

## Chapter 10

---

Only five miles on the other side of Okmulgee Town, Jack knew something was wrong.

Crossing the South Fork of the Canadian River, he should have been standing on the edge of the River of Corn. But as he strained in his saddle for a better look, he could see that it had receded more than a mile, another victim of conflict. His heart felt heavy.

Over the past twenty years, the Creeks had regained their pre-Removal prominence as the greatest farmers of all the Indians. By the mid-1850s, the Creeks were exporting hundreds of thousands of bushels of corn and growing prosperous in the process. Their greatest agricultural achievement, and one that wouldn't be equaled anywhere in America for a hundred years, was the River of Corn, a massive collective cornfield that ran three miles wide and eight miles long between the two Canadian River forks.

Four towns, Wetumka, Okmulgee, North Fork, and Greenleaf, and dozens of surrounding villages planted, tended, and harvested the corn. Women and children were mostly responsible for the planting, and everyone, including the men, participated in the harvest. Now that thousands of men were being drawn into battles and skirmishes all over the Territory, there simply weren't enough people for the task. For the first time, crops

rotted in the fields in 1862, dying in the deadly combination of searing heat and thunderstorms that defines Oklahoma summers. And the spring campaigns at Fort Gibson and Pea Ridge had taken their toll in more than just soldiers.

Thousands of families, even whole villages and at least one town, Greenleaf, simply disappeared, either chased north with old chief and staunch Union sympathizer Opathle Yohola into Kansas or south into Choctaw territory and the relative safety of Boggy Depot, the Red River and Fort Towson. It was also the custom for many Indian women to follow their men into the army camps, creating makeshift villages with children, dogs, and what little livestock they still possessed trailing along behind the soldiers in a cacophony of dust and poverty. Tending the cornfields was the last thing on their minds.

Jack walked his horse through the stubble, scattering flocks of crows that screamed their protest.

Some of the corn had come up on its own, Jack saw, scraggly little volunteer patches that made a mockery of the tended fields. The birds held dominion here, as they would over the entire River of Corn next year, when first Federal, then Confederate, troops would burn down the cornfields and hay pastures in a misguided, but entirely effective, attempt to starve out the other side.

Jack couldn't help think what a sad occasion the Green Corn Ceremony was likely to be in years to come.

He continued plodding through the field, lost in thought, until he neared the bluffs that led to Wetumka Town. Then he heard the joyous shouts and looked up.

Standing on the bluff was Sarah, sitting his old horse Crackers. Then, waving her hands above her head, she tore off down the hill toward him, yelling his name over and over.

Luckily Jack had dismounted, because she flew at him like a circus acrobat, almost knocking them both to the ground.

"Ah Jack, my darling Jack," Sarah laughed and cried, "It's been a lifetime since I've seen you. You must promise never to leave again."

“Hello, little sister,” Jack said. “You’ve caught me at a good time. I’m prepared to promise you anything. But how did you know I was coming?”

Sarah laughed again. “I didn’t. I’ve been coming to the bluffs every morning for the last three years, pining for your return.” She smiled. “Well, maybe not three years, but at least since the day before yesterday. It seems like years. Jim Tom told us you were coming. He and the Giggle Sisters came over for dinner a couple of nights ago.”

“I hear the Giggle Sisters are now Mrs. Nokose, both of them,” Jack said. “And I hear that you’re about to be a bride, too. Tommy Brokeshoulder?”

“Yes, Jack. I do love him so. He’s coming this afternoon for dinner, and Jim Tom and his wives. That sounds funny, doesn’t it? We’ll have a feast, just like the old days, with chicken and dumplings and rhubarb pie. I’m sorry we only had enough sugar for one pie, Jack.”

“Then I better eat it before the rest of them show up,” Jack said. “They wouldn’t know rhubarb from Adam’s off ox in Boston, Sarah, and I’ve missed it ... only slightly more than I’ve missed you. By the way, are you still in the habit of naming all the chickens and livestock?”

She leaned across her horse to give him a playful punch on the arm. “Yes, I am, Mister Smarty. Tonight we’ll be having Chopin and Vivaldi the Second.”

Jack was in awe of his sister. He had gone to college, but she was the real brains of the family, he thought. She possessed every skill he lacked. While he struggled to master Creek, Sarah could speak it fluently, as well as Cherokee, Choctaw, Seminole, of course (which was to Creek what Italian is to Latin), and a smattering of some of the Plains Indian tongues, such as Caddo, Kiowa, Pawnee, and Osage. She played the piano with great skill, read music, and sang beautifully.

Thinking of Sarah playing their big upright reminded Jack of the day when his father drove the piano-laden wagon onto the front yard, with Jim Tom sitting on the eagle-claw stool, pretending to play. It was one of his happiest memories, and turned him sober.

