprout bits of rubble. Tears blurred her eyes, and she tripped, skidding on a loose pebble. Instinctively Mary's hands flew out to her sides to catch herself as she fell, her books flying away from her to land with an ominous rip somewhere off to her left. Her right hand betrayed her, though, landing on a glittering shard of glass. It stabbed into the meaty part of her palm, under her thumb. Mary gasped at the sharp pain.

"Yeah, I smell it too, Cissy." A chorus of giggles. "I think it's coming from that clumsy mutt lying on the ground over there."

Mary pushed herself upright with her good hand. Keeping her head down, she glanced around under her lashes in search of her books. Just ignore them, she said to herself. Find your books, and go.

As she searched, she heard footsteps come close. A red tennis shoe appeared in her field of view. Slowly, Mary raised her head, cursing the tears that spilled from her eyes to roll down her cheeks. The blood from her hand hit the ground with a steady plopping sound.

Standing close to her were two girls with long blond hair, their blue eyes sparkling with malice. One of the girls, Cissy, reached out a hand and poked Mary hard in the ribs. "Hey, Red Girl. Why are you crying?"

Did you lose your peace pipe?"

Her partner-in-crime widened her eyes, and then clapped a hand over her mouth, laughing through her fingers.

"Oh, I forgot. Squaws don't have peace pipes, do they?" Cissy sneered, her voice reflecting the relish she took in this game.

The other girl pointed, nudging her friend. "Hey, Cissy. She's hurt. Let's go."

Mary had always felt that Amber wouldn't be so cruel to her if it weren't for the leadership of the other girl. Grateful to the kinder of the two, more tears threatened.

"No!" Cissy said, shrugging her friend off, eyes hard. "My dad says they don't feel pain like real people do. They're just dirty, stinking Indians."

Mary shook her head, wanting to clear her ears of the awful things spewing from Cissy's mouth. She spied her books lying off to the side and moved to get them.

Cissy stepped out quickly in a blocking move. "Where do you think, you're going, Red Girl?"

Amber was starting to look a little anxious, and she tugged on her friend's arm. "Leave her alone, Cissy. She's bleeding."

Mary stared into Cissy's eyes, afraid. She wanted to defend herself, but as always happened when she got scared, her brain froze and her mouth dried up. She took a step backwards.

Cissy's hand shot out, pushing her hard on the shoulder. Mary stumbled backwards, her arms windmilling to maintain her balance and some of the blood from the gash on her hand splattered onto the blonde girl's face.

"Gross!" Cissy wiped the blood off, glaring at her.

Amber was scrabbling in her shoulder bag and came out with a tissue. "Here," she said, handing it to her friend.

Taking advantage of the moment, Mary darted around the pair and snatched up her books. Seeing the torn pages, she groaned. Great. Now she was going to have to pay for them. Holding her injured hand out to the side, she hurried away, Cissy still screaming at her.

"I've probably got AIDS now! I'm going to tell my daddy about this! You wait and see if I don't!"

The voice seemed to push Mary along, making her feet move quicker and quicker until she was running. Her house came into sight, and breathing a sigh of relief, she slowed to a walk, her side aching. Pausing at the side door—the front was only for company—she leaned her head on the cool wood, her shoulders shuddering as she tried to catch her breath.

The tears gone, Mary examined her hand. Ugh. The glass was still in her palm. Putting the books down, she gritted her teeth, then wincing, pulled it out. Fresh blood welled, and she wished she had something to wrap it in.

Walking around to the back of the house, Mary lifted the lid off the plastic trashcan, and tossed the glass inside. No sense some little kid or animal cutting themselves on it.

The sound of tires on the driveway reached her ears, and she looked up to see Aunt Janet's car pulling into the driveway. Mary groaned again, and then hurried back around to the side door. Grabbing her books, she let herself inside, fumbling awkwardly with her house keys.

"Mary, wait up! You can help me carry some of these groceries ... Mary?"

Janet Two Dogs' voice followed Mary into the house. Tossing the books on the counter, she turned on the faucet, letting the water run over the gash. Red swirled on white porcelain to disappear down the drain. In her mind, she could still hear Cissy's voice calling her Red Girl.

Her aunt entered the side door in a rustle of paper bags. The faint scent of the perfume she wore filled Mary's nose—the same perfume as her mom had worn—and for the second time that day, Mary's eyes filled with tears. Her aunt was talking to her, but Mary ignored the words, concentrating on the pain of the gash to drive away the ghost of her mother.

A hand came down gently on her shoulder, and Mary turned the water off. She grabbed a paper towel off the roll hanging under the cabinet, using it first to swipe at her face before wrapping it around her hand and turning to face her aunt.

“You’ve hurt yourself! Let me see.”

Mary pulled away. “Leave me alone,” she muttered.

“Look at me.” Janet grasped Mary by the shoulders, but Mary kept her head lowered, refusing to make eye contact. “You’ve been fighting again.” Her aunt’s words were flat.

“I haven’t been fighting! It’s those girls—” Mary stuttered to a stop. “I mean, I fell down on some glass.” She pulled away. “It’s nothing,” she snapped, flopping into one of the kitchen chairs.

“It was that Cissy, wasn’t it?” Janet’s voice was grim. “I have half a mind to call her father. It’s a disgrace, the daughter of the chief of police acting like that.”

Mary’s anger was gone, leaving behind only a dull feeling of despair. “It wouldn’t make any difference if you did tell him. He wouldn’t do anything. She gets it from him.”

Sitting down at the small kitchen table, Janet closed her eyes and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “You’re right,” she sighed. “Cissy does get her attitude from her father. He’s a racist and a bigot who should never have been allowed to hold a public office. That’s part of the reason I was sent here, you know—to try to get enough evidence to get him removed from office.”

Mary’s aunt worked for the FBI, though everyone in the town thought Janet was just a clerk in the circuit court. There had been rumors of corruption for some time now in the small Southern town where they lived, but they were just that—rumors. People who had evidence against the police for abuse were too afraid to testify. Desperate, the Bureau had finally decided to place one of their own people inside the town. Janet Two Dogs had volunteered, arguing that she was the best choice. As an American Indian and a woman, she was a double minority, with a greater opportunity to experience firsthand some of the abuse that the FBI suspected was instigated by the chief of police. That was before the accident, though.

