

Chapter Fifty-Three

William and the Valentine Nine got an early start on Wednesday morning, so that they arrived at Prairie Wind's home at 8:30. She had not told them where they were going today, but she did say that the trip would take about two hours, plus time for lunch on the way. Following her instructions, everyone had ordered a take-out sandwich at the Coachlight Café on Tuesday evening, and a bottle of juice, so that they could have a roadside picnic before they reached wherever it was they were going.

Prairie Wind and Richard, as well as their parents, seemed unusually quiet when their guests arrived. They came out the door into the front yard, but there were no morning smiles, no bright greetings, no invitation to come in for a cup of coffee. Clearly there was something on their minds . . . which they did not want to talk about.

And then—just before the group got back into the van—Prairie Wind did something very mysterious.

From a leather pouch with beadwork on it, she took out, one by one, a red bandana, brand new, neatly folded into a square six inches by six, and gave it to each member of her wedding party.

She said to William, "Hold this in your hand."

She said to Arava, "Hold this in your hand."

She said to Jennifer, "Hold this in your hand."

And so to Claire, to Erik, to Teresa, to Bruce, to Natasha, and to George.

Then she gave a red bandana to her brother Richard, and took one out for herself. She handed the leather pouch to her father.

She explained to her curious guests, "While we are riding in the van, I would like you to think about the most happy events in your life. They may be small moments, they may be special days, they may be important milestones in your life. Imagine that you are weaving all those happy events into the fabric of your red bandana. It will hold the greatest moments of happiness that you have ever known."

She paused, looked for a moment at Richard, then she said quietly, "Let's go."

Guided by Prairie Wind's directions, William drove out of Rosebud and followed Route 7 northwest for about eight miles, then turned left onto Route 18, heading west. She told him, "We'll stay on 18 for sixty miles, about an hour."

William nodded, “All right.” He had the red bandana in his left hand, wrapped around the wheel while he drove.

The day was cool and clear, with an overcast sky. The vast rolling prairie stretched ahead, brown grass and dry earth all the way to the horizon. He could cruise while he thought about a family camping trip when he was about twelve and Jennifer was about eight, on a lake in the Adirondack Park north of Syracuse. The four of them had paddled in with all their gear in two canoes. They set up their wall tents—old fashioned, green canvas, Army surplus tents—near a little bay that was perfect for swimming. He remembered . . .

The van was quiet while he drove, until he heard his mother, in the row of seats behind him, ask Prairie Wind in the navigator’s seat, “Can we talk with each other while we’re thinking?”

“Of course,” she said.

The van was soon filled with a low hum of voices, and occasional laughter, as people reminisced together about Old Times. William could hear his sister’s voice in the rear of the van, as she told Richard about a birthday party when she was ten, and her mother and father had given her a new red bicycle. “With a horn! Toot toot!”

After about an hour on the road, Prairie Wind asked William to pull off on the side, just before a small bridge. Then she turned around in her seat and told the group, “We’ll have lunch here. No picnic tables, so we’ll have to stand. But you can look down at a little creek which flows beneath the bridge.”

William pulled well off the road, then looked carefully up and down the busy highway before he opened his door and got out. The others got out of the van through the front door and sliding side door, stepping out on the prairie side. Each person—all eleven of them—held a red bandana.

While people ate their sandwiches—turkey and roast beef and egg salad—and drank their fruit juice still cold from the cooler in the rear of the van, they looked down from a grassy bank at the creek that shimmered silver-gray beneath the overcast sky. People talked quietly, sharing stories about skiing under the green and pink northern lights that rippled over the Arctic tundra. About snorkeling with a graceful turtle in the lagoon of a coral reef in Tahiti. About walking across the Brooklyn Bridge when a nearly full moon hovered ahead over the Manhattan skyline.

As they were getting ready to get back into the van, Prairie Wind reached her hand—a hand holding a red bandana—toward the shimmering water and told her guests, “This is Wounded Knee Creek.”

Then she opened the van door and climbed into the navigator’s seat.

Everyone in the van was silent now, except for Prairie Wind as she instructed William to turn right onto a road called Big Foot Trail, and soon after, to turn left onto Route 28 “for about nine miles.”

They passed a sign directing them toward “Wounded Knee Massacre Site.”

William understood. Before the wedding, Prairie Wind wanted him to know, wanted his family to know, wanted her best friends to know . . . who she was and where she was from. As she often said, Native Americans had a different sense of time. For her, the massacre at Wounded Knee was recent history.

Just past a post office set among a few scattered buildings, she directed William to turn right onto a dirt road that led to a parking lot with a couple of cars in it. He parked the van and everyone got out. No one said a word as they looked around at a broad flat sweep of land bordered by the creek, and at some sort of archway that led—they could see tombstones poking up above the brown grass—into what looked to be a cemetery.

