

1: A Warrior's Curse

Respected by all, Snow Eagle's brother, Gray Storm became the White Chief and head of the council after the passing of their father. He has since proven to be a fierce warrior and a brave, dependable leader. The safety of their tribe rests on his broad shoulders.

With rumblings of the Civil War looming between the north and south, it was critical to fill the position of Red Chief, recently vacated by the unexpected death of their uncle, Chief Winter Hawk. Tonight they pondered the fate of their families, how best to defend them, and discussed which young warriors should be considered to replace Winter Hawk. More pressing however, was the news of the continued raids on nearby Cherokee settlements. The most disturbing was the total destruction, killing, and kidnapping that occurred on the Walkingstick land two days' ride to the south. The consensus was it had to be an underground operation of slave traders. There was no other explanation. These deviants preyed on people from all tribes. *"They call us red-skins . . . and worse, as opposed to the blacks captured in other lands across the sea.* At the coast, new arrivals of blacks were being traded for Indians that were then, shipped back to Europe. A profitable crossing for their organizations, in both directions.

Snow Eagle was sickened by the information they were starting to uncover. He stepped up onto the large flat boulder that jutted out over the river. With legs wide apart, clad in buckskins, and bone breastplate covering his broad bare chest, Snow Eagle silently begged the river to quiet his thundering heart. Scars of many battles crisscrossed his bronzed back. His silver hair brushed past his shoulders in the back, and two narrow braids wrapped in red yarn framed his striking weathered face. Across his forehead, a sweaty piece, of coarsely woven red fabric was tied in a knot at the back. Fluttering in the slight breeze from it were the eagle feathers, the Cherokee badge of honor. Their color and shape depicted his injuries, as well as enemies he'd killed over the course of his life. Facing the rising moon, Snow Eagle, standing tall with broad shoulders, arms crossed over his breastplate, was the silhouette of Cherokee pride and strength.

Breathing in a sigh of relief, a cool breeze with the sweet scent of freshly cut hay swept across the landing. The rippling water and night sounds played a lazy melody that usually soothed him. Snow Eagle had never needed that solace more than he did tonight. It was a hectic meeting, and no decisions were made. None of the suggestions seemed viable. His concern for Willow dominated his heart and his attention, making it impossible to concentrate on anything else. The

council and his brother wanted him to become the Red Chief, yet training the men and leading them into battle again was the last thing on Snow Eagle's mind. He would fight to defend his tribe, but he had already seen too many battles. That was a position for a much younger warrior. This was the first time in his life that he had a chance for real happiness. And, it was with his first true love. He was thankful that his brother and the council understood his decision to decline the honor and position offered to him. He asked the council members to keep his nomination confidential; he didn't want whomever they chose to feel like they were second choice.

The moon was high, casting a gossamer blanket of mist over the silver ribbon of water flowing far below. Along the water's edge, on the opposite bank, trees were cloaked in black. Their images reflected on the waves became gnarled fingers, rippling their way toward him. Their crooked arms stretched in homage toward Father Sky. Off to his left, in the dense underbrush, a bullfrog croaked, setting off a chorus of katydids. Bats darted across the water, snatching up thousands of mosquitoes. The night sounds from the river were peaceful, but his soul was unsettled. His heart ached for Willow. *What is wrong with her? What is our future going to be?*

Snow Eagle turned and sat on one of the two enormous stumps that had been rolled up onto the landing several years ago. The surface was smooth from being used as a bench for so many years, the bark long gone. As he breathed in the earthy smell of the muddy riverbank, he yearned to have her at his side. A pungent fishy odor hung below the air thick with mist. The sounds and smells of the river were all part of the ambience he loved. "Humph." *I would build a floating house and tie it to the bank, but everyone would think me crazy.* The next best thing was to position his new cabin as close to the water as he could without the risk of flooding, which was exactly what he did.

Snow Eagle's brow furrowed with deep concern swirling through his mind as his thoughts turned to her again. Willow's health disturbed him more than the upcoming war between the North and South. He could fight a war, but he could not fight what he didn't understand. His brother could worry about the raids and war rumors. Willow was the only concern he could concentrate on at this moment. She had been lost to him for over two decades. They had a chance to be happy and together, and yet, Willow was retreating into a dark place that only she could see. *What could possibly be wrong with you? This all started at your daughter's wedding. Since that day, it seems*

your soul is seeping out of your body. You are becoming just a shell of the person I found on that dirt farm.