“I know,” Mary replied in a small voice, picking at the paper towel wrapped around her hand. “You just never figured on having me here to complicate things.”

“Mary.” Janet got up and walked around to where the girl sat. “You aren’t a complication, sweetie. You’re my niece, and I love you.”

Mary left off worrying the paper towel to glance up at her aunt. “I love you too. I just wish—” She broke off, tears threatening again.

“I know. I wish too.” Janet turned away, looking out the small window over the sink, “I’ve been thinking, Mary ...”

Mary knew that tone. It was the one adults used when a Decision Had Been Reached. She sighed. What now?

“I’ve been thinking,” Janet repeated. “I’m going to send you to Grannie’s for the rest of the summer. Things are heating up here, and I don’t want you in danger. This thing with Cissy is the last straw.” She turned back to look at Mary, face firm. “You’re going to the Reservation.”

Mary stared in disbelief. “The rez? You have to be joking!”

Janet shook her head. “No joke. It’s the safest place for you right now.”

“I don’t know anybody there! That woman’s not even my real Grannie!”

Janet frowned. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. She may not be your real grandmother, but she chose the job. She and your grandmother were best friends—they each agreed to step in for the other if needed. You’ll be welcome there!”

“You just don’t want the bother of having me around.” Mary closed her eyes, feeling desolate. First losing her folks, now her aunt was shuttling her off to somebody not even related to her.

Swiftly Janet came to kneel next to her. “That is not true!” She placed an arm around Mary’s shoulders, her voice breaking as she spoke. “Your dad was my brother. I loved him dearly. And I love you just as

much. Too much to put you in any danger.”

“If you love me, then don’t send me away!” Mary begged, turning to face her aunt. “I won’t fight anymore!”

“Honey—”

I’m not afraid of these bigots! Just let me stay with you. I don’t want to go to another strange place where I don’t know anyone. It was hard enough coming here!”

For a moment, Mary thought she’d swayed her aunt. Then Janet’s gaze fell on Mary’s battered hand, where the blood had begun to seep through the makeshift bandage covering it. Her lips tightened and she stood. “I’m not discussing it any more. You’re going to Fort Belknap, and that’s that.”

Too angry and hurt to speak, Mary fled to her room. She didn’t hear Janet’s anguished words, “I’m the one that’s afraid, honey. I can’t lose you too.”

CHAPTER TWO

STILL IN THE HABIT OF WAKING EARLY FOR SCHOOL, MARY LAY IN BED

listening to her aunt make coffee. Usually, she got up and joined Janet for a cup, the two of them watching the morning news in companionable silence, but this morning Mary had no desire to see her aunt. She still felt betrayed and angry at being too young to have a voice in her own future. Mom and Dad would never have sent me there!

Thinking of her parents filled Mary with a terrible sadness. She listened to the rattle of the pipes as Janet started her shower, concentrating on the noise in an attempt to chase away the tears that trembled and blink away.

A short time later, Mary heard the side door open and close, then the burr of the car starting. Janet was leaving for work. Safe from another confrontation, Mary got up and padded into the kitchen to get herself a cup of coffee.

Coffee wasn’t something her folks had ever let her drink. She felt a twinge of guilt lacing the dark liquid liberally with cream and sugar, but she’d quickly become addicted to her morning fuel so pushed the feeling away as she did every morning.

Sipping at the coffee, Mary sighed with pleasure. She carried the cup with her into the living room and plopped sideways into one of the overstuffed chairs, her legs hanging over the chair arm.

Watching the news was no fun without her aunt, so Mary didn’t turn the television on, choosing instead to stare out the window, wondering why in the world anyone would choose to live in Georgia. It was hot and muggy, with creepy bugs she’d never seen before, and though she had yet to experience winter, everyone said that it never snowed. What was winter without snow?

Outside, the little boy that lived next door was riding his trike, furiously pedaling back and forth from the sidewalk in front of his house to the end of the sidewalk in front Mary’s house.

Mary stood and went to the window, watching the boy zoom back and forth, his short blond hair fluttering in the self-created breeze. She reached up and toyed with a piece of her own hair—short, bone straight, and a deep, inky black, another thing that marked her as an outsider. Most of the girls in town seemed to favor long hair, and definitely, nobody had hair like hers, so black it had a bluish sheen.

Turning from the window, Mary wondered what she would do to fill the hours that stretched out before her. Stretching, she listened to her back crack, and then drank down the last of her coffee, abruptly deciding to go back to the library.

I should pay for the books that got damaged yesterday, at least that way I can take them to Montana with me. Mary wrinkled her nose, realizing her decision was a form of capitulation but unable to see a way around her aunt’s decision. Besides, she thought, I don’t know if there’s a library on the rez and without something to read, I’ll go stir crazy!

That train of thought led to wondering about the rez in general. She knew next to nothing about the place, except for the fact that both her parents had been born there. Now, curiosity niggled at her. Maybe I can look up Fort Belknap on the library's Internet connection.

Heading into her room to get her clothes prior to taking her shower, Mary thought about how weird life was. Before coming to live with Janet, she'd never thought one way or another about being Sioux—she'd always been just Mary. Now look at you, she thought wryly, going to research your roots! Next you'll be joining a genealogy group. An image of herself dressed in old lady clothes, drinking tea, and poring over dusty archives made her giggle.

After a quick shower, she grabbed her money and the books and headed outside, where the day was already oppressively hot. In seconds, her shirt was clinging damply to her back. Mary shook her head and, turning right instead of left, started up the sidewalk. As she passed the neighbor's house, the little boy on the trike paused to stare at her, thrusting two fingers into his mouth.

"Hello," he mumbled around them.

Mary laughed and crouched beside the boy. Without thinking, she used her injured hand to steady herself. "Ow." She pulled the wounded hand up, cradling it against her chest.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"Yes, I did."

"What happened?"

"I fell on some glass."

The boy's eyes widened. "My mommy says, 'Be Careful Timmy. You Don't Want To Step On Glass!' all the time when I run outside with no shoes on."

Mary laughed again. "You should be careful. Your mommy knows what she's talking about."