“Words can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am about Father’s death, little one,” Jack said. “Are you all right? How is Mother?”

“We’re both fine, Jack, although it was hard, of course, maybe more so because it came with no warning.” She took his hand. “We can talk about it later, if you like. But there’s not much time for grieving. Death has come to live with us all, I’m afraid. Mister Wilkins, one of the Ballard boys, two of Chief McIntosh’s cousins, even Reverend Meeker. All dead, Jack. Jack, oh, Jack, Jack. I just want to keep saying your name over and over. It makes me feel safe. Now let’s go in and see Mama. She’s missed you so much.”

\*      \*      \*      \*

Dinner that evening was as memorable as Sarah had promised. Mrs. Gaston put out the tablecloth and napkins she had gotten as a wedding present and used every Christmas, her cut glass pickle dishes, and the little silver saltcellars her parents had brought from St. Louis on their last trip. The Giggle Sisters brought a bowl of sweet potatoes as big as a washbasin, with Jim Tom smiling his approval and occasionally nodding at Jack. Tommy brought a cured ham, although it was clear it wouldn’t be needed that night.

“I’m sorry we don’t have any coffee to go with the pie, Jack,” Mrs. Gaston said as she cleared the table.

“Couldn’t have had room for it even if you did,” Jack said, leaning back in his chair. “I’ve got to say I don’t know when I’ve enjoyed Chopin and, who was it, Vivaldi, so much.”

Tommy looked confused. “Am I missing something?”

“Those were the chickens you just ate,” said Jack.

Tommy looked at Mrs. Gaston. “You name your chickens, ma’am?”

“Sort of a standing family joke,” the older woman said. “But as you are soon to be family, we can let you in on it. Yes, Lord, ever since Sarah was seven or eight, she started giving names to everything—dogs, cats, cattle, even chickens. She had a turtle named Napoleon Bonaparte. Edward thought it might be a bad idea to name all the animals, and that she’d make pets out of all of them. Then one day she came into the kitchen and said ‘Daddy, Mister Jefferson is looking mighty plump. Do you think we

could take him to the church picnic?” Mrs. Gaston looked lovingly down at Sarah and laughed. “He didn’t understand at first that she meant fried.”

“I think it was mostly your idea, Mama,” Sarah said as she helped her mother clear. “At least you encouraged it. It gave you the opportunity to teach me the names of all the greats—presidents and Greek gods, artists and composers, war heroes.” She hesitated. “Although I stopped using those names.”

Jack jumped in to cover Sarah’s discomfort. “Names can sure be fascinating, all right. Did you know that Leroy means ‘the king’ and Rene means ‘born again’? I learned that in French class.” Jack looked across the table to see Jim Tom smiling and softly chanting ‘Books, Books, Books.’ “Gaston is French, too. But we’re not. Father said his grandfather took the name from Gaston County in North Carolina, where our family came from. But you know what I can’t figure out? What does Brokeshoulder mean, Tommy?” Everyone at the table chuckled, except Sarah.

“Hush, Jack Gaston. I think it’s a perfectly wonderful name, Tommy. Don’t let them tease you.” Sarah was staring hard at Jim Tom’s wives, who were, in fact, giggling behind their hands.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Tommy answered laconically, “I know a lot of our names sound funny in English. When whites hear my name, I see them laugh. But when I hear my name, I am proud. Chief Micco gave that name to my father before I was born. The Comanches came to our village one night and stole our horses. My father followed them two days on foot, caught them and got the horses back. The Comanches broke his shoulder with their stone clubs, but he got the horses anyway. So when I hear Brokeshoulder I think of a brave and noble man. But I know what you mean. There was an old Seminole Chief named Billy Bowlegs. He had ‘em, too, so I guess that’s all right. But he’s got a son named Young Billy Bowlegs, he’s in the army, and he’s the fastest runner I ever saw, with legs are straight as arrows. Grandma Meat over in Okmulgee can make medicine to cure just about anything, but can’t eat meat. No teeth. And there’s all those Fivekiller boys, fraidy cats every one of them. And Flea, well, he is little. And Pebbleface. What sounds funny to some just seems natural to

others, I guess. When I went down to Mexico a few years ago to bring back those army ponies? Seemed like every other fellow I met down there was named Jesus. They said it 'Hay soose,' but it was Jesus, all right. I saw a man write it out."

"What about English names, Tommy? Do they sound strange to Indian ears?" Sarah asked.

"Well, English can sound kind of *clickety-clack* sometimes. And some of those names? Mister Atchison? And old man Bittlekauf? Sounds like they're coming down with something."

"Is that why you call us 'sneezers' behind our backs?" Mrs. Gaston asked pleasantly.