Snow Eagle shook his head and took a last draw on his pipe. A chill crawled through him like a parasite creeping under his skin and worming its way into his soul. He could feel the burn in his chest as he rubbed his hand over his heart. Snow turned from the river to gaze at the cabin he'd been building for himself when word of the raid on the Walkingstick settlement reached them. Willow's son, Tahníe, rode into their settlement with five braves looking for any information that would help him find his mother and sister. His fear was that they had all been kidnapped. There simply was no sign of any of them, alive or dead. Rumors swirled around other villages that it was a band of army deserters and slave traders, working with several Indians from a Creek tribe in the southern part of the Indian Territory. Tahníe and his men searched for over a month without uncovering any other usable information.

The rest of what the boy said was a blur. Stunned to see Willow's son, now a grown man, Snow Eagle was taken back to when he first met Tahníe's mother, Willow of the Wind. He and his family were with many other Cherokee and white families migrating to parts of Kansas and continuing on to the Oklahoma Indian Territory. Willow and her son, who was just a boy of eight winters at the time, were traveling with her husband, Jimmy John Walkingstick. She had given birth to a beautiful baby girl, whose eyes, like her mother's, were the striking color of a bright summer morning.

Coaxed into a trance by the hypnotic movement of the river, Snow Eagle could see the past as if he was still standing next to his wagon watching her—*over two decades ago*. He would never forget the forlorn look on Willow's face, as she stood there, young and beautiful on the prairie. Her little papoose laced into a beaded cradleboard, her son Tahníe at her side, holding onto the fringe of his mother's dress. They watched Jimmy John Walkingstick ride off to scout for the army. Willow's back was ramrod straight, her head held high, but the enormity of being left on the wagon train alone with two young children had to have been an overwhelming weight on her small shoulders. "Willow, I fell in love with you at just that moment," Snow Eagle confessed to the river wind. *You were the most dazzling and graceful creature I had ever seen. A beauty second only to your sweetness. And...you were married.*

When Tahnie and his men came to them in the spring describing the destruction of their village and the loss of his mother and sister, neither heaven nor hell could have kept Snow Eagle from searching for her. Snow knew who Tahnie was immediately. Unfortunately, he had grown into a hotheaded brave. Tahnie and his men also had three of their tribal horses. They claimed to have found them roaming on the open rang, and asked Chief Gray Storm if they could trade the horses for winter provisions. Of course, Storm told them they were welcome to whatever they would need. He also invited them to join the tribe, even though, the council wasn't entirely sure they hadn't been part of the raid. When questioned further, Tahnie and his warriors took offense and left after a heated confrontation. They were so enraged, they left in a cloud of dust shouting obscenities, and completely forgetting to take the horses and the winter supplies with them. To the council that was all the more suspicious.

Snow never mentioned to Tahnie that they knew his mother, or that he had loved her. He simply stopped working on his cabin, organized his own rescue party, and departed at dawn the following day. He and his men spent the entire summer scouring every farm, ranch, and settlement in the Indian Territory before any useable information surfaced.

After months of dusty, dead-end trails, a half-breed from a Creek village was captured that admitted he had taken part in the raid. He was "coaxed" to divulge what part he had played in the kidnapping and disbursement of those that were to be sold. He sneered that she was "damaged in transportation" and would not go to auction block, but instead was to be sold to a black man who needed someone to take care of his children. With persuasion, he confessed that this was completely out of the ordinary for this operation. The buyer didn't want a Negro. He insisted on having a "squaw" for a nanny. *Maybe it was beneath him to buy one of his own kind.* Knowing that he was most likely not going to live through the night, this deplorable savage delighted in going into graphic detail about what his boss did to the women and children. "The laird," he said, had a particular fondness for little boys. He was correct. The smirk was wiped off his filthy mug, and he, in fact, did not survive the questioning. After talking to the Creek, Snow Eagle and his scouting party left him to rot for the buzzards and spent another moon cycle backtracking the ground they had already covered in a systematic search for a widowed black man with young children, who worked his own land.