"Mom is pretty smart," said a new, deeper voice.

Mary looked up but the sun was directly behind the speaker's face, making it impossible for her to make out his features. She stood awkwardly.

"Hi. I've seen you around school. My name's Steve Shield. I see you've already met Sprout here." The boy stuck out his hand.

Mary vaguely recognized him as one of the guys from school. He was a senior, but she'd never had anything to do with him. "Uh, hi. I would shake but ..." She gestured with her bandaged hand.

Steve grinned self-consciously, dropping his hand. Fair cheeks stained red, he shook his head. "Sorry. Silly of me. I heard Timmy talking to you about it, too."

Smiling tentatively in return, Mary bent down again to say goodbye to Timmy, who had been listening solemnly, little head swiveling back and forth.

"I'll see you later Timmy. It was nice meeting you."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to the library."

He nodded. "I know what that is. That's where there are lots of books. And mommy says 'Timmy, You Have To Be Quiet And Not Run In the Liberry.' "

"Right." Mary laughed, straightening. She looked at Steve. "Well, I guess I'll see you later."

"Hey" —Steve turned a little rosier—"I was going to the library, too." He shrugged again, affecting a nonchalant air. "I could walk with you, if you don't mind."

"Uh, sure," Mary said. "I don't care." She could feel her own face begin to burn.

"It'd be kinda silly, both of us walking down there on the same sidewalk, just ignoring each other," Steve grinned and ruffled his brother's hair. "See you later, Trouble."

"Bye Steve! Bye Mary!" Timmy returned to the task of racing up and down the sidewalk.

Shifting her books, Mary swallowed and looked away, feeling a little awkward. She was startled to feel the books eased from her grasp.

“Hey!”

“Sorry,” Steve replied with a serious expression. “My Daddy’d have my hide if he saw me walking with a girl who was carrying a load and I had empty arms. He’d say I was being ungentlemanly.”

Mary frowned, but let him keep the books. They walked for a time in silence.

“So, where are you from? I’ve seen you around school, but never had a chance to talk to you.”

“I’m from New York,” she said, her voice flat. She didn’t want to talk about where she was from or why she was here. That would lead to—Mary swallowed hard, pushing the thoughts away.

“New York City?” he asked.

At Mary’s nod, Steve grew animated. “Man, are you lucky! I’ve always wanted to live somewhere like that. Instead,” he waved his hand, encompassing the area around them, “I’ve been stuck here—in Podunk, Georgia ... better known as Peachtree.” His face looked determined. “But soon I will. I’m going away to college in the fall. My folks promised.”

“It sounds like you’re looking forward to it.” Mary slid a sideways glance at him just as he looked at her questioningly.

“Is that where your folks are? In New York?” he asked.

The familiar tightness returned to Mary’s chest, replacing the small flame of happiness that had been kindled. Without answering, she sped up a little, wishing the library would come into view.

“Hey, wait up!” Steve trotted to catch up to her. “What’s wrong? Did I do something?” He sounded honestly perplexed and Mary took a deep breath. He didn’t know, she told herself.

“My parents are dead,” she blurted, surprising herself. “They were killed in a car wreck on their way to perform in a concert.” Pausing, she stared down at her feet. “They were musicians.”

Mary closed her eyes, returning once more to those long ago afternoons when her parents had played for fun, for each other and Mary. She let the haunting music wash over her for an instant before pushing the memory away and slamming the door on it, afraid she would use it all up. And without even the memory of her parents ... She shuddered.

Steve’s hand came to rest on her shoulder. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“The only reason I wasn’t with them was because I had the flu.” She opened her eyes and stared ahead, but instead of seeing the tree-lined street with its quaint homes behind white picket fences, Mary saw her mother, leaning down to kiss her goodbye.

Her lips had been cool against Mary’s feverish cheek. Unconsciously, the girl raised a hand to her face. “I always went with them. Always. My mom came in to say goodbye and my throat was so sore, I didn’t even answer. She must have told my dad not to bother me, because he never came in.” Now she looked at Steve through tear blurred eyes. “I didn’t say goodbye,” she repeated.

“Oh man,” Steve breathed. He took a hold of her arm and gently pulled her off the sidewalk and under a big oak that stood near, its branches low enough that it hid them from view of the street. Then he dug in his pocket and held out a neatly folded handkerchief.

Mary took it without thinking, scrubbing at her eyes. “Some drunk was driving down the wrong side of the road,” she spit the words out. “He plowed right into them, and then just drove off. The only reason he was even caught was that he ran into a light pole a block away. I wish he’d killed himself, but he was fine.” Mary turned and beat her fists against the unyielding bark of the tree. “That jerk was fine! He killed my parents and walked away without a scratch! It’s not fair.” Her voice rose until she was screaming. “It’s not fair! I didn’t even get to say goodbye!”

“Hey ... hey.” Mary felt Steve cup his hands around hers, stilling the blows against the oak that had left her hands raw. He turned her away from the tree and gathered her in a hug. “It’s okay.”

Clumsily, he patted her back. “They knew you were sick. I bet they’d be more upset about you still beating yourself up about this. You need to let it go. For their sakes.”

Mary felt the dam of emotion break inside of her. All the tears that had been pent up inside of her for so

long came flooding out. She cried until she felt utterly empty, drained of everything. Finally she pulled away, and wiped her eyes a final time on the cloth. She held up the hankie, laughing weakly. "I won't give this back now," she said. "I seriously have to wash it first." She was surprised that she wasn't embarrassed, odd considering she'd just had a complete breakdown in front of a virtual stranger. Instead, she'd felt safe.

Steve poked at the sodden handkerchief dangling from Mary's hand and wrinkled his nose. "You know what? You're right—it does need a touch of laundering. Despite what my daddy'd say about being a gentleman, I think I'll let you handle that job."

They both laughed and Mary realized why she wasn't embarrassed: Steve wasn't acting like her crying had been a big deal. 'It happened, it was over, move on' seemed to be his attitude. She grinned tucking the hankie in her pocket. She felt suddenly and absurdly happy.

"Deal." She leaned closer to him and whispered. "And I promise not to tell your dad."

