

*May the paths from every direction  
recognize each other.i*



From a Cherokee Sacred Formula

## Elle Graves

**T**he fierce Indian brave walks towards me strong and sure. He's naked except for his breechclout and bright feathers tied in his hair. He doesn't smile or laugh or make any motion 'cept to walk toward me in an easy, long legged stride. When he gets close enough to me he stops, raises his hand and touches my cheek. "Are you ready to go, my mate?" he asks in his best white person words that I've taught him.

Before I can answer, the door behind us opens and out comes our friend, Deer, looking a bit sheepish. "Got any more room on those packhorses? Seems as if Possum has found still *more* things to send back to the village with you ..." He rolls his eyes like he can't believe what his mate has done.

"There would be *plenty* of room still on those horses if you had not insisted on sending those sacks of new fangled seed you want the village to try planting," comes an impatient voice directly behind him. Possum, Deer's mate, comes into view holding a basket, covered carefully with a piece of muslin cloth.

Deer and Possum are the mirror images of Bright Feather and me, he with his white face and she with her Indian one. Of all of us today, only Deer looks truly white instead of his Indian self, choosing to look like the proper white trader known as William Holland Thomas with his homespun shirt, tan trousers and cloth suspenders. For you see, even though Possum wears the clothes of a white person, no one would be able to mistake her for one with her dark snapping eyes, beautiful long black hair and red Indian skin. She is Possum, of the Turkey clan of The Real People

of The Maple Forest. But you can call her Mary. She'll answer to either name as long as you speak to her proper like, with respect.

Which is the problem, you see. For many a white person would call her a savage no matter what she wore or how she behaved because they can't see past the red skin. I was like that for a time. Until I was taken from my white home. Until I was made a slave even with my proper white skin and all. Until I had to realize that it wasn't the skin color that made you a slave or a savage or anything else. It was what was *inside* that made you the person you *chose* to be. I have white skin, I wear savage clothes, I love an Indian brave, and I call The Maple Forest of The Real People my home. I'm not white anymore. I'll never be red. If you need to say a color, you best call me pink.

I grin at Possum. "I've still got some room, but you'll have to help me fit it on Willow's pack." As Possum and I start to walk to the horses, I realize that even Possum looks more white than I do from behind at least with her proper cloth skirt and blouse.

We are almost ready to leave with our pack horses piled high and final shouts of best wishes from Deer and Possum's three children: James, *Red Bird*, Eliza, *Sleeping Rabbit*, and Richard, *Small Turtle*. This being my first trip to white territory since Bright Feather and I have joined together, I was powerful worried about just about everything. Would I be safe? Would Bright Feather be safe with me? What if we met others besides Deer and his family at the trading post? What should I say? How could I explain my circumstances? Do I have the right words to tell my story? All of my worries are needless in the end. Even with soldiers showing up unexpectedly at the trading post, by keeping quiet and in the shadows they thought I was nothing more than a "thievin' Injun squaw" I think is how they put it.

In the end, this trip to Deer and Possum's has filled in a powerful large hole in my puzzle of life. Things I'd wondered about, like why I was taken in the first place from my home in Ward's Mill, Virginia, to Great Elk's village in The Maple Forest.

And then there are the things I never thought to consider. I glance at Bright Feather as he talks quiet like to Deer. I had no idea that so many of my choices had been so right. I had no idea how my presence has brought healing to so many.

Bright Feather stops talking to Deer and turns to look at me across the hard packed dirt of the yard. For a moment there is no Deer or Possum, no horses stomping and flicking away annoying flies with their tails, no Eliza, *Sleeping Rabbit*, pulling on my arm and asking me the last few one hundred questions she needs to ask before I leave. There is just me and Bright Feather. Standing separate and yet joined so strong I feel as if he is touching me, can smell his manly scent, can hear his thought whisper in my ear, *Are you alright, my mate?* I sigh and give him a brief nod and a small smile. *Yes, I am fine, my husband.* He turns back to finish speaking with Deer.

I have promised Deer and Possum's daughter, *Sleeping Rabbit*, for that is how Eliza now insists on being called, that perhaps in the coming summer she will travel back to Great Elk's village with us and stay for a bit. Their son, James, already had the chance this past summer I am surprised to learn and *Sleeping Rabbit* feels that she is ready now, too.

“Think *long* and *hard* before you make the final decision about her coming,” Possum says to me in pointed words while rolling her eyes as Sleeping Rabbit shouts her last few questions to me as Bright Feather joins me and we mount up on our horses in the chilly morning mists.

I feel adult and grown up but look at Possum and smile thinking back to me and my endless questions. “I remember,” I say to her as I turn to answer Sleeping Rabbit’s latest question, “When I come to visit Great Elk’s village and stay with you, can I have a tunic to wear made just like yours?”

“Perhaps,” I say to Sleeping Rabbit with a smile, “we can make you a tunic that is decorated with rabbit fur. What do you think of that?” She claps her hands in excitement.

“I will remember your words,” I tell Possum for she has asked me to send greetings to a number of family and friends in the village. “Thank you for everything.”

“*Thank you, too,*” she says and she looks up with meaning at Bright Feather as he guides his horse, Companion, near me and says, “Are you ready to go now?” Possum must grin a wide grin every time she calls Bright Feather “Bright Feather” instead of the name she has known him by for so many years – One Who Is Always Alone.

Because of me, the name no longer fits him, you see.

That makes me smile a bright smile as I cast a glance back at the trading post at Forest City, North Carolina, and wave to the family of red and white skin that has made three beautiful pink children. It is a peek at my future that I hope sometime soon will come true.



The journey back seems much faster than the journey there. I have nothing to worry about and many stories to remember and sort through. I think about all the pieces to the puzzle of my life and am amazed at how large the puzzle truly is! I ponder over why I came to be taken from my white home in Ward’s Mill, Virginia, and all the heartache and sorrow that went along with it. I now know the gift Bright Feather gives me in choosing to love again for I have learned of the heartache and sorrow that brought him to be called One Who Is Always Alone for so long. I now know that the choices I made were wise ones.

I think in particular about the times that Bright Feather came so close to bringing me back to Virginia. I wonder what I would have done with the chance had he offered it and how much I would have missed about finding out about me as a powerful woman. I think about the flier telling others about my capture and pleading for my safe return. I think about Cornelius Cooper of Cooper’s General Store and wonder just what he would have done with me had I shown up on his doorstep at any one of those times? Just what would he have done with an orphaned white girl who had lived for a time with the *wild Injun savages*. I remember his face and his store and his kind, plump wife who I only knew to call *Mrs. Cooper*. I can’t recall any children although they were both older so perhaps their children were married and gone. Would they have adopted me like One Who Knows has done in The Maple Forest and would I have become their daughter and learned all about their store and married some white settler and gone on with my white life just as I have here in this Indian life? I look at Bright Feather’s straight back in front of me Companion and I think, *Would I have even missed you? Would you have even missed me?* A wave of sorrow deep and sharp cuts through me at the thought

of being without him. It's different from the sorrow of losing Pa, Henry and Eli. This sorrow feels like all of my insides are being carved out and thrown on the ground to be trampled and left to rot. It's a pain so strong I decide maybe not to think on this subject anymore and make an effort to turn my thoughts away.