The slave runners normally took the Indians they captured to Mississippi and traded for Negroes from Africa and the Caribbean. The Creek further explained that the Indians they captured were too hard to keep as slaves in America. They were wedded to their freedom and would frequently kill their masters, escape, or be rescued by other tribal members. Blacks, on the other hand, once on American soil, had no place to go back to, which was why they sent the “red-skins” to Europe. They too had no place to go and no one to rescue them. This was the main topic of the powwow. Snow Eagle had to admit that the operation was organized and most likely much larger than anyone knew. It also meant that if the captives weren’t located quickly, rescue would become impossible once they left the territory...

The day he found her played repeatedly in his mind. He thanked God countless times for the blessing. Snow and his warriors were weary of traveling and sleeping on the ground night after night. They had just decided to return to their settlement to replenish supplies and see if any other news had surfaced about Willow or any of the others captured. *We topped that ridge and looked down upon a dilapidated farm with dark children playing in a yard. A tiny woman wearing a calico dress and yellow sunbonnet dropped a wicker basket on the ground. The sun was beating down on her as she started to hang the laundry out on a sagging clothesline held up with two rickety poles. White speckled chickens pecked the dirt around her ankles, and an old flea-bitten hound dog appeared to be asleep on the porch step. Her back was turned toward us as we neared. The domestic scene of a farmer’s wife with her children was placid. She seemed to be at home and content. The children facing her were stone still as they watched us ride in.*

The woman turned and raised her hand to her eyes to block the glare of the midday sun and looked directly at us. When she lifted her arm, the chain pulled at her wrist. Not wanting to scare the woman and her children, we walked our horses calmly toward her. The old dog lifted its head and struggled to get his feet under him. His ribcage showed through the fur on his sides. He was in such poor condition he didn’t seem to have the energy to attempt a bark, or maybe the mongrel just didn’t care enough. The children were clean but skinny. Their enormous black eyes sunk into their skulls giving them a haunted appearance. The little boy was shirtless. Like the dog, his chest was sunken in and every rib could be counted.

Snow Eagle blew smoke rings as he sat on his log. The further they drifted over the river the larger they grew until they completely disappeared into the mist. He enjoyed the mesmerizing

habit that had become a nightly ritual. Snow could gaze at the water and instantly recall that first sight of her. It had been two decades since he'd laid eyes on Willow. At first, he had no idea that this woman could have been her. *But, there was no doubt the chained woman desperately needed their help. As we rode closer, the woman fell to her knees, covering her face with both hands. The braves spread out and circled the house, barn, and field. In the distance, we could see a man with a floppy straw hat, hunched over a plow as he guided the blade to create straight, deep furrows. He snapped his whip above the two plodding mules that appeared to be as poor as his dog.*

The children were as silent as a totem, but oddly did not go to their mother. They simply stood, rooted in the dirt, watching with vacant black eyes. Staring at the water, spellbound by his thoughts, Snow could feel the reins in his hands as he relived the moment; he dismounted Raven Feather and led the warhorse toward the woman. Her knees crumpled to the side so that she sat down hard on one hip. She sobbed into one hand, while the other arm was pulled up tight by the chain. I could see the raw wound on her wrist as I touched her hand. She looked up and blinked, piercing my heart with sadness, and tears of relief flooding her beautiful sky-blue eyes. "Willow?" Snow Eagle sucked in his breath remembering how the emotion gripped his heart. His hands shook as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled his beautiful Willow of the Wind to his chest. Hand behind her head, arm around her shoulder, he couldn't hold her close enough, but the chain pulled her away from him.

Snow Eagle had never cried. Not even when his wife died. Nevertheless, standing here by the river, a tear cleared a path through the dust on his bronzed cheeks. His throat clogged every time he relived that moment, and his jaw locked at the memory of touching the sun-warmed links of the chain binding her. *I will still kill the man who did this to her.* The black man who bought her was not the one that captured her, but he was the certainly the savage that chained her like an animal.

He chastised himself for not hauling the whole lot of them back to the village right then, but he was so stunned to find Willow, all he could think of was getting her away from that dreadful dirt farm.