Laughing, he pulled her back out from under the tree and they headed toward the library, Mary poked Steve in the arm. "Who walks around with a clean hankie these days? I thought only old ladies did that."

"That would be my mama's influence. She's as old-fashioned as my daddy in her way, and one of her rules is to always make sure to have a clean handkerchief in your pocket before leaving the house." He shook his head. "I'm pretty sure between the two of them I'm doomed."

"Doomed to being a gentleman, you mean?" Mary smiled. "There are worse things to be, trust me."

"I guess." Steve bowed and then held out an arm. "May I escort you to the library, madam?"

Fluttering her lashes, Mary took the arm. Affecting a drawl, she said, "Why thank you sir!"

They joked and laughed the rest of the way.

CHAPTER THREE

THE AIR INSIDE THE LIBRARY FELT LIKE HEAVEN. Mary grasped the collar of her tee shirt and fanned it back and forth, allowing the cool air to dry her sweatdampened torso. She turned to Steve and gently removed the books from his arms. "I need to go and pay for these."

"Okay. I'm gonna cruise around a little, try and find something to read." The boy headed off into the towering bookshelves.

Mary watched him for a few seconds with a smile, and then went to the front desk. "Hi. I checked these out yesterday, but they got damaged. I'd like to pay for them." Mary placed the books on the counter. The librarian was an older woman with her hair pulled back in a long gray ponytail secured with a plain rubber band. With no make-up, in jeans, sandals, and big gauzy shirt, with chunky earrings dangling from her ears, she was the epitome of a "flower-child." Mary remembered her from previous visits as being pleasant, if a little distracted—almost as if she were reading a book in her head all the time. Now though, her gaze sharpened as she looked at Mary. "Personal responsibility," she said. "I like that." The woman pulled the books across the desk toward her and ruffled the pages. "Most kids your age would just toss them into the book drop and claim they didn't know a thing about the damage." She frowned. "Hmm. The spine on this one is cracked. And there's a stain on this cover." Her gaze rested briefly on Mary's bandaged hand, resting on the counter. "Blood?"

"Uh, yeah." Mary pulled her hand back down by her side, not wanting to talk about it.

The librarian didn't pursue it. She merely raised her eyebrows before consulting her computer. "These were due to be weeded out soon. Let's say ... five dollars for both?"

"That's great!" Mary was relieved as she pulled her wallet out of her back pocket, removing a five. It would have eaten up most off her ready cash to pay the full price for the books. Handing over the money, she asked, "Would it be okay if I took the books? I'm going away for the summer, and it will give me

something to read.”

“Sure. If you left them here, they’d end up in the trash anyway.” Pushing the books back to Mary, the woman smiled. “I’m Willow Sanborn, by the way.”

“Mary—”

“Two Dogs. Right, I issued you your card, remember?” Willow winked.

Feeling silly, Mary nodded. “Right, you did.”

The phone next to the computer began to ring. Willow glanced at the display and sighed. “That’s Mr. Harvey again. He likes to use the microfiche, but needs help loading and unloading the film.” She picked up the phone. “Yes, Manny. I’ll be right there.” Another wink and the woman hurried away.

I wonder if there’s a fee to use the Internet here? Mary wondered. She decided to wait and ask Willow when she returned, a little surprised at how much she was looking forward to finding out about the rez.

“Ewww. I didn’t think they let dogs in the library.” From behind Mary came a malicious giggle and she felt her heart sink. Turning, she faced Cissy and Amber. Amber at least, had the grace to look uncomfortable.

“Give it a rest Cissy,” Amber hissed, tugging at her friend’s arm.

Cissy pulled away, ignoring her friend. “Can you even read, Indian Girl?”

“Hey, Cissy. Hey, Amber. What’s going on?” Steve walked up.

Cissy’s eyes widened and the hateful smirk on her face morphed into a simper. “Steve Shields. Amber and I were just talking about you!”

“Were you?” Steve’s voice was pleasant, but noncommittal. Glancing at Mary, Steve asked, “Are you all done?”

Mary nodded wordlessly. Steve reached over and took the books from her again as the two girls watched, open-mouthed.

“You ... you two are together?” Cissy’s face had gone pale under her tan.

“Why?” Steve asked.

“Never mind!” she snapped, her face ugly again. “It’s none of my business who you hang around with.”

Now it was Cissy who grabbed at her friend’s arm. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Steve watched them disappear into the shelves, Cissy flouncing, Amber being tugged reluctantly along.

“That is one spoiled girl. Just because her daddy is the chief of police, she thinks she can treat people like dirt. Amber isn’t too bad, just silly, and she lets Cissy do too much of her thinking for her. Her brother is cool, though. He graduated last year. Goes to Cal Tech now.”

Mary barely heard the words, too busy processing the fact that Steve had actually stood up for her. Maybe everybody around here didn’t suck after all. She peeped up to find him studying her.

“You didn’t think I would just let them run you into the ground, did you?” His eyes widened. “Oh my gosh, you did!” He sounded amazed. “My Lord, we must have given you a really bad taste in your mouth.” Guiding Mary toward the door, Steve opened it, gesturing for Mary to walk out first. “There are a few jerks here, just like everywhere. In Cissy’s case, the bad behavior comes from her father. He’s pretty bad.”

Outside, it seemed hotter than before, if that were possible. Heat shimmers danced over the asphalt and the air slapped down on Mary’s exposed skin like a soggy, woolen blanket.

“I’ve heard he’s a racist.” Mary looked around, wondering how anyone had the energy to do anything in such brutal heat. She had a vision of men in hoods and sheets dancing around a burning cross, all of them passing out from heat stroke and giggled to herself.

“He is.” Steve’s voice was short and Mary looked at him. He was sending off a weird vibe suddenly.

Without thinking, Mary said, “My aunt works for him.”