But then I hear Bright Feather's words in my ears from last night when we talked about different places, different languages and different words and how we still found each other and what it meant. In between his kisses, Bright Feather had whispered to me, *It means we are each other's destiny. No person, no situation, no thing will stop this that we have*, and I feel certain that at some point even if had I become the adopted daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Cooper of Ward's Mill, Virginia, a tall handsome Indian brave with bright feathers in his hair would have crossed my path somehow. *Destiny.*

The village of The Maple Forest is glad to see us and is happy to receive the many, many things that we have brought. I tease Bright Feather that now I understand why everyone always seems so glad to see him when he returns each time. I thought it was just because they missed him. He pretends he does not hear me.

As soon as I have finished kissing and cuddling Little Bird and answering my friend Otter's many questions, I make my way into the village to deliver Possum's words and gifts. Possum, I have come to learn, has a sister and an aunt in the village who are happy to receive all the things I bring with me. It was here that James spent his summer last year while I struggled with the unexpected directions my life had taken through no fault of my own. I answer their polite questions and tell them of Sleeping Rabbit's hope to visit next summer. I laugh in understanding when they seem to hesitate (Sleeping Rabbit has quite a gift at making a body tired with all the questions that she asks) and things become more comfortable after that.

My final stop before I return to our hut is to One Who Knows. My adopted mother. A woman who at first I was a slave to and now I am a daughter to. One Who Knows is as her name replies: she is a healer and she can sometimes tell directions for the future. She is also old and mighty crabby. Age has made her impatient with stupid questions, annoying people, and, well, most things in general.

Turtle, the young Indian woman that lives with her, is preparing the evening meal and tells me that One Who Knows is somewhere out in the forest gathering her precious herbs. I smile at Turtle and ask if she is ever allowed to help prepare the herbs. For sure I never was. She gives me a horrified look and says, "Oh No! The worst slap I ever received was when I accidentally ruined some of the herbs she had drying in the sun. I am *never ever* to touch *or even look at* the herbs she uses for healing."

"I suppose she told me that too, many times, but I couldn't understand her words then."

A sharp voice behind me says, "That is true. When you were with me you were more of a trial than Turtle ever was, as slow as she is. Head as thick as rock, you have. How was I ever supposed to get anything done with a fool white girl that always seemed to draw trouble to her quicker than ants to a tasty crumb?" Turtle scurries to get back to work and I remember the fear I see in her eyes.

I turn as she is speaking and her expression is as hard and dark as how I recall it to be when I was in Turtle's place, only called Mouse. But I know many things now as I stand there in the late afternoon shadows and I know that there are many differences from when I was Mouse and now: I am unafraid, I am Bear, and *I am her daughter by her choice.*

"I come to wish you well, *Mother*, and inquire how things are with you. I bring greetings to you of Possum of the Turkey Clan of the Real People of the Maple Forest."

She snorts through her nose and rolls her eyes. "Help me with these things, *Daughter*," and she says the title with not the same kind meaning as I meant mine, "they are heavy and anyone polite will have done it without being asked." I remove her precious gathering basket from her back and am amazed at how heavy it really is.

"Tell me," I say politely and with great respect, "when I was Mouse here in this hut with you, did you speak to me like this even when I did not understand you?"

She looks at me for a beat and then I see the twinkle in the eye. "I speak to *everyone* this way and that was one of my greatest frustrations with you. How can I cause you to jump with fear at threats you cannot understand?" She sighs as she settles on her furs at the opening of her hut. "I was well rid of you."

"You claimed me for your daughter the night I was named Bear. I did not know that until Bright Feather told me. I thought you claimed me as your daughter the night we celebrated my joining with Bright Feather."

She begins to sort through her basket and hands me some herb I don't know. "Goat's Beard," she says. "Good for poultices for bee stings and to be brewed as a tea to stop bleeding after childbirth." She whispers quietly to me, "I like to soak my swollen feet in it at times, too." I watch her speed and skill as she works. "Best picked right before the end of the growing season. You must immediately break off the roots and hang it in a bunch in a dry, dark place or it loses much of its power. Here." She thrusts a pile of the plant in my hand and I watch as she works to prepare it for hanging. I am pleased to be allowed to help and carefully begin to follow her directions. "Bright Feather has a big mouth," is all she will finally say about my comments.

"If you claimed me for your daughter, why did I not go back to live with you in your hut?"

She looks at me and I sense impatience. "Do you ask questions of me because you like the sound of my voice? I have some songs I can sing you that might be more interesting than just repeating things you already know."

I look down at the herbs and study them closely while I think. At last I say, "If I were to come back to your hut, without understanding the language well enough, I would have just thought that I was going back to being your slave again."

She nods ever so slightly. "And Otter needed companionship. And Raccoon needed someone to stir him up a bit. And One Who Is Always Alone needed someone to make him remember he was a *man* not some solitary creature of the forest. And I needed someone I can threaten more with my words." She smiles a sweet innocent smile at me that can almost be more frightening than her dark looks and I can't help it; I burst out laughing.

“I have brought you a gift,” I say finally and I hand her a package wrapped in an old seed sack and tied with twine. “Two, actually.”

She puts down her herbs and for a flash seems almost like a child as she unties the twine (and carefully wraps it up for future use) and opens the seed bag and draws out what I have brought her. “It is a collecting bag,” I say all of a sudden worried that it is a foolish thing to give a woman who has been gathering herbs for longer than three of my lifetimes – at least. “The whites use them when they are planting and it is used for carrying large quantities of seed.” I stand up and demonstrate, “It sits comfortable like at your shoulder like this – see the padding here? – and then drapes across your body to rest at your hip. They are not usually decorated like this but Possum showed me some stitches and gave me some thread and so I added some decorations on it so it didn’t look so plain.” In the face of her silence at the gift I add, “If you prefer your basket, then you can always use it for something else ...” She examines it with quiet concentration; the fabric, the stitching, and the decorations. But remains silent.

“And this,” I draw out the other thing that I have brought her from the seed sack, “Deer tells me is called a *mortar and pestle* by white doctors and such. It’s heavy because he says it’s carved out of a kind of rock! I think it will be easier to grind your herbs with it. White folks use it for the same thing.” This too she examines with great interest, turning it over in her hands.

“I have no use for two gathering containers,” she says at last, “and lately the gathering has gotten to be harder with these tired old legs.” I feel the disappointment in me well up almost like tears and then she says. “But to have company sometimes along for the walk to talk and listen and that I can share things with, now that might just give me a new passion for things. You would have to be content with that old basket though for I am not inclined to share this new gathering bag with *anyone*. And I am not inclined to say things more than once, well maybe twice, so you are going to have to carve a hole in that thick skull of yours to quick catch all the things I would be teaching you. You are far too old to learn to be a healer, but there is a skill in just knowing the herbs that you can probably master in time.”