His men rounded the barn dragging a screaming black man with them, his plow and mules left standing in the field. "A-da-hi-s-di na-s-gi-a-s-ga-ya" Kill him! He muttered to the river wind. *Willow placed her small hand on my shoulder. Oh— touch. I would do anything she asked.*

“No,” she said. “We are not like him Snow Eagle. I detest the man, but the children are sweet and have been kind to me. I cannot take him away from them. Their mother is already dead, and they are too young to live here on their own.”

Snow shook his head in disbelief as he listened to her. He ordered his men to search for the key and release Willow. As his men unlocked her chains, he approached the cowering mass of flesh. Grabbing a handful of shirt from the back of the man’s neck, he jerked the quivering skinny mass of bones to his feet, and whispered in his ear, “I will be back.” With one backhanded blow, he knocked the man face down in the dirt. Snow rubbed his fist. He could still remember the sting on his knuckles. “I will be back,” he whispered to no one. At the time, he had prayed the black man would get up or turn over. He did not.

His men should be there by now. Snow had sent them to “question” him. *Willow was right not to let them kill the man.* Because she’d asked him to show mercy for the children, he instructed them not to kill him now. However, the man would never buy another woman—nor would he ever bed one.

Once his braves released Willow, she went to each child, hugged them goodbye, and herded them into the house. As the screen door slammed behind her, she pulled the ribbon tie on the yellow gingham bonnet, gripped its brim, and threw it in the red dirt beside the man. A soft waterfall of glorious black hair floated to her waist.

Snow Eagle breathed in the moist air deeply. It was becoming a nightly ritual to re-live the memory of finding her. Willow’s smile, her face, and her hand lifted to him, were all etched into his mind forever. *I mounted Raven Feather and watched her approach. Her eyes bright, she raised her face and smiled, and then...lifted her left arm to me.* He remembered the warmth he felt when their eyes met. *I locked my forearm to yours and swung you up behind me. I can still feel your weight on my arm. It is as if we have traveled back in time.* “His” Willow swung onto the back of his horse for the first time in over two decades. *In my entire life, I have never felt as in love or as alive as I did at that very moment.* Every night by the river, he allowed himself the luxury of this one memory, and would do so for the rest of his life.

Snow Eagle was anxious to track down and dispose of those responsible for these heinous actions against his people. Something was happening to Willow though, and he didn’t want to

leave her for even a day. She was in a very precarious position, and it scared him. The joy they both felt that first day had begun to fade in less than a week. She was crawling inside herself and building a wall. *Just two days after I found you, we learned your daughter was alive and in love with a man for whom I have great respect. We went to your old settlement. Your son rebuilt your house. He attended your daughter's wedding. I know it bothered you being there, but coming here, to our new home... I thought you would bounce back.* It was seldom that Snow Eagle felt baffled about anything. This stumped him. *I cannot face losing you again.*

He enjoyed—in fact, he needed this nightly reprieve at the river. Snow started to relax his shoulders and shake the kinks out of his neck, when her piercing cry stabbed his heart and brought him to his feet. Memories invaded her sleep nightly. His imagination tormented him. Only God knew what happened to her before that farmer bought her...and after. *Once we are married, I'll be there for you every night and help you heal. Oh God, Willow. What did they do to you?*

Snow shook his head again in sorrow, tapped the pipe on the side of the stump, knocking the ash from the bowl, and then tucked it back into his leather pouch. He was never sure what to do when he heard her cry out. If she was crying out in sleep, he didn't want to wake or scare her by showing up at her door. *However tonight, Willow, if you light a candle, I'm coming in.* He needed to hold her, as much as she needed him. "If it weren't for Chewahnih coming up for the wedding, I would marry you tomorrow," he muttered to himself, folding his arms across his broad chest. "I might just do that anyway. Yes, that is exactly what we're going to do, Willow of the Wind." *We can have a Christian wedding or just a celebration next week when Chewahnih and Isaac arrive. I'm not going to let anything stop us from getting married immediately.* Wiping his hand across his mouth and chin, *we can't go through this another night. Hell! I can't go through this another night.*

His decision made, Snow Eagle stood across the path from the cabin. Slapping a mosquito on the back of his neck, he watched for any tiny sign that Willow was awake. It was the largest cabin in the settlement, and closest to his favorite place by the river. When he brought Willow home, he gave the cabin to her knowing that he would be marrying her, and this would be their home together. Now, he was no longer sure what was going to happen to them. Snow Eagle placed his hands on his hips. He was ready to turn and leave when he saw the flicker. Lifting one eyebrow, he ground his teeth and crossed the path with long strides on silent, moccasin-clad feet.