Steve didn’t answer. The silence between them grew more awkward and they didn’t speak again until they reached the sidewalk in front of Steve’s house. Timmy was nowhere to be seen. Probably inside,

Mary thought wistfully, where there's air conditioning. Instead of saying goodbye, Steve hesitated, hands thrust into his pockets, jingling the change there. Casting a longing look at her own air conditioned house, Mary said, "Thanks for walking with me. Do you want to come over for awhile, maybe get something to eat?" "No, I can't. Mom wants me to keep an eye on Timmy while she runs to the store." He rattled the change again, looking down. Finally, taking a deep breath, he said, "Mary, does your aunt have to work for the chief of police? I mean, there are other places in town that'd hire her." Mary frowned, unsure of how to answer. Janet had cautioned her to tell no one of her real reason for being in the small town and while she felt she could trust Steve, she wasn't comfortable ignoring her aunt's request. Besides, she reminded herself, you could be wrong about him. She decided to play it safe, countering with a question of her own. "What's the problem with her working there?" There was a pause. Mary watched Steve struggle with himself. He knows something, she thought. What is it? But whatever he knew, Steve wasn't going to share it today. "Nothing," he sighed, shaking his head, "nothing." He handed her books back to her. "I better go." Taking the books, Mary watched as Steve went inside. The heat wasn't as oppressive as it had been a few minutes ago she realized, rubbing at the gooseflesh on her arms. But she knew the cold had nothing to do with the temperature outside and everything to do with what Steve had left unsaid.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHY IS JANET HOME? Mary thought, spying her aunt's car pulled up next to the house in the driveway. It was about lunchtime, but she didn't usually come home for lunch. Is something wrong? Hurrying up the steps, she opened the door and went inside, only pausing long enough to toss her books on the kitchen table before calling, "Janet?" "I'm in here." Janet's voice sounded muffled. Going into the living room, Mary gasped. Janet sat on the sofa, holding a cloth to the side of her face. She'd obviously been crying. "What happened?" she cried, kneeling in front of her aunt, trying to see under the cloth. "I'm fine." "You aren't fine! You're hurt! What happened?" "I said, I'm fine." Janet wouldn't meet Mary's eyes. A queer fluttering sensation started in Mary's stomach. She tugged hard on the cloth, finally pulling it away from her aunt's face to expose a livid bruise, in the center of which was a nasty looking gash. "What happened?" Mary's voice was controlled but inside she was frantic. Oh god, please don't let anything bad happen to Aunt Janet! She's all I have left! "Officially?" Janet's laugh was bitter. "I fell in the records room and hit my cheek on the filing cabinet." "And unofficially?" Mary couldn't stop staring at the injury. Janet took the cloth back and covered the bruise again. "It was the chief of police." Janet's eyes filled with furious tears. "That bastard! He made a pass at me. I slapped his face, and he pushed me. I did fall— into the file cabinets." "Well, that's that, right? You've got your evidence!" Excited now, Mary jumped up, squeezing her hands together. "We can leave! We can leave right now!" She leaned down, tugging on Janet's arm. "Come on! There's no reason for you to stay any longer!" "No, Mary." Janet pulled her arm away. "It doesn't work like that. There was no one else around. Any

halfway decent attorney would just tear that to shreds. Claim I could have done the injury myself, and then used it to entrap him.”

“But ...you wouldn’t do that. You’d never lie to send someone to jail. It’s not fair.” Mary sounded childlike, even to herself, and she knew she wasn’t going to win. Her shoulders slumped.

“You’re right, Mary. I wouldn’t lie—not even to send somebody like him to jail. And it’s not fair, but we both know life often isn’t, don’t we?” Janet took a deep breath. “There’s something else.”

“What?”

“I made your plane reservation. I’m sorry. You have to leave in the morning for the rez.”

“All right,” Mary replied dully, the fight gone out of her. “I guess I leave for the rez in the morning.”

CHAPTER FIVE

MARY WENT TO HER ROOM AND STAYED THERE, CALLING THROUGH THE

bedroom door that she wasn’t hungry when her aunt offered to make her a sandwich.

I want to go back home to New York! I miss my friends, and the ice cream from O’Malley’s on Sullivan Street. I miss real pizza, and the noise of the city! Mary slumped on her bed, staring out into the darkened back yard.

“I miss the noise,” she whispered. “Even the cab drivers, honking and yelling at everyone. But mostly ...” Mary turned away from the window, where the gentle sound of crickets drifted through the screen and lay down in her bed, staring blindly at the wall. “Mostly, I miss my folks.”

She must have cried herself to sleep. Sometime later Mary started awake, dripping with sweat, and peered at the clock next to her bed. “After midnight,” she mumbled before going to the kitchen for something to drink.

Gulping down the water, Mary realized it was hot everywhere in the house. She went to the wall where the switch for the AC was located and flicked it back and forth several times to no avail.

“Stupid house. Stupid Georgia and its stupid heat!” she whispered viciously. She felt like punching the wall, but knew the noise would waken her aunt and she didn’t feel up to any questions.

Grinding her teeth, Mary slipped out into the backyard, hoping for a cool breeze. Climbing onto the picnic table, she stretched out, staring up at the stars.

Plucking at the rough wood under her fingers, Mary remembered when Janet first got the table. She’d made such a fuss, talking about how great it would be to eat outside every night. That was before the full force of a Georgia summer impressed itself upon them—no one ate outside by choice. It was simply too hot. Now Mary listened to the cicadas, their eerie wailing interspersed with crickets chirruping, and wondered again what it would be like on the reservation. Would it be hot and humid like it was here? I wonder if there’ll be anybody my age there and if there are, will I get along with them? It’d be nice to have a friend again, she mused.

Mary searched out the Big and Little Dippers. She felt a special affinity to the star groupings; they reminded her of her father, who’d shown them to her so many years ago. There’d been a blackout and everyone in their building had gone up to the roof for an impromptu party. Mary had been afraid of the unaccustomed darkness, but her father had held her, soothing away the fear by showing her the stars, saying they made light too. He’d traced the Dippers, calling them Mother Bear and her Child. She swallowed hard. They’ll be at the rez too, she told herself, taking comfort from the thought.

Somewhere off in the distance a car coughed and spit, the gunfire-like sound out of place amidst the quiet country noises. Overhead, the drone of a plane made her think of heaven—was heaven somewhere up there, over the plane, over the stars? Was that where her folks were?

Mary wondered if her folks could see her and if Steve had been right. Did they really understand that she hadn’t been a bad daughter? That she had just been sick? She felt the familiar ache in her throat and chest.

Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes, running down to fill her ears, tickling her into sitting up. Wiping at her face, Mary froze when she saw something moving in the darkness.