I grin at her a great wide grin. “I will be back again tomorrow. Is this time of the day good?”

“Of course not! I am just about done for the day. Come as soon as you can and it will still be too late.” She picks up her herbs and starts working on them, but not before she carefully folds the seed bag and places it by the rolled up twine.

“Good night, Mother,” I say to her as I walk away.

“Good night to you, too, Daughter.” She says it with no sharp words or tones. I think she liked my gifts.

I tell Bright Feather that I have given One Who Knows her gifts and of her reactions and words to me. In my excitement over the gifts it’s not occurred to me that he has made no comments during the preparation of the gathering bag nor my plans to give One who Knows the gifts. “I am happy that she is pleased,” he says at last.

I sit down next to him and look at his face. “I did not ask you about the gifts, should I have?” I ask for all of a sudden I think I’d like to hear his thoughts.

He shrugs. "One Who Knows is difficult to understand," he begins carefully and I can't help but laugh quietly at his way of description. "There has been no one in many years that has helped her in any way with her gathering and healing. At one time, many sought her out to learn her thoughts and seek her advice about important things in their lives. These past years she has kept most of her thoughts to herself except when it suits her to hurl them at you almost like a sharp rock. At one time, she anticipated people's needs and wants and almost knew before you did when you needed a special herb or other special care. These past years if you needed her you knew where she is. She rarely ventures out among the village except to sit at council circles. And often even then she is silent and unwilling to voice her thoughts.

"I did not know how she would react to your gifts, especially since they had to do with her healing arts. I think it is best that you did not speak to me about my thoughts before you gave them to her for I would have had to tell you these things that I just did. Then maybe you would not have chosen to give her your gifts and things would be unchanged.



I spend the rest of the fall tramping through the forest with One Who Knows trying my best to crack open my thick skull and shove as much knowledge as I can inside. More than once I feel that I'm hopeless and should just give up. Very soon, she tells me, there'll be nothing to look for until the spring comes. Today I'm walking in the forest with One Who Knows, she with her new gathering bag and me with her old gathering basket. I feel much the way I did when I struggled to learn the Indian language and the words always seemed to come and go too fast for me to keep them in my head. One Who Knows seems to me to be made entirely of knowledge about the forest and its plants and the more time I spend with her the more I begin to realize that I'll never, ever know all she knows about these things. I tell her that finally in frustration when she scolds me for not remembering correctly the uses and care of an herb I *do* remember she tried to teach me about the first or second day we began gathering together.

"I was not so quick with learning these things, either," she finally tells me as we walk slowly back to the village. "I was young and beautiful and smart but was more interested in other things than the silly dried herbs I had grown up with hanging from the roof of my hut and smelling in the baskets around my head while I slept."

"What was more interesting to you?" I have to ask and wait for a sharp word for asking such a question.

"Boys," she says, "quite a few of them," and she giggles the most wonderful giggle I've ever heard. It sounds like happy water in a quick flowing brook.

I grin at her. It's hard to imagine at first the stooped, gray haired old lady walking slowly and carefully beside me as a beautiful Indian maid chasing boys, but the giggle manages to paint a good picture in my mind. "I never, ever thought of boys much," I say to her in all honesty, "until Bright Feather."

"You had survival on your mind," she says quickly. "The mind is very wise and works on important things one step at a time. You do not make plans to build a hut to live in while you are

still a baby in a cradle board. Once you do decide to build a hut, you make sure each step is sound: choice of location, choice of materials, care of construction. Who wants to live in a house that is unsafe? Who wants to rest each night in a house that threatens to collapse in on you with the first stiff breeze? Life is filled with hard choices that correctly made lead to an existence of harmony and peace. But it can take a long time to get there.

“You will not learn all I know about the herbs and the plants around you. Do not frustrate yourself over the things your brain will not have the time to do in this lifetime. Concentrate on the things you know you can do. Learn one piece at a time, just like you learned our language.” She mimics me shouting, *DANGER! FIRE! STOP! BEAR! HORSE! NO! COME! FIRE!* the day that Bear John came to attack our village. I remember the fear in my heart as I struggled to decide what I should do and how I could make my slow tongue explain it to those I cared about. I remember the look of puzzlement on Otter’s face at my shouts and screams and then the terror when she realized what was coming fast behind me. I remember the feeling of power that poured through my arms as I picked up the burning stick and killed a white man to save my red friend and her baby ...

One Who Knows grunts and shakes her head in disgust at the obvious shortcomings of my brain bringing me back to my present difficulties. “Maybe, walking through the forest with me pointing out things is too much for your thick skull. We will do it differently in the spring. We will start with the herbs you already know and I will tell you all the things I know about just them. Then, I will send you out on your own for these old legs are just not what they used to be anymore and I cannot do this every day, and you can bring me back things you find and I will tell you what I know. How does that sound?”

I worry that she is disappointed with me. “I want you to be pleased with what I learn from you. I want you to understand that I am doing my best and trying my hardest,” I say to her with great emotion.

She dismisses my words with a wave of her gnarled, old hand. “You are foolish to worry about such things. Mothers always understand that about their daughters.” She looks at me and I have learned to watch for the brief twinkle of fun that flashes very quickly now and then. “No matter how stupid they appear sometimes.”

Sometimes she says things to me that I have no answer for. We fall into an easy silence as we walk through the beautiful forest not unlike my times hunting and riding with Bright Feather. My mind wanders and I think of Otter and Raccoon and Little Bird. “Otter is expecting another baby,” I say to One Who Knows after a time. “She says the baby will come in the late summer.”

“You worry about not one but two things,” she says to me casual like and I feel the goose skin run up my arms across my neck and into my hair even for she is right.

Her bent old legs carry her with purpose through the forest as she says to me over her shoulder, “They call me One Who Knows because I know more than most people but I don’t know everything. Sometimes it is a terrible thing to see only parts of the future, not enough to know anything for sure, only enough to be afraid.” She is quiet in her thoughts and I know she must think of her daughters Raven and Black Fox that she could not save from an early death. And perhaps

even Weasel and how she could not keep his evil from those she loved and cared about. She shrugs. “But I see good things, too, like the brightness I spoke about seeing where you are concerned.

“You worry first about whether you will have a child with Bright Feather for it has been some months since you first mated.” She turns and smiles a rare, sweet smile at me. “You do not need to be One Who Knows to know of that concern for it is something almost every young woman thinks of – I am sure white *or* red – if a baby does not come with the first time you are together with a man.

“But a bigger fear you have still is that you worry that you *will* have a child with Bright Feather. That,” she says with certainty, “is another fear that one does not need to have special skills to know about. All women worry of such things for all women know of those who have gone on to the spirit world during the hard battle of childbirth.”

