

# CHAPTER ONE

The sod roof shack was fairly bursting with heat. The young girl bent over the stove to look into the firebox. In the dimness the restless light painted her face, catching and outlining her strangeness. Her amber coloured hair was pulled to the back of her head and tied there with a bit of string; it fell halfway to her waist, light-sparked yet with deep shadows. Her amber hair incongruously framed a tawny-skinned face, dominated by very dark eyes. It was not a happy face, nor was it a child's face either, wary and lonely. Her father had been a white man, but only her hair spoke of him. Her mother had been Sioux.

The heat grew suffocating. The girl left the stove and crossed the one room to the door-flap, threw it back and stepped outside. It was spring. The last patches of snow were sinking beneath the tangled mat of old buffalo grass; down in the creek-bed the ice ground, smashed together, and then broken and disintegrating, became part of the rising flood.

She leaned back against the doorframe and brushed at the dampness on her face. There was little joy in her. Spring had come too late for Little Tree, her mother. Dour, hard-drinking, the woman had died as she had lived, with her face to the wall, giving no reason and asking for none.

Her daughter mourned, but with the silent, natural understanding, that grief is unavailing.

A hawk wheeled above her, his head cocked and turning as he searched for prey, and now and then his harsh cry sounded. Wherever his shadow fell small brown creatures fled to cover. Much farther out on the rising and

falling of the plain antelope sped like a ruffle of smoke. Very soon now the first buffalo would come drifting northwards, the forerunners of the spring migration.

Then her eyes caught and held on something else. Quite deliberately she reached inside the doorway for an ancient flintlock.

“Grey One!”

The wolf lifted his head, blinking his yellow eyes; then seeing that she held the gun, came to her with a rush, his nose working the wind for danger.

But this time a man on a horse did not mean danger. It was Jerry Potts. As he approached he raised his arm in a familiar greeting, and the girl responded by putting the flintlock back inside the doorway. The wolf sat down as the girl called out in her mother’s tongue; “I thought you were scouting for the white men.”

“I was,” replied the man, as he dismounted and slapped his horse away. He grinned through his drooping mustache. “And I drank too much. You know me, one foot goes one way, the other points back. What man can walk two ways at once?”

For the first time, she smiled. He too, was Métis; it was part of the bond between them. He rummaged inside his buckskin shirt, looking for the bag that held his pipe and a wad of tobacco.

Potts was short and stocky, bowlegged from years in the saddle. He appeared much older than his thirty-odd years; weather, whiskey, and a constant racking cough had all taken their toll. His high-crowned, wide-brimmed hat was too big for him, and obscured his face and the shrewd hard eyes. He wore winter moccasins pulled high over bright plaid trousers. Altogether he presented a ludicrous picture; but no one laughed at Jerry Potts. He studied the girl through the moments it took him to light up.

“You’ll have to leave here, Tahnea” he said. “Your mother’s man has been drinking in Fort Benton for days. But he’ll come back, and with things as they are between you...”

## BLACKFOOT CROSSING

The girl shook her head and moved restlessly. "I know, I know that, and I will go. But when I'm gone she will be so alone."

"Listen to me," he said impatiently. "Little Tree was always alone, even in a crowd. When I heard of her death I was sad, but not for her. Yet..." He shrugged. "I seem to hear her voice, asking me to warn you."

"You hear more than I do" she said flatly. "My mother didn't often speak to me when she was alive, and she does not now. You know how it is with me, how little I know about myself...about anything. Who was my father? How did you come to be our friend? How could a man like Hugh Suttle take us away from our people—to this?"

Jerry Potts leaned over to pull at the ears of the wolf, who was sniffing warily at his legs. "In the lodges of the Sioux, a woman feeds and rests a man before she asks her questions...that is, when she really wants the answers."

Tahnea started, her face flushing. For a moment she stood quite still, not knowing what to say; then, when she saw that he smiled at her, she vanished inside the shack. He could hear the sounds of her moving swiftly about.

He sat down cross-legged on the bare ground. Pity and anger at himself struggled within him. What was he going to do about her? Certainly, he could answer her questions; someone should have done that long ago. But then what? He could only hope to keep her out of the Benton whore-houses, and out of the reach of Hugh Suttle. He knew of the deadly animosity between the man and the girl. Knew that it went beyond all reason or control. He frowned. If he could get some family to take her in, get her a bit of schooling! But with high tension all over the country, that possibility was remote.

She appeared again with a bowl of stew and some hard-biscuit; then she went back for two mugs of tea, strong and exceedingly bitter. He knocked out his pipe and set to the food, hungry from the morning's ride. She sat in the doorway, sipping at her cup and watching him. There was eagerness in her face now, and as soon as he had finished she spoke.

“A very old and hungry Sioux came by here some days ago. I gave him food and drink. When he left he touched my hair and called me Daughter-of-the-Sun. For all I know that could be the truth.”

“I wish it were,” he said quietly, “For you could use such magic, little White Deer.”

The conversation had become formal.

“Tell me, Bearchild.”

“I do not believe in looking back,” he said. “But there are times when we must, to find the way ahead. First you will tell me what you remember.”