Prairie Wind, holding her red bandana, led the group to the top of a slope looking down on the flat patch of land, covered with sparse brown grass. She swept her arm toward the barren land, the sacred land. “Here is where 356 Lakota people camped in the snow, sheltered by their tipis, on December 28, 1890. They were a band of 106 warriors and roughly 250 women and children. They had been brought here by a regiment of the United States 7th Cavalry, which intended to disarm the Lakotas on the following morning. During the evening, cavalry reinforcements arrived, with four Hotchkiss cannons. A total of 470 soldiers surrounded the Lokota encampment, with superior weapons, against a force of 106 warriors.

“The Lakota were exhausted and starving. Their leader, Chief Big Foot, lay sick with pneumonia in his tipi. Outside his tent, the Lakota had hung a white cloth, indicating a truce.

“Keep in mind that fourteen years earlier, in June of 1876, the U.S. 7th Cavalry, with a force of 700 troops, had been defeated at the Battle of the Little Bighorn by Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors. When the 7th Cavalry, now with fresh

troops, surrounded the Lakotas on the night of December 28, 1890, the soldiers were no doubt waiting for an opportunity to take their revenge.

“There was a further reason for military action against the Lakota. During the summer of 1890, a growing number of Native American tribes were engaged in a spiritual rite called the Ghost Dance. People would form a large circle and dance for hours, hoping to cleanse themselves spiritually, to meet relatives who had died, to stop the constant conflict with the White Man, and to bring peace, abundant food, and unity among all of the tribes. The Ghost Dance was an effort, a *peaceful* effort, to return to the time before their homelands were stolen, before the buffalo were slaughtered, before their spiritual way of life was devastated by the rapacious invaders who always wanted more and more and more of their land. And who wanted them dead, to the last Indian.

“Yes, the Native Americans, from many different tribes and cultures, danced to the drums for hours, slowly moving in a circle, with the hope that somehow, they could return to their ancient way of life.”

Prairie Wind paused, for even a hundred and twenty years later, she could still hear the drums, she could still feel that longing to return to something ancient and pure and strong.

“But the White settlers, forever arriving in growing numbers, did not see anything spiritual in the Ghost Dance. They suspected that it was a gathering of warriors, a making of plans, a preparation for a sudden attack on the hard-working Christians who had come to till the soil and tame the wilderness. They demanded protection from the U. S. Army, and the Army was glad to oblige.

“Tension was building. The fuse was short. On December 15, 1890, only two weeks before the Lakota encampment on Wounded Knee Creek, Sitting Bull had been shot at the Standing Rock Agency. The great Lakota leader was dead. Thus the Lakota who camped in the snow by Wound Knee Creek were not only cold and starving and sick. They were a broken people, utterly helpless, asking only for the rations they had been promised, and a place where they could live in peace.

“The Cavalry, on the other hand, had the backing of a nation of people who hated the ‘savages’. The Cavalry had food, horses, guns, and even four cannons. Some of the soldiers standing guard that night also had a bottle of spirits, just to keep them warm.

“So the fuse was short, and it took next to nothing for the slaughter to begin.”

Prairie Wind stared at the flat barren expanse of ground, where a hundred men had stood guard through the night while two hundred and fifty women and children tried to sleep.

“On the morning of December 29, 1890, just a few days after the White Man’s Christmas, soldiers entered the Lakota camp with the intention of collecting all of the weapons. The Cavalry troops were disarming the enemy; but the Lakota men, who knew that the promised rations often did not arrive and that their people were starving, regarded their rifles as essential for shooting whatever game they could find. Amidst the arguments and the scuffling, someone fired a shot. Although we will never know who fired the first shot at Lexington in April of 1775, we do know that ‘The shot heard around the world’ led to the birth of a new nation. However, that first shot at Wounded Knee Creek . . . led to the slow death of a once great people.

“That one shot triggered massive and unrelenting gunfire from the Cavalry troops. The Lakota men, most of whom had relinquished their rifles, had only revolvers and knives. The Hotchkiss cannons now opened fire, sending explosive shells into the tipis. Women and children tried to escape to the creek, and to a dry gully, but soldiers, some on horseback, chased after them.

“At the end of this madness, 146 Lakota were dead. Some of the women and children were killed as far as two miles away from the encampment, by soldiers who had pursued them. Seven more later died of their wounds. The bodies were left to freeze in the snow.

“Twenty soldiers were killed, and another sixteen later died of their wounds. Because the soldiers had been firing from a circle around the encampment, and because the four cannons were firing explosive shells into the chaos, many of the soldiers were killed by their fellow troops.

“Snow began to fall. The Army retreated from the blast of a growing blizzard by marching with their wounded to their base at the Pine Ridge Agency. The Lakotas, dead and dying, including infants who had been wrapped in blankets and carried in their mothers’ arms, gradually disappeared beneath the snow.”