I am silent just as she is lost in memories. We walk for long moments, she with thoughts of her daughter Black Fox, Bright Feather’s first mate, and the grandson that never lived to see a sunset. Me with thoughts of Ma and how Eli knew only ever me as his Ma even though I was just a girl of eight. I wonder, what do I dread more? Do I fret that I never will have a child with Bright Feather or that I will? I can’t decide which path is more filled with worry.

We walk for a bit more and I know we are close to the village. “Men worry about such things, too, but their worries show in different ways. Maybe the baby I know you will have with Bright Feather waits until it knows the worry of *wanting* a child will become greater than the worry of *having* a child – for both of you.” I had not thought of Bright Feather worrying about me and the dangers of childbirth. It was the death of Black Fox and his son that caused him to go from being the great hunter known as Hawk to the man I first met known as One Who Is Always Alone. I sigh and shake my head at the tiny hole I peek through to view my world. I realize I must work more on seeing how others think and feel than just my selfish self.

She touches my arm. “When the worry gets great about the *having*, look around you at every single living being you see and know that the *wanting* usually wins out eventually.” She snorts loudly at her own joke. “And have fun with the practicing in the mean time.”



We enter the village with her hand still on my arm and I’m certain my face is red with the thoughts of the ‘practicing fun’ to make a baby with Bright Feather. As we get towards the center where the council circles are held, her hand tightens on mine in caution and warning. “Watch and listen carefully for the brightness, my daughter, for darkness is here in this village again.” I raise my head in concern to see a strange Indian brave talking with our village chief, Great Elk and War Woman, his mate. He wears the clothes of a white man but it does not change who he is. But the darkness One Who Knows speaks of, I realize, is more probably in the form of the white soldier standing stiff and surprised and looking right at me.

One Who Knows stumbles and I stop to catch and steady her. “Are you alright? Shall I take you back to your hut?” I ask quick with concern. My mind scrambles to still the millions of

thoughts buzzing around in my head like an angry hornet's nest. My heart thumps and thumps. *Don't forget me too!*, it seems to say with a panicked shout.

She places her hand on top of my hand and looks deep into my eyes calm and unconcerned. "I am fine. *So are you.* Remember who you are and what you have learned and where you choose to go. You have handled many situations much more difficult than talking to a white man here in your own village." I realize she has stumbled on purpose to give us a moment for *me* to gather my thoughts.

I grin at her serious eyes. "I am Bear, daughter of One Who Knows, of the Elk clan of the Real People of the Maple Forest and the mate of Bright Feather, son of War Woman of the Wolf clan and Great Elk, chief of the Real People of the Maple Forest. I am a Powerful Woman."

She nods her head satisfied. "*Now*, you can take me home. We will meet these men tonight I am certain."

I realize something about myself as we walk casual past the strangers in our village. I feel my heart slow and my thoughts still and my eyes take stock of who is present and who is not and my senses register the feelings around the council circle group. I realize I do particularly well in unexpected situations; my brain and heart get the sudden shock – like getting struck by a bolt of lightning I suspect – and then everything settles into a hum of high alert. *Experience is the best teacher, Elle*, I hear Pa say loud and clear in my head. Lord knows I've had some experience with unexpected situations! Kidnapped by Indians not once, but twice. Responsible for the death of one white man and pleased about the death of at least three red ones. All before I turned sixteen years. I sigh and shake my head at the passel full of experience that I've been educated by as One Who Knows and I make our way to her hut. *Proper schooling would have been a might easier I suspect*, I think with a quiet chuckle to myself. *Oh well...*

By the time I have the council fire area to my back, I already know that these strangers have just arrived for they are not seated nor have their horses been tended to. I see that Great Elk and War Woman are alert yet do not appear overly threatened. I see a number of others who sit regularly in council circles making their way towards the council area. I am certain that the brave has white blood in him. And I know that the soldier is powerful curious about me for he follows me with his eyes like no other.

I leave One Who Knows at her hut and am glad to see that Turtle has begun the evening meal. She gives me a shy smile and then gets back to her work. At our hut, I have not even finished the preparations of our meal before Bright Feather, Raccoon and Red Fox show up; Red Fox has obviously gone and got them. I stand as they approach and see the concern in their eyes. "They have seen me," I tell them, "and they are powerful curious who I am." Then I tell them what I have seen and know.

As it is with almost every night in the village, after the evening meal is completed many travel to the council circle to talk and hear the way of things. Tonight has a different feel to it as Bright Feather and me make our way through the dark and light spots of the village to join the evening's discussions. Just before we enter the bright spot of the council circle fire, Bright Feather pulls me into the shadows for a long embrace. I feel his tension and know his desire to protect me; it

is a good feeling. But there is something more I realize as I reach up and touch his face and kiss his mouth and smell the wonderful smell of him. I realize with a start that I am right calm about things. I reach up and touch my husband's face and smooth my fingers through the three colorful feathers tied in his hair – red for cardinal, yellow for goldfinch and blue for blue jay. In the darkness and shadow the flickering firelight flashes brightly on his long dark hair. “These people were once my people,” I say to him quiet like in the safety of the shadows. “I know *both worlds*. More than anything, I remember what One Who Knows and Great Elk have said that I bring brightness to this village. I think this village is much better off with me here than without. I think that much of what has happened to me so far is to make sure I am right in this spot right now. So let us go see just what I can hear and understand about these people who think they still *are* my people.” I draw him down for a long and lovely kiss.

When the kiss is finished, Bright Feather takes long moments to search my face, in no hurry to go into the light. Then he grunts, the closest I have ever heard him come to outright laughter. He's apparently satisfied with what he sees. “Do you think this soldier is afraid? I think maybe he should be.” He kisses me again holding my face between his two big red hands and then takes my white hand and leads me to the brightness of the council circle.

The white soldier seated in the council circle cannot conceal his surprise as Bright Feather and I arrive hand in hand. It is Bright Feather's way of making a statement to these strangers, I know, as we rarely show affection to each other within the village and never in the council circle. The Indian brave that has traveled with the soldier shows no expression whatsoever but watches us both just the same. Seated with the newcomers are War Woman, Great Elk, One Who Knows, and Raccoon. I realize that this group is specially called for others that regularly join the council circle are not here. All wear their serious faces, even Raccoon who enjoys nothing more than to cause me problems and confusion with his teasing.

“My name is Major Alexander Everett and this is my interpreter, George Maw,” the soldier with fair hair and blue eyes says to me. He looks strange among the ring of dark faces and dark hair and I realize that with my brown hair and tan skin I go more with the dark than light. Even his partner has dark brown hair and brown eyes. “I am a member of the Second United States Calvary, Division of the Army, Company A. Our unit is presently based in Virginia, and we work with Ninth Virginia Cavalry, Company D out of Fort Winston, Virginia, of which George Maw regularly works.” He looks at me seated across from him sitting between Bright Feather and Raccoon.

“I am here because of a communication I have received regarding one,” here he searches through his pack and takes out a letter which he begins to read aloud to the group. He speaks in English and I translate to all those in the circle ignoring George Maw.