“Mary?”

It was Steve. Letting her breath out in relief, she wiped away the last of her tears and cleared her throat.

“Yes. It’s me.” She moved over so he could sit next to her.

He must have just showered, she thought, smelling the soap and dampness.

“I leave tomorrow,” she said.

“What?” He sounded startled.

She lay back, scooting down, so she could rest her legs comfortably on the bench. “Yeah. My aunt wants me to visit the rez.”

“The rez?”

“The reservation. My people are Sioux–Assiniboin Sioux. My parents were born there. I have some relatives who still live there.” She gave him a sideways glance. “She thinks it will be safer there for me.”

Steve paused before saying carefully, “She might be right.”

Mary sat up. “Steve, what are you not saying?” Her voice sharpened. “If you know something, you need to tell me. My aunt’s still going to be here, after all.”

Steve picked up her hand, holding it loosely. “Mary, there’s more going on here than you realize.”

“Tell me about it,” she muttered.

“Mary—”

Mary pulled her hand from Steve’s and jumped off the table, facing him. “Steve Shields, I’m leaving. My aunt is sending me away because she thinks it might be too dangerous for me to stay here. If you know something, and you aren’t saying, for whatever reason, I don’t want to have anything else to do with you.” Blinking back tears again, she continued, “I thought we were friends. Friends trust each other.”

“We are friends! At least, I’d like us to be.” Taking a deep breath, Steve seemed to come to a decision.

“Mary, if anyone knew I was saying this to you, I’d be as good as dead.”

Mary froze. “You mean like ‘killed’?”

“I’ve lived in this town my whole life,” he replied quietly, ignoring the question. “I’ve known the chief of police and his friends since before I could talk.” At that moment, a stray headlight from a turning car on the street caught him, giving Mary a brief snapshot of his face. In that momentary flash, he looked ancient, carved deep with lines of worry. “You know how Cissy feels, and how I told you that she gets views about people from her father?”

She nodded.

“Well, that wasn’t just something I guessed at. There’s a group of men in this town” —Steve paused, and then continued in a lower voice, as if he were afraid of being overheard—“this group, they make the KKK look like boy scouts. I don’t know if the chief of police started it, or if he just inherited his post as “leader” from somebody else, but they’re dangerous, Mary. They don’t like anyone different from them—not different religiously, not different in the way they look.”

He gave a harsh laugh that caught in his throat, turning into a cough. “Haven’t you noticed, Mary, there aren’t any minorities here? No blacks, no Hispanics. No one that isn’t white? There aren’t even any Catholics here!”

Mary crept back to the table to sit beside Steve, and this time it was her hand that found his. “I did notice that. It’d be hard not to, since I stick out like a sore thumb.”

“I had a friend,” he said. “He was Black—his name was Steve, too. Steve Wilson. His folks were down from Abermarle way. His daddy was a preacher.” His hand squeezed hers tightly once. “He must’ve thought he was another Martin Luther King or something, because he’d heard about the town, and wanted to force the issue. Mr. Wilson thought no one was evil enough to kill these days. He thought there’d be some name calling, at worst maybe a cross burned in the yard.”

There was silence. Even the insects seemed to be holding their breath— nothing stirred, not even a breeze ruffled the trees.

“What happened?” Mary finally asked.

A drop of moisture fell on their clasped hands. Steve was crying, Mary realized.

“They died. All of them,” he said, his voice a croak. “Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, Steve’s two little sisters—they were twins. And,” —a gulp— “and Steve.”

“How?” Mary was aghast. People being killed in this day and age because they were different? It didn’t seem possible.

“A fire. They said it was an accident, but I knew better. I heard some guys bragging about how they’d “cleansed” the town again. They didn’t know I could hear them.” Steve pulled his hand from hers and wiped his eyes. “I used to clean up in one of the bars in town twice a week. They’d come in while I was taking out some trash and didn’t hear me come back in. It freaked me out so bad, Mary. I didn’t know what to do, so I went back outside real quietly, and then came back in again, making a lot of noise this time. They shut up quick, but I think they were suspicious of me for a long time after that.”

“You’ve never told anyone?”

“Who could I tell? And if I did, then what? They’d just shut me up and probably whoever I told, too. And there’s something else—probably the biggest reason why I couldn’t tell anyone.” He turned toward her.

“One of the guys sitting in the bar bragging? One of them was the chief of police.”

CHAPTER SIX

MARY COULDN’T SLEEP AFTER STEVE LEFT. She waited in agony until Janet’s alarm went off, practically wearing a hole in the carpet with pacing back and forth, then pounced when Janet came out for coffee, quickly relating what Steve had told her.

Janet brushed away her talk. “Mary, I know this.” She pulled Mary over to the sofa, where she forced her to sit. “Why do you think it’s so very important that I stay here and try and finish this job?”

“But—”

“But nothing! This is my job. Do you think the killers of those children should go unpunished?”

Mary bowed her head. There was no way to answer that question that would allow Janet an out. The chief of police and those horrible men should pay, but why did it have to be Janet who tried to bring justice here? Why did she have to be in danger?

Janet cupped one hand under Mary’s chin, gently bringing her face up. “Our people are warriors. Do you know what the men used to shout before going into battle?”

Mary shook her head. She didn’t care about that old stuff. She cared about the here and now—about keeping Janet safe.

“It’s a good day to die,” Janet said. “That’s what they said.” She smiled. “We all die eventually. You know that, better than me, I think. If I die here, in this place, while trying to bring those evil men to justice, I’m okay with that. I’m okay with that because I think that nobody should have to walk around afraid. If no one stands up to bullies, we all end up afraid. That’s no way to live and not the kind of world I want for you.”

Mary looked at Janet, so strong and determined. So fearless. It made her feel weak and cowardly. She turned away to get her bags.

Now, almost to the airport, they still hadn’t spoken—Janet seemed preoccupied with her thoughts and driving, while Mary was a whirl of anxiety, the worst of it lodged firmly in her stomach. She thought a time or two she was going to have to ask her aunt to pull over so she could throw up, but she gritted her teeth and each time the feeling subsided.