Through the small glass window in the door, he could see her kneeling on the floor by the tall bed. Her eyes seemed closed, and her head was leaning against the feather-filled mattress. Hating to disturb her, Snow Eagle steeled himself to the task. This has to be done. *Whatever is going on with you is going to change. Tonight!* She was drifting away from him just like the smoke rings, and yet he knew she loved him.

Gently, he tapped on the door. Willow startled at the sound and sprang to her feet. She could see his white hair through the window and froze in place. Snow Eagle worked the latch and in three steps was at her side. Embarrassed, wearing only a loincloth and a striped cloth binding her chest, she covered her eyes with one hand and wrapped the other around her waist. Snow Eagle appreciated that she was shy. They had only been reunited for a week, and she had always worn knee-high leather leggings and long sleeves even in the late-summer heat they'd been experiencing. *Enola*, her sister, had given her traditional clothing to replace the gingham dress she was wearing when he rescued her. Enola was married to the chief, Snow Eagle's only brother. Gray Storm had candidly mentioned to Snow that Enola told him, Willow was badly scarred, but he was reluctant to share anything more about it.

Snow Eagle peeled Willow's hands from her eyes and waist and placed them on his bare shoulders. He hefted her up as you would a small child and rocked her from side to side. Nuzzling her neck, he started chanting quietly, soothing her. He let her cry it out before sitting her back on the bed.

Willow dropped her head forward to keep from making eye contact with Snow. Her hands rested on her knees. Towering over her, Snow Eagle turned and walked over to the tiny wooden table, picked up a ladder-back chair with one hand, swung it around, and set it on the floor in front of her. Now sitting eye to eye, he touched her knee and forced her to look at him. Gently, he tilted her head up and tucked a lock of loose hair behind her ear.

"Willow, you have to tell me what is happening. Every day you withdraw more and more, and I'm afraid for you. What has happened? You were fine and joyous when you found out Chewahnih was alive and happily in love. Something happened when we went down there to see her. What was it?" Her eyes were cloudy and so full of pain it broke his heart to look at her. He smiled slightly and nodded encouragement to her, just as he had the day they returned to the

village. Willow had choked up when she addressed the council, while explaining what had happened to her and the others that were captured.

Staring at his face with vacant eyes, Willow swallowed deeply. She scared him so much, the hair on the back of his neck prickled with worry. It seemed that Willow's spirit had fled her body, leaving a thin fragile shell in its place. He wanted to shake the answer out of her, but quietly fought to contain himself. He waited silently and moved his hand to touch her knee again. Gathering her thoughts, Willow brought her eyes back into focus. She cleared her throat and licked her lips, but her mouth felt so dry she couldn't speak.

“Do you want a drink of water?”

Willow nodded yes. Snow Eagle rose to fetch a ladle full of water from the bucket. Steadying it with both hands, she drank deeply, nodded, and whispered “thank you.” He turned in the chair and laid the utensil on the wide tree stump he used as a table by the bed.

Snow sat patiently, waiting for her to speak. Finally, taking a deep breath, she looked up at him again, anguish straining her eyes; she began. “It was...it was,” she stammered. “The smell. When we went back to my home, it was the smell and the sounds that no one else could hear. The fire crackling, the shouts and screams, the smoke, the burning deer hides that covered the roofs of our homes. It seemed so real. I couldn't get it out of my head. I still smell it every minute, of every day. Snow Eagle, I think I'm going crazy.”