*“- poor young woman of obvious gentle breeding for her manner and way was most kind and solicitous to all she came in contact with when treated with care and compassion. She was brought to this Indian settlement as a rescued captive and spent approximately six weeks with us this April last, 1829, however, it was our understanding that prior to her arrival she had spent a considerable amount of time north of here in the Indian village that is frequently referred to as “Indiantown” for want of a better name. Upon her arrival here, she was fully acclimated to the Indian way of life and was fluent in the language and customs to the point where she was unwilling to reveal her white*

*name or history. She departed with three Indian braves, one being the eldest son of Chief Dark Cloud, and one French trader by the name of Martin DuBois with the destination I understand to be the hopes of returning her to her white relations. None in the party have been seen or heard of since. The Cherokee Nation has made every effort to cooperate and become a civilized partner with the United States of America. The United States Government has been supportive and eager to encourage a solid alliance with the Cherokee nation. It seems to be an easy matter to join these two like mannered forces and to inquire into the safety and well being of this young woman whom my wife and I have embraced and taken to heart as if she were our own daughter. We would be most appreciative to any assistance you could afford us in securing information regarding this young woman's whereabouts and health. Your Humble and Sincere Servant who in His Holy Name I entrust my soul and safety, Reverend James Francis Wilder, New Echota, Georgia, July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1829"*

His blue eyes meet my green ones and I feel the silence stretch across the fire growing longer and longer. At last he says, "Are you the young woman Reverend Wilder refers to in this letter?"

"Yes, I am," I say but I answer not in English but in the language of the Real People. George Maw translates to Major Everett and when he finishes I explain, "I will speak to you in the language of The Real People as that is the language of this council circle."

"I understand," Major Everett says politely, "and I will trust that you will continue to translate my words as carefully as George Maw does yours." I nod my head.

He reaches into his pack and takes out another paper, one that I recognize before he hands it across to me for I have seen the likeness drawn on it. "Have you seen this?" he asks, and I translate his words and then read aloud the words about me and my capture to the council circle:

*"On the evening of TUESDAY, the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March in the year of Our Lord 1828, the peaceful homestead of Andrew Graves, Esq. of Ward's Mill, Virginia was violently and savagely attacked by a marauding band of blood thirsty Indians. No surviving witnesses were found to provide an accurate account, however, it is with the Utmost Hope and Desire that the person of Mistress Elle Graves might still be Alive and with the Most Extreme Care and Speed be found and returned post haste. All leniency will be afforded to those cooperating with authorities in the positive outcome to this tragic occurrence. April 10, 1828, Cornelius Cooper of Ward's Mill, Virginia."* Beneath the writing is my picture, roughly drawn with the description: *"Orphaned white girl whose mother has died and father and brothers have been murdered by marauding Indians, who answers to the name of Elle.."*

I look up when I have finished reading and translating and look at Major Everett. "Yes, I have seen this," I answer, "I saw it just this past month in the trading post of our friend and brother, Deer, also known as William Holland Thomas, in Forest City, North Carolina." I hand the paper back to him.

"Are you Elle Graves?" he asks, taking the paper and holding it casual like in his hand.

"No, I am not," I answer strong and sure and I meet his eyes. I try not to even blink. "I am Bear, of the Elk Clan, daughter of One Who Knows, mate of Bright Feather, son of War Woman of the Wolf Clan and son of Great Elk, chief of The Real People of the Maple Forest."

"I see," he says, after listening to the translations and carefully studying each blank Indian face in the council circle. "I had suspected that you would say that. You understand that there are those that still search for this Elle Graves and wish for her safe and speedy return?"

After I translate, at first I am silent. But then finally I say, “Yes, I can see that there are those that search for her. But none of them are her family it seems.”

He looks down at the flier and I see him read through the final bits and see *Cornelius Cooper*. He puzzles for a moment and then he finally says, “Often the proprietors of general stores or trading posts are listed as the point of contact as they are more easy to find and more well known. She might have other family members besides the ones that are spoken of.” His answer from all is silence.

Major Everett looks at all of those around the council circle but then settles on me and finally he asks, “How is it that you sit here in Indiantown when last you were seen on the trail with four men charged with the assignment of returning you to your white relatives? Are those men here and we do not know it?”

“You have been misled if you think that I am not where I wish to be.” I tell him. “You were also misled if you believe that *the four men charged with the assignment of returning me to my white relatives* had anything such as that planned. I am not a prisoner here, I have never been tied nor have I ever been attacked or brutalized here. The only time that I have ever been hurt by anyone was under the *care* of Dark Cloud’s son of whom I refuse to speak for his name is dirt in my mouth. I carry scars from him and his treatment on my arms,” and I hold up my hands that show wrists forever marked by rope burns, “and on my body,” here I open my tunic to show the scar that is still pink and new over my breast. “I carry more wounds such as this made from a knife and from teeth – eleven in all, do you wish to see more?”

Major Everett swallows and appears even paler than before. He does not need the translations I think from the sound of my voice as I speak, the scars I show on my body and the anger I flash in my eyes. “No, I do not need to see more,” he finally manages to say.

I continue. “As for the whereabouts of these men, I do not know and I have never known. I am back here where I want to be in the village of The Real People of the Maple Forest. I know only that I was taken by force by this son of Dark Cloud and held against my will at that village. The only people who showed real concern for my safety were the Reverend Wilder and his wife, Miss Rebecca. They were unwilling to believe anything less than what they were told by those in charge and I was never in a position to convince them otherwise. I am grateful for their concern over my health and safety. Please assure them that I am fine, wish them well, and,” I smile a little smile, “I am still saying my prayers.”

Major Everett is smart enough to realize that to discuss my white life will not benefit him much in this council circle and the talk finally turns to other things. Food is brought and enjoyed and I feel the tension up my back start to ease just a slight bit. I learn that Major Everett has been part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division of the United States Cavalry for more than fifteen years. George Maw has been many times to Dark Cloud’s village, but always in the capacity of the cavalry’s need for a translator. Both soldiers agree that the opportunities within the cavalry cannot be equaled anywhere else within the military. “There is an independence that cannot be equaled in riding your own horse, scouting new and different places and viewing the world from a higher place than most,” Major Everett says with a shy smile.



Bright Feather and I decide the next morning to have me ride out early on Willow and avoid any more contact with either Major Everett or George Maw. Bright Feather will stay in the village and watch the way of things. Willow is glad to see me and dances in excitement as I ready her to ride out. "That's a beautiful horse you have," a white voice says to me and I turn around startled to see Major Everett leaning against a large oak.

I take a deep breath to still my jumping heart and stroke Willow's soft silky side. "She's white and learned to be an Indian, just like me," I say. "Miss Rebecca Wilder said that I couldn't go back to being white but would never be red and that perhaps I was more closely pink. Willow's the same way."

"I know you are Elle Graves," he says in the quiet of the forest as I mount up onto Willow as fast but as casual as I can. "The picture is not a good likeness, but the age fits and Dark Cloud was able to share with me when he knows you came to be a part of this village and where he suspects your family is from."