Jim Tom laughed. "I don't think you're supposed to know about that, ma'am. We don't use that word much anymore, but no, we call you sneezers because of snuff. Indians had never heard of snuff back in the old days, and white men were always putting it in their noses and sneezing all over the place. I still don't get snuff. Why bother, when you could have a cheroot?" he said, producing a couple of cigars.

"Take those out on the porch, boys," said Mrs. Gaston, "Sarah and I will join you in a minute."

"Yes, ma'am," said Jim Tom, then turned and looked out the window. "What about Kickingbird? You like that name?"

Mrs. Gaston looked puzzled. "Kickingbird, the Pawnee Chief? Why do you mention him?"

"Because he's out in your backyard right now."

"Kickingbird here?" Sarah said and walked rapidly toward the kitchen. "I've got to go to him, Mama. And Tommy, don't get mad, but I've got to do something with your sweet present."

The three men quietly made their way out the front door and around the side of the porch, as much out of curiosity as any sense of protection for Sarah. She had grabbed a tow sack of what appeared to be potatoes and the ham Tommy had brought with him, and she was standing placidly beside the mounted warrior.

It looked like something out of a fairy tale, the tiny young princess looking up into the eyes of the centaur. Kickingbird was a powerful look-

ing creature, muscular and with the typical Pawnee cockscomb of hair standing erect and slick with animal fat. The sides of his head were clean-shaven, and he had hawk feathers and, incongruously, three tiny bells dangling down the right side of his face on a rawhide lanyard. The bells sounded merrily as he moved his head, but there was nothing merry about him.

*He looks like an ancient king*, Jack thought. Just then, as if the chief had heard his thoughts, Kickingbird gazed straight at Jack. He seemed to nod slightly and then dipped his lance in Jack's direction. Bringing the lance back up, he leaned forward to grab the food Sarah held up to him. They exchanged a few words, and then with a final nod toward Jack, he wheeled his horse and trotted slowly away, bells tinkling.

Sarah came skipping lightly up on the porch. "Well, that's that. I'm sorry to give away your ham, Tommy, but his people are absolutely starving."

Tommy answered a little peevishly, "Oh, it's all right I guess. But corn, honey, if I'd a mind to give him a ham, I could have just done it myself."

"Yes, and caught a lance between your ribs in payment," Jim Tom said. "He recognized you, Books, did you see that?"

"Yes, I did," Jack replied. "But I'm a little confused. Do I know him? He looked kind of familiar."

"He should," Mrs. Gaston said, bringing a pitcher of water and glasses onto the porch. "Wish it could be lemonade," she sighed. "You're an important man in his life, Jack. He's the Indian boy you almost shot, out there by the clothesline, more than ten year ago."

Jack remembered clearly now. He was only fourteen, and had heard his mother yell to his father that someone was stealing shirts off the line. Without thinking, Jack grabbed the shotgun and ran into the backyard. There was a young Pawnee, about Jack's age, sitting upright on his pony, not moving, just staring wide-eyed at Jack.

Jack started to level the gun at the boy, more out of fear than anything else, when he heard his father's calm voice.

"Don't shoot, Jack," his father said. "Just bring your gun down and don't move. He's not going to hurt you. He's just a boy and he's not wear-

ing paint. He's probably just as scared as you are. Now stand still. I'm going to walk up to him slowly and hand him another shirt. Then I'm going to walk back into the house."

As his father walked past him back into the kitchen, the young Pawnee turned his lance around and walked his horse toward Jack, who had remained frozen in place.

"What do I do now, Father? He's coming right at me," Jack asked, his voice wavering a little.

"Just stay still, son, it will be all right."

Still wide-eyed, the young boy leaned toward Jack and tapped him on the shoulder with the blunt end of his lance. Then sitting back up, he lifted his lance over his head, let out a blood-curdling scream, and galloped off.

Jack's knees were so weak he wanted to drop to the ground, but he wanted even more to show his father he wasn't afraid. "Why did he do that, Father?"

For the first time, his father began to chuckle. "He was counting coup on you, Jack. You've helped him get his feather. By the time he gets back to tell his story in his village, you'll probably be about eight feet tall with horns. Now come on in to supper."

Jack smiled at the memory of his father, as unflappable as his mother had been excitable.

"So that was Kickingbird—quite a fellow. You speak his language, huh, Sarah? And mother, how you've changed. You used to call them wild Indians back then, remember?"

"They are wild Indians, Jack," his mother answered sweetly. "It's just that now your sister has taught me to call them by their tribal names. Now, if you've finished your smokes, gentlemen, let's go into the parlor. Sarah, will you play for us, darling? And Jim Tom, you, too, if you've a mind to. I haven't heard you play in ages." She leaned close to Jack. "And there's an extra slice of rhubarb pie in the kitchen calling your name, son. Welcome home."