Janet parked the car and started to open her door, then paused, reaching down and grabbing her purse

from its resting place by Mary's feet instead. Opening it, she pulled out a cell phone, handing it to Mary. "I'm not sure of the reception you'll get out there. It's supposed to be a nationwide carrier though, so I assume it'll be okay." Flipping open the phone, she scrolled through the contacts. "See? There's the house phone, and there's my office ... and," this last was said with a sly wink at Mary, "I even put in the neighbor's number."

"Aunt Janet!" Face hot, Mary grabbed the phone and snapped it shut. "Thanks."

"What?" Janet's face looked totally innocent. "I thought, if you couldn't get in touch with me, you could call Mrs. Shield and that might ease your mind."

Opening her door instead of answering, Mary retreated to stand by the trunk of the car, hoping Janet would blame her flushed face on the heat.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PLANE RIDE WAS A LONG ONE, WITH A STOP AND PLANE CHANGE IN SALT

Lake City. This fact had caused Janet some concern.

"No talking to strangers—"

"Duh, Janet! I'm not a baby!" Mary had rolled her eyes.

"Hush and let me finish." Janet held up a hand, using her fingers to tick off the list. "No talking to strangers, no stopping for food—"

"What? But what if I'm hungry?"

"Your layover is only forty-six minutes. You won't have time to get anything to eat." She'd glared at her niece. "You won't starve. Just go from your plane to—tell me again your connecting flight."

With a long suffering sigh, Mary recited, "Delta flight 4500."

"And what do you do if you need help?"

"Ask a skycap."

"Maybe I should request that someone escort you." Janet frowned, looking worried, but the idea had horrified Mary.

"I am not a baby! Only little kids have to be escorted!" She'd crossed her arms. "I won't get on the plane if you do that to me."

They'd bickered back and forth for a time, with Janet eventually abandoning the notion of Mary being escorted between flights.

Now though, looking around the bustling airport, Mary was secretly glad that Janet had drilled the connecting flight information into her. She tucked her bag tightly under her arm and quickly found the counter for her flight and checked in, pleased to be allowed onto the plane right away.

Once seated, she dug in her bag for one of the damaged library books and tried to read, but the sleepless night caught up with her and she ended up dozing, instead.

She woke to the announcement that they were starting the landing approach. I hope I wasn't drooling, she thought. She wiped at her mouth, relieved to find it dry. She wondered who was going to meet her at the airport since Janet had mentioned that Grannie didn't drive.

Looking out the small window at the Billings airport, Mary listened to her fellow passengers murmur as they gathered their belongings.

Tiny airport compared to Atlanta and New York, mused the girl.

Another announcement by the pilot, this one reminding everyone to turn off their cell phones, reminded Mary that she now owned one. Reaching into her carry on, she rummaged around until she found it, then flipped the phone open and looking thoughtfully at the last number Janet had programmed in. She grinned a little, wondering if she'd have the nerve to actually call Steve, then shook her head and powered the

phone down, stuffing it back into her bag along with her book

Mary stood in the airport terminal, bags by her feet, waiting for someone to step out of the moderately sized crowd and claim her.

Now this could have been planned better, she thought, starting to feel cranky and wondering if she should call Janet.

Just then, a tall man with long black hair stepped forward, a big smile on his face. Like most of the men in the terminal, he wore a battered looking cowboy hat and jeans. “Hau! You must be Mary! You look just like your mother did when she was your age.”

Mary felt herself enveloped in a rib-crushing hug. Then she was released while the man held her at arm’s length, studying her. “A little of your dad too, around the eyes, I think.” The man grinned again. “I’m one of your uncles,” he said. “Frank Spotted Pony.”

“Pleased to meet you Mr. Spotted Pony,” Mary said, feeling a bit faint from the enthusiastic greeting. She’d never been a real touchy-feely kind of girl.

“No, no, no.” Frank wagged a finger in Mary’s face. “None of that mister nonsense. Just plain old Frank, or Uncle Frank if you feel like you have to stand on ceremony.” He bent down and grabbed her bags. “Is this everything?”

At her nod, he started toward the exit. “Don’t lose me. I’d hate to have to fight my through this mess again trying to find you,” he called over his shoulder.

Looking around at the “mess”, Mary smiled. This was nothing compared to a New York City sidewalk. It’s all relative, I guess, she thought.

“Come on!”

She hurried after Frank, caught by the familiar cadence of his voice. Memories of her parents rushed over her, of how sometimes after sharing a bottle of wine they would forget their clipped New York way of talking, falling instead into this same rhythmic way of using words. She found the fact that he sounded the same as her folks oddly comforting and she smiled, hurrying after him. Maybe being here wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Frank headed toward another area of the terminal, instead of toward the parking lot as Mary expected. Pausing at the arched door he’d hurried through, she noticed a sign with a small propeller-driven plane on it. Swallowing hard, Mary caught up with her new uncle. “Where are we going?”

Frank glanced over his shoulder, flashing his ready smile without slowing. “We have to take another plane. I have a small prop that will take us right to the Fort Belknap.”

Mary stopped. “You’re going to fly us there?”

“Come on, cinja,” he called, still not stopping. “Get a move on! People are waiting.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

MARY TIGHTENED HER SEAT BELT A THIRD TIME, FUSSING OVER THE BUCKLES,

taking deep breaths, and trying not to think about how incredibly small the plane was. Frank was doing something with the controls while speaking into his headset. Suddenly the small engines on either side of the plane thrummed to life, scaring a frightened squeak from Mary.

Frank smiled, then handed her a set of headphones as well. Mary examined the black headset for a moment, noting the small microphone curving out in front. She felt a tap on her shoulder and glanced at Frank, who was gesturing for her to put it on.

“Oh, okay,” she said, then grimaced, realizing he couldn’t hear her. Mary slipped the headset on, settling the black cushioned ear pieces securely over her ears, and immediately the noise went from an overwhelming distraction to a dull thrum more felt than heard.

Mary looked at Frank and frowned. His mouth was moving, but she couldn’t hear anything. He

gestured again and Mary shrugged helplessly, not understanding what he wanted her to do.

“Hold on,” Frank mouthed, and then leaned over, reaching toward the left side of her head, where he did something to one of the earpieces.