"Seems powerful interesting to me how much he seems to know about me considering I never had the *pleasure* of knowing him until a few months ago and even then I told him *nothing* of myself," I say, and I remember how very, very much I hate him and his dead son.

Major Everett surprises me with a laugh. "Do you know, that is exactly what I said to him." He looks at me, "Considering the Wilders insisted that you never revealed anything about your white past to them, I found it hard to believe that you would have chosen to tell Dark Cloud anything of a personal nature and I said so to him. He told me that in his capacity for leadership he had many connections and had heard information about you from a number of sources." His face tells me that he finds those words hard to believe. "You have nothing to fear of me. I am not here because of Dark Cloud but because of the Wilders. Rebecca is my aunt, you see."

I don't know what to say to him but I search his eyes and think, *Why would he lie to me?* I can't think of a reason.

"They are tenderhearted, the two of them." He smiles shyly at me and sighs. "I'm glad that God watches over them for they need all the help they can get."

I remember my time at Dark Cloud's village and the danger I feared for them more than for myself. "Almost nothing is as it seems in that place," I finally say. "Yet, whenever they spoke, I knew that their words meant just what they said and had no hidden meanings. There was never a time that I didn't believe that they were truly worried for my safety and my well being." He smiles a smile of gratitude for the way I think of his aunt and uncle.

I will him to go away. Far away. Away from me and my life here, leaving me safe and sound and where I want to be. He looks at me with concern and kindness. And a fair bit of stubbornness, too, I realize with regret. Finally I say, "The flier says that Elle Graves' father and brothers were killed and that her mother was already dead. She's called an orphan. Seems to me that there isn't much for her to go back to."

He sighs and walks away from the oak to mingle among the other horses and view the beauty of the autumn forest with its floor of golds and reds and yellows. “Indiantown is an aberration. Do you know what that means, Bear?” he asks me and I shake my head ‘no’. “It means that it is a place unlike any other place that people know of.” *A Garden Walled Around ... chosen and made peculiar ground*, I think of the words of the Isaac Watts song. “It is an Indian village that has barely any signs of the white world in it. That alone is stunning in this day and time. It is like going back in time to before the whites’ arrival before the sicknesses, before the lies, before the Old Ways were called the ‘old ways.’ But this is not an Indian town, is it?” He laughs and sweeps his arm out towards the sounds of the stirring village. “This is a *United States of America town* full of *citizens* of that country. Here is the problem which you might find surprising, but unfortunately you probably won’t: *No one wants this place or knows what to do with it.* The United States of America doesn’t really want it. The State of North Carolina certainly doesn’t want it. And here is the saddest thing: The Nation of The Real People don’t want it anymore either. They would *all* just like this Indiantown to *go away*. Disappear. Cease to exist. Never have happened. Every single one of those powerful institutions would like you all to just vanish and they would love to find a reason to make it happen.”

He walks over to stand next to me and I look down at him from Willow’s back and he gazes up at me. The last remaining fall leaves drift down around us like colorful snowflakes. “*You* could be an excellent reason to make trouble for this place called Indiantown. *You* could be a reason for the United States of America to reconsider the citizenship status of this village of *red savages*. *You* could be a reason for the State of North Carolina to reconsider its *magnanimous* offer of money in replacement of the land reservations they promised but could not give. *You* could be the reason that The Nation of The Real People does not step forward in defense of this place for they have done everything in their power to secure your freedom and have even had blood shed over it. *You are exactly what all these powerful institutions are all looking for.* The unanswerable questions that surround you and the voices that call you still from the white world could be music to the ears of those who wish this place serious harm.”

Major Everett’s words are awful words to hear. I want to throw my hands up over my ears and keep them from getting into my head and heart. I feel like I have so often felt in my life that there are no choices for me, just action I must do. “So what do you tell me to do? For it seems to me whether I am this Elle Graves or not, just the fact that I am a white woman in this Indian village seems to be a problem. I have heard that from Dark Cloud already and even from Great Elk and War Woman.”

“Seems to me that you have only one choice,” he begins to say but I interrupt him.

“Choosing between two things is a choice,” I say with bitter words, “choosing between one thing is not a choice at all.”

I really think he is sorrowful for me as he says the next words, “You must go back to Virginia and tell them what has happened to the young woman named Elle Graves.” I feel the fear and the tears begin to build and turn Willow into the forest so that Major Everett will not see either feeling. As I ride into the woods I hear him say to me, “We will wait another day before we leave. We would be a good escort for you should you wish it.” I want the black fur earplugs that Raccoon

gave Bright Feather to shut out Major Everett's words but I know it is already too late for they are colliding around in my brain sucking my life right away.

I ride the whole day alone on Willow feeling powerful sorry for myself. My heart is full of sorrowful questions that tear me apart. What is it about me I think? Why does disaster seem to be the course of my life whether I live in the white world or the red? Does everyone have a life like mine and face choices that are no choices? I listen in my head for wise words from Pa and try to remember important things I have learned from Bright Feather and One Who Knows but my thoughts are silent. Then quietly, I hear Miss Rebecca's words, *Then shall ye call upon Me, and ye shall go and pray unto Me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart.* So I try praying to this God that is supposed to be so loving and I am told cares so much about me and I ask Him, *Why? Why must I do this thing? Why must I leave those I love to go back to a life that has nothing for me? Why?!*

And then the answer comes to me like the start of a soft breeze that grows and builds with force until it becomes a blasting force that whips your hair across your face and tears the branches off of trees. *For Love*, the answer says. *Only for Love.*



I ride into the village that evening just before the evening meal, and as I expected with guests in the village, many including Bright Feather, Otter, and Raccoon are seated around the council circle eating and talking. Bright Feather stands as Willow and I walk into the flickering firelight. I have returned as planned and I can see just passing concern for me as he walks towards me. He touches my cheek and murmurs for only me to hear, "I missed you, my mate, but I hope your day was a good one. Things have been quiet and easy here in the village today."

I smile at him - a sad smile - and he stops short for he can tell that tears are close and that is powerful unusual for me. "Are you well?" he asks in concern and I nod my head 'yes' but choose not to speak for I am uncertain if my voice will work.

"Will you join us to eat?" I hear Otter call from the circle with her usual bright smile and she rises to get a bowl for me. I can see all eyes are on me. I slip my hand in Bright Feather's and still concerned he grasps it tightly. Together we walk closer to the group. I see Major Everett and George Maw seated amongst the group relaxed and at ease.

At the edge of the circle, I look at Major Everett and his eyes tell me he knows I have made a choice that really is no choice at all. I struggle on the words that I manage to push out of my mouth as I look at Major Everett and clutch onto Bright Feather's hand. "My white name is Elle Graves, late of Ward's Mill, Virginia," I say to him in English and the words just about choke me. Bright Feather, of course can understand what I say although no one else in the village can. He looks at me and then to Major Everett and back at me again and I look at him and think how much I love this man. The feeling bursts from the very center of me and is greater than any sorrow or hurt or loneliness I have ever felt or imagined. As I look in Bright Feather's very troubled eyes, I say clearly to Major Alexander Everett of the Second United States Cavalry Division, Company A, "I am the girl you are looking for and the one that must be returned to her people in Virginia."