Prairie Wind looked at Arava and told her, “Your Beloved Child froze to death in the snow that night.”

Then she turned and began to walk, with the red bandana in her hand, toward the archway to the cemetery.

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Chapter Fifty-Four

William had never seen an arch like the one that led into the cemetery. Two square structures—he could not call them columns because they were square—built with alternating red and white bricks, stood about ten feet tall, with a slender steel arch above them. At the top of the arch stood a small cross. A sidewalk stretched from the bare earth in front of the arch to a chain-link fence inside the cemetery.

Prairie Wind led the group through the arch and along one side of a fenced-in rectangle of short, dry grass, about twenty feet wide and a hundred feet long. Stopping close to a stone monument about eight feet tall, she stood facing the fence. The ten members of the silent group stood in a row, facing the fence and the rectangle of grass inside.

William noticed ribbons and scarves that people had tied to the fence. He now understood, at least partially, why Prairie Wind had given everyone a red bandana.

Outside the fence were fifteen or twenty headstones, many of them overlooking a plot which had been decorated with plastic flowers. At the foot of one headstone was a photograph in a frame, and a bunch of sage tied with a red ribbon.

One headstone honored a soldier who had served in the US Army in Vietnam. He had survived his tour of duty, for he had died just a few years ago.

William kept a close eye on Prairie Wind. She wanted him—she wanted all of her wedding guests—to understand who she was and where she was from. But for her to come to the site of the Wounded Knee Massacre, and now to the cemetery—he had already guessed what sort of grave they were facing—must be extremely difficult for her. She was showing him the deepest wounds in her heart, the deepest scars in her soul. And his job was to know, forever, that whether it was a course in World History, a course in marine biology, a course in Black Literature, a dream of attending law school, or a vision of speaking in a court of international law, her roots reached deep into the earth inside this long rectangular fence.

She said with a loud, clear voice for all to hear, “Four days after the massacre, when the blizzard had stopped, the Army returned to Wounded Knee Creek with hired civilians who brought shovels. The work party dug a long rectangular grave, about four feet deep. Civilians drove around with horse-drawn wagons, collecting frozen corpses. The corpses were dumped, without coffins, into the mass grave.

“Someone took a picture of the historic event. Two men stand in the trench, which is partly filled with bodies. A heap of bodies lie in the snow beside the grave, waiting to be tossed in. About twenty-five men, wearing long coats and winter hats, some with rifles and some with shovels, stand around one end of the grave . . . as witnesses to a proud moment in American history.”

She paused, with tears running down her cheeks. William wondered, Were they tears of grief, or tears of outrage? Probably both.

“We are standing at the edge of a long, shallow grave where one hundred and forty-six Lakota men, women and children are buried, not side by side, but in whatever contorted position they were in when they died and froze. They are wearing rags, and worn-out blankets, worn-out moccasins. Some of them were infants, who were found frozen while nursing at a mother’s frozen breast.”

William noticed that his mother was crying. His father stood behind her with his hands on her shoulders.

Further along the row, his sister Jennifer stood beside Richard, her face as hard as stone.

“Keep in mind,” said Prairie Wind, “that this happened at the end of the year 1890, only thirteen years before the Wright Brothers flew their airplane at Kitty Hawk. Only eighteen years before Henry Ford’s Model T rolled off the assembly line. What possible threat did these Lakota people pose to the most powerful industrial nation in the world? Why, I ask, *why* . . . was so much hatred focused on a tiny group of helpless people, who asked only for some quiet place where they might survive?”

Prairie Wind stared at the ground inside the fence, stared at the grave where her people were buried only a few feet deep.

Then she held up her red bandana, which she had rolled into a cylinder inside her fist. Turning to the group, she told them, “It is a tradition for visitors to leave a scarf, a ribbon, a cluster of flowers, perhaps a feather, tied to the fence. It may be a gift, or it may be a way of saying to the Lakota that they are not forgotten.”

She looked them, face by face. “You, who today have remembered the deep and lasting happiness in your life, may if you wish . . . tie one corner of your red bandana to the fence, with whatever thoughts, whatever feelings, you may have.”

Prairie Wind now unrolled and unfolded her bandana, then tied one corner to the chain-link fence. William saw that stitched to the bottom corner of the red bandana as it hung straight down . . . was the blue feather which she had found in their campsite beside Cathedral Lake.

Now she walked, staring straight ahead, past the row of friends and family, then out through the arch to the barren ground overlooking the site of the massacre of her Lakota people.

Ten witnesses tied ten red bandanas to the fence, each with their own thoughts, each with their own feelings. Then they walked in silence toward the arch.

William watched as Jennifer and Richard tied their bandanas to the fence beside each other. He watched as Jennifer looked at Richard, and he looked at her.

He watched as she now took the bottom corner of her bandana and the bottom corner of his bandana and tied them together with a square knot.

Then they walked together toward the arch.

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