Suddenly, Mary’s ears were full of a different sort of noise. She realized it was Frank’s breathing.

“Sorry,” he said. “I should have shown you how to use your headphones first, but I’m not used to having a passenger.” His voice was quite clear, but had an alien, tinny quality.

“That’s okay,” Mary replied, a bit startled by the way her voice seemed to echo back at her, the words rolling around in her head. She was about to say something else, for the fun of listening, when she felt the plane lurch backward, as Frank angled the plane into position. Her delight was replaced by a sudden queasiness as she realized they were about to take off.

“Hang on!” Frank said but Mary needed no prompting; she was already clutching the armrests of her seat. The plane lurched forward before settling into a smooth motion, gathering speed.

Realizing her stomach wanted to stay on the runway behind them, Mary slammed her lids shut and pressed one hand against her midsection, praying she wouldn’t throw up. She felt terribly unprotected and was positive the plane wouldn’t be able to win its fight against gravity.

Tears leaked from under her tightly closed lids. Please let it be quick, she thought. At least I’ll be able to see my folks soon.

A gentle laugh sounded. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. Open your eyes and see the land of your people—land that is yours, too.”

Mary cracked one eye reluctantly and gasped, tears and thoughts of death evaporating. She’d had no idea they’d climbed so high in such a short amount of time.

“When did we get up here?” she demanded.

“While you were praying,” came the dry answer.

Far below them were rolling plains bisected by a sparkling river. How beautiful! She was delighted by the view and leaned over Frank, ignoring his amusement. From his side, Mary could see what she guessed were mountains, surrounded by sky that was such a deep blue that it looked like a picture from a magazine.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Frank sounded proud, as if he alone were responsible for the gorgeous landscape.

“Oh my gosh, yes!”

Now that she’d gotten over her fear, Mary couldn’t get enough, drinking in the sights, marveling at how small everything looked. It looks like a quilt, she thought. Like a big blanket some giant threw down and forgot. A tiny ribbon snaked over the endless plains below her; Mary frowned at it for a minute before realizing it must be a road. A road with no cars. How weird! Finally, she turned back to Frank. “It looks so different from up here, doesn’t it?”

“It does. I’ve always loved being up here,” Frank leaned toward Mary, looking across her, pointing out the window on her side. “Look, cinja!”

Turning, Mary looked down and gasped. “Are those buffalo?”

“They are.”

“I thought they were extinct or something.”

“Not yet,” Frank sounded grim. “But they almost were, thanks to greedy hunters and developers. But things are changing. Now there are breeding programs, land set aside for them. We will never see the great herds our ancestors hunted, but some is better than none.”

The look on his face made Mary uncomfortable. She liked him better when he was cheerful and wished they hadn’t seen the great shaggy beasts that at this height looked like brown dots. In an effort to distract him, Mary asked, “What did that mean? That word you called me?”

“What? Cinja?”

“Yeah.”

Frank smiled again. "It means girl."

"Is that Indian language?"

"Not Indian, Nakota. Nakota is the name of our language." Shooting Mary a puzzled look, Frank asked, "Didn't your folks teach you that?"

Mary clenched her hands in her lap and stared down, willing the anger away. He didn't know anything about her parents. It wouldn't be too smart to get into an argument with the one person she knew here. And besides, a small voice mocked, he's right, isn't he? They didn't teach you anything at all about being Sioux.

Closing her eyes a moment, Mary swallowed hard and then, ignoring the question, she said, "Nakota, then. I'd like to learn it." She glanced at Frank, trying to smile. "What's the Nakota word for uncle?"

"Atena."

She tried the word a few times, Frank correcting her until she had it right. Pleased, her anger and discomfort gone, she began to pester him for more words, learning how to say grandmother: "Not Grannie," Frank said with a laugh. "That's wasin oyade talk. She's your mikusi."

The next half hour was filled with hoots of laughter from Frank and giggles from Mary at her pronunciation, which the girl had to admit was pretty awful.

Finally, Frank said, "Okay. I need to concentrate now. Time to land this bird."

Mary settled back, the happy feeling replaced by a small frisson of anxiety as she wondered what her grannie, no, that was wrong—her mikusi, would be like. Will she like me?

The plane dipped lower and lower. The feeling in her stomach was the same as the one she'd experienced on roller coasters in the past: that almost queasy sensation of tickling. Again, she laid a quieting hand on her midsection and looked out the window, fighting back the fear that threatened to return. The ground came closer and closer and just when it seemed to Mary that there was bound to be a crash, she felt the wheels touch the runway and the small craft bounced a few times before settling into a speeding roll.

Glancing at Frank, Mary guessed that this was a normal landing; sure, he seemed to be concentrating, but he didn't seem to be worried. As Mary watched, he applied the brakes and the plane slowed, finally rumbling to a halt close to a small building.

It was the only structure around, Mary noted, unbuckling her seatbelt. She swallowed nervously, noticing the small group of people clustered under the tinroofed porch attached to the front of the building. My people, Mary thought, the words sounding odd in her mind. Before, her people had been her parents and later, her aunt, but now the words meant something totally different.

She took a deep breath and pulled off the headphones as Frank shut down the engines. He hopped out and walked around the plane, opening her door and reaching out to help her down.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered, giving her hand a squeeze before releasing it. She smiled back, grateful for the attempt at reassurance, even if it didn't do any good.

Frank went to the small luggage compartment on the side of the plane, leaving Mary to stand awkwardly on the tarmac. The day had evidently been a hot one, residual heat crept up through Mary's thin soles and she shifted uncomfortably as the waiting people came toward her. They chattered to one another in Nakota, smiling at the girl; the noise sounded like doves cooing.

A few of the women had on dresses, but most wore jeans, like Frank. All of the people had long hair, some in braids, some loose, blowing free in the warm breeze.

Mary turned her face toward the wind, letting it push her short hair off her face and cool the nape of her neck.

Then she was surrounded by women, the men hanging back, talking together in low tones. She felt her clothes being touched, and several of the women stroked her hair, clucking their tongues. They murmured and laughed, addressing her in Nakota until Frank came back around with her bags. He uttered a short, flat sentence, and there was a pause. The women looked at each other, dismay plain in their faces. Then one

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