I've never seen Bright Feather angry I discover right quick. The talk around the circle swirls around me as I stare at the uneaten bowl of rabbit stew that Otter has placed in front of me. For once, it seems, my stomach is not hungry. George Maw is hard pressed to do all the translating back and forth for I'm not inclined to do any talking and he must do the part I did last night. Major Everett explains the same things he has explained to me. Bright Feather, Raccoon and even some others around the circle argue that there are other ways around these things. They're all ways I have thought of over the course of my long, terrible day alone with me and my sorry thoughts and there are still a few more I've considered that they haven't gotten to yet.

It's One Who Knows who at last speaks and causes the arguments to stop. "My daughter, Bear, is right. She must return to the whites just as our brother Deer had to return although for different reasons." She looks at me fiercely but it sends me love and strength just the same. "Bear knows who she is, Deer was uncertain. Bear knows where she belongs. Deer could not decide. Things must always be done in the proper order. *Life is filled with hard choices that correctly made lead to an existence of harmony and peace. But it can take a long time to get there.* This village must gain strength and prepare for fierce battles that are coming. That involves fixing things inside our borders *and outside.* Deer has warned us; only but the greatest fool would deny that great battles are still ahead. Bear must return and carefully put out all fires that could spread to this village and threaten its existence of peace and harmony. But she will return to us for she is no longer *Elle Graves* and though many will force her to look for her, she will not be able to find her."

"I will travel back with my mate," Bright Feather finally says in a tone that asks no permission and denies any discussion.

"No, you will not," I say to him for I've prepared myself for this argument that I knew would come. His look tells me that he's prepared to argue with anyone but me. "They will not understand that you are my husband, even if we say it is so. You can be blamed for my taking and for the killings that happened at the homestead. It would be your word and mine – a foolish young girl who's been kept with red *savages* for nigh onto two years – against an angry group of homesteaders powerful hungry for revenge. You will not go, you will stay safe here. Major Everett will travel back with me."

It's War Woman who speaks, but many nod in agreement. "She is right, my son, you cannot travel with her."

"In fact," I turn to Major Everett, "I do not want them to know where I was found. Is that possible?"

"I see no reason why we need to be specific about the location of your *rescue*," he says after thinking for a moment. He looks at George Maw who shrugs his shoulders.

It's Raccoon who speaks next. "It is obvious that Bear feels that she can trust you, Major Everett. I mean no disrespect when I question the character of Mr. George Maw. Tell me, what is your opinion on the way of things here in this village and beyond its borders?"

George Maw finishes the translating of Raccoon's question and then answers for himself. "My mother is full Cherokee," he says, "and my father is full white. I was raised with a strong taste of both worlds. I grew up away from the lands of the Real People but returned each summer to

spend time with my mother's family and learn their ways. When land was taken again in the Treaty of 1819, most of my mother's family chose to travel west of the Mississippi. I am a translator because I can do it and do it fairly." He looks across the fire at me and smiles a small smile, "Major Everett has told me what his aunt has said to you. I am a different shade of pink than you, but I am pink just the same."

In our hut that night the silence continues from me. I've nothing to say and am tired to the bone. And for sure there is nothing that anyone can say that will make me feel any better. I lay down on the furs and curl up into a tight ball willing my thoughts and worries and tears to go away and leave me in peace but that doesn't work. Bright Feather seems unable to settle down, too, and finally walks out into the night leaving me to my own sorrows. I understand his helplessness, I think. I lay there tense and miserable wishing I could just escape to a place with no sorrow or pain or worry. But there is no where to go.

Time passes but I don't sleep. My mind struggles to remember pictures to carry with me that will help me once I'm away from this wonderful place. I must keep my memories sharp and not let them grow cloudy. I listen to the noises of the village and the woods and try my hardest to remember every speck of it. I listen to the nightingale sing and hear Companion and Willow stomping and snorting in their place nearby. Then I realize that the nightingale sings a powerful lonely song, one that I'm unfamiliar with and I know that it is no nightingale at all.

I step out into the dark night and follow the song for I know all of a sudden that it is Bright Feather. He's seated in a clearing that's so bright that there are shadows of the trees on the ground cast by the light of the full moon. I sit down next to him and rest my tired, sorrowful head against his shoulder. He makes no move to touch me and for the first time in many, many months I remember how he was when he was called One Who Is Always Alone.

"It was a choice that was no choice," I begin. "It was not something I could discuss with you for it was my decision to make and not one that you could have helped me with. You said one time to me, *The only way you can keep your other choices is to make this one.* This was just like that, Bright Feather. I had to make the choice to go back for otherwise I could lose these other choices that mean so much to me: you, the Indian way, this village. A wrong choice could mean that it could all be lost." I weave my arm underneath his and find his hands clenched in tight balls. "I will come back. I will go back and say, 'Here I am: Elle Graves, but I am no longer her. I am healthy, strong, happy and smart. I am Bear. I am the mate of Bright Feather. I wish to go back and live with them always. Where is my horse? Thank you, good bye.' I will be back before the first flower buds."

He is silent for a moment and then he grunts and shakes his head. "That is a ridiculous plan but you are the only one I know who might be able to succeed with it." His tight fists open and he wraps his big warm hands around my one small one. "As soon as you leave here I ride to Deer. I will tell him what has happened and ask him what we should do." He lets go of my hand and turns and grabs my face and holds it tight, almost too tight, and says fiercely, "If you have trouble, *any trouble* you send word to Deer's trading post by letter or a messenger you trust. As soon as you can, you go there to his place and I will come to get you there."

"I promise," I say. "I will do as you ask. Now it is my turn to ask a promise of you."

His hands release my face and he lays back on the grass, throwing his arm across his eyes. “What,” he says in a tired voice and I realize that he is as day weary as me. “What would you have me promise?”

“No matter what you hear or what concerns you have, you will not leave Indian territory to come for me. I cannot have that fear tied around my neck forever worrying that you will risk your life for me.”

Still without looking at me he sighs and says with angry words, “And tell me, Bear, how that is different from what you are doing now.”

It is my turn to be angry for I realize the importance of this promise. “There is a great difference and you know it! I can never be in as much danger as you would be just by crossing a border.” I lean over and pull his arm from across his face and his dark eyes look at mine hovering over his. “Give me your word,” I demand.

In a flash I am flipped on my back and he is above me, looming in the dark night. “I promise ... that I will not lose you. I promise ... that we will be together again. I promise ... that I will always love you. I promise ... that I will not put myself in danger unless it is the only way to help you. Those are the only things I will promise you, *ever*.” The fierceness of his look tells me I know I must settle for that.

I touch his face and try to smooth away the fierce look and the lines of worry I see around his eyes. “You must remember, I am much more than I was the last time they saw Elle Graves. I am a powerful Indian woman with much knowledge and ... only a little fear. I will watch, and listen, and learn, and be very patient. And then I will come home to you,” and I pull him down to kiss him.

“You seem to be in some danger now,” he says quietly after a time, but I laugh at the threat.

“If I could only be in this kind of danger for the rest of my life,” I say and I sigh a wonderful sigh as he kisses the hollow between my neck and shoulder and I feel his warm breath send shivers up my back. I force the fears and worries away as I wrap my arms and legs around him and try with all my might to draw him right inside of me.

“I love you, *Elle Graves*,” he says to me in my ear.

The chill of the autumn night finally forces us back to our hearth and the warmth of the furs. A full moon’s brightness does not warm like the sun. Still neither of us wishes to sleep. I stir up the fire and add a few sticks to the red coals. By the time Bright Feather has dragged out two big wraps, the fire is warm and inviting.

“Tell me how you got your permanent marks,” I ask him suddenly as I stare at his face in the firelight and will myself to remember every single speck that I see.

He shrugs. “It is a little bit like names for you often get them to celebrate an important part of your life. For me, I received them when I received the name of Hawk. Three lines for the three claw marks a hawk often leaves on its prey. Great Elk did them for me.”

“I would like some,” I say all of a sudden before I can change my mind. “One Who Knows has them. I wish to have some so that no matter what clothes or skin color I have, people when they look at me will know that I am more red inside than white.”

He looks at me for a moment, pondering my face as an artist would. “And what would you have?” he finally asks. I think as an afterthought he adds, “It is painful, you know.”

I shiver but it is not from the cold. I draw my bearskin around me and Bright Feather moves closer to me. “I do not know,” I say. “I do know that I have many marks on my body from my times since I left Ward’s Mill, Virginia. There are few people who see them, but I know they are there just the same. I would have some marks on my body that speak of other times that I would choose to remember with love and happiness.”

He reaches over and studies my face and his hands touch the smoothness of my forehead and my cheeks and my chin. He is like an artist searching for the right place to do a design I realize and I shiver again. He takes his knife out and places it in the hot coals of the fire. “Do you know of the four sacred directions?” he asks me finally.

“No,” I say concentrating hard to stop the shivering nervousness that seems to be slowly creeping through all parts of my body. I shut my eyes and concentrate on the gentle rhythm of his voice.

“Well,” he says, “the direction in which the sun rises from is called *The Direction of Beginnings*. It speaks of family, togetherness, sharing, and spiritually-same thoughts. Within a family or group of friends there is a certain freedom that comes with that sense of belonging and unity.” As I listen to his voice my shivering slowly stills and I close my eyes and remember my family here in this village and I know exactly of that sense of freedom that comes with that feeling of belonging. “This first mark on your chin,” he takes the knife from the coals and I hear the sizzle of it being cooled in the birch bark container we keep nearby to drink from, “is for the *Direction of Beginnings* and I feel a sharp pain as he cuts my chin and a greater sting as he rubs the wound with ashes from the fire.

He puts his knife back into the coals. “The direction in which summer comes earlier and winter comes later is called *The Direction of the Natural*,” he says in a quiet soothing voice. He blows a cool breath on my stinging chin. “It speaks of the natural way of life and the boundaries that must be kept in place to make all things harmonize. It reminds us of respect for Mother Earth and the importance we have in protecting her. It is rooted in innocence, play, and the respect of learning.” I think of the contrast of the way of life between the whites and what I have learned here in the Maple Forest. I think of love of my Pa and how I think he was more Indian than he was white with the way he wanted to live his life. I think of all that I have learned to love and respect in my time here in the Maple Forest. I hear the sizzle hiss of the hot knife cooling just before feel the second sharp cut in my chin.

“The direction in which the sun sets,” Bright Feather continues, “is called *The Direction of Introspection*.” This time he blows warm breath and follows that with a light feather kiss on my trembling lips. I work to concentrate on his words and not the pain that screams so loudly on my face. “Our strength, our will, and our self-awareness comes from this direction. Belief in one’s abilities and the understanding of what should be valued and what should be forgotten is a part of this direction, too.” I think of the changes that came about in me when I realized what a Powerful Woman I am. When I realized that I was no longer white and could never go back to the frightened white girl I once was. I think that perhaps this Direction of Introspection is one that has grown the

most in me. I feel the third cut get made and the sting of the ashes as they are rubbed into the wound.

With my eyes squeezed closed I am held in place only by Bright Feather's words and touch. I take short quick breaths to forget about the pain as Bright Feather blows, then kisses and then finally, this time, trails hot, wet kisses down my neck. He bites me careful where my neck and shoulder meet and I jump and for a moment I forget just about everything else but his mouth.

At last he says to me, "The final direction is called *The Direction of Sharing* and it comes where it is always coldest." He places his knife in the fire and I feel him kiss my mouth gentle and careful one more time but I still do not open my eyes. "This direction is a quiet one for it comes on the whisper of the winds. It speaks of generosity and sharing like the deer who is gentle and kind and Mother Earth who is generous with all nature has to offer. It is my direction for it is like when I used to be alone all of the winter and it is yours, too, for it is from you that I have learned of the *sharing of love*." And he kisses me again just before he makes the fourth cut and then does the final piece of smoothing in the ash.

The shivering starts again and it is not from chill I realize but from the thoughts of being far away from this man I love so fiercely and fear of being on my own with strangers who do not know me and do not care and I feel the tears building up behind my eyes and slipping out from my still shut eyes. "*Remember me, and I will always be there*," he whispers soft into my ear and gathers me close on his lap and wipes my face of tears and just a little blood I think. Silently we sit there, the two of us as one dark shadow, rocking back and forth, sharing our love and sorrow and fear. "*Destiny*," he whispers then, "*remember destiny*," he reminds me of our pledge on Deer and Possum's porch not so long ago, "no person, no situation, no thing will stop this that we have." And he loves me again in the warmth of our hut and furs and I try hard to remember every single moment and believe that I will be back here before the first flower blooms.

"I love you, Bear," is the last thing I remember him say before I finally fall fast asleep.

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Portions in the book that tell of stories from the Cherokee: Beaver's story of the Ceremony of Life, One Who Knows story of The Beginning of Time, Bright Feather's story of the Four Sacred Directions, and War Woman's story of Grandmother Corn and her song that she sings are based on the descriptions of these stories given in the book Meditations with The Cherokee, Prayers, Songs, and Stories of Healing and Harmony, by J.T. Garret, Ed.D., Bear and Company Publishers, Rochester, Vermont, 2001.

<sup>i</sup> from a Cherokee Sacred Formula quoted in A Bare Unpainted Table. By Gladys Cardiff, New Issues Press, Western Michigan University, 1999, p. 33

<sup>ii</sup> From a poem entitled "Remember Me", Copyright 1989 Renee Womble