Snow Eagle sucked in his breath as it dawned on him what was happening to her. *The warrior's curse*. He too had experienced flashbacks after coming home from war. Certain smells or sounds would trigger a horrendous memory so real that it was like being on the battlefield again. Like a flash flood, the smell of blood, death and the sounds of war would drown you without warning. It would consume everything around you, sucking the very air out of your lungs, suffocating you. Willow was at war. She was still a prisoner of that war. The horror of being captured, and whatever happened after to cause those scars that had been so heinous she can't get past it. “Oh, my Little Dove.” He grabbed her, pulling her off the bed and onto his lap and rocked her again. Understanding what was happening to her was as much a comfort to him as it was to her. Relief spilled into his heart. *This will pass. And now I know how to help you.*

“Oh sweet girl, I understand. When a man goes to war, we experience the same thing when it is over. Most of us bury the memories in strong drink to chase the curse of war away. Honey, you have to talk it out to begin to heal. Shhh, now it’s going to be all right. It will get better with time, and I will always be here for you...always. You are not going crazy,” Snow Eagle assured, as he soothed and started to rub her bare back. He was shocked at what he felt on her skin. It was like running his palm down the bark of a pecan tree. At his touch, Willow flinched and drew back stiffly.

“What? Willow?” He recoiled his neck and narrowed his eyes so that he could see her. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, I just...just, didn’t want you to see me. And...and I can’t marry you Snow Eagle,” she blurted out. “You deserve someone who hasn’t been...hasn’t...,” Willow stammered and couldn’t complete her sentence. Her head fell forward onto his shoulder. “Marked,” she said as she exhaled the word in a whisper of breath.

“What do you mean? We will be married right here, right now Willow.” He smoothed his hands over her scarred back. “Do the scars of war on my back bother you?” he demanded.

Her head moved back and forth. “No. They do not bother me,” Willow whispered.

“They are who I am and so are your scars, Willow. They are the mark of a warrior. Nothing any man did to you would make me not want you for my wife in every way. Willow, I don’t know if you were violated or not. I want you for my wife, in any way you will have me. And, you will be my wife by this time tomorrow night. What we do throughout our life together, will be totally up to you. Your scars and anything that happened to you are who you are, and I love every part of you. You are a survivor and should be honored.” Snow Eagle embraced her tiny trembling shoulders and smoothed his hand back and forth across her rough back.

She nodded yes, and then said, “But...but, there is more.” She pulled back from him and rolled slightly to the right exposing her bare left hip under the edge of the loincloth.

Snow Eagle blinked and locked his jaw. He couldn’t believe what he was looking at. With the tender touch of his fingertip, he traced the shape of the S on her hip. His eyes narrowed to slits, and his mouth turned to a flat white line as the anger flushed his face to apple red and worked its

way into every pore of his body. He would annihilate this man in the most vicious way he could possibly think of, and feed him to the buzzards.

Willow cleared her throat and said. “When they were doing this to us, they laughed that this was the mark of the *squaw*, but there is something else under it.” Her damp eyes looked into his, questioning what it could be.

Snow Eagle touched the brand again and felt it. His husky voice cracked as he tried to talk around the lump that was threatening to strangle him. “It’s...it is a bar, Willow. It is a Bar **S** brand.”

The Cherokee don’t often brand their horses or what livestock they may have, but he’d been around many white men that did. He had smelled the burning hair, and heard the animals scream in unbearable pain. The burned flesh would become a festering wound filled with puss that attracted blowflies if left untreated. Ranchers put axle grease on the brand to keep the flies from laying eggs in the wound, but he doubted the white men treated this brand with anything.

He looked into her eyes and sadly smiled. Tipping her chin up and said, “Willow, the S stands for survivor. It is a badge of courage. No man I know is worthy of such a brand. I’m proud to have you as my wife. Never be embarrassed of this honor. You have survived the worst of man.”

Willow fell into his arms and wept with a relief she hadn’t known possible. When she sat back, her eyes were red and swollen, but she was smiling and took his face in both her hands and kissed him with all the love and passion she had stored for a lifetime. The words burst from her lips. “Let’s go wake my sister and the chief and have him say the words tonight. I don’t want to spend another night without you.”

Snow Eagle sat back, a grin spreading across his rugged face, as he pulled her to her feet, picked her up, and swung her around in a circle, practically knocking over the candle on the stand. He sat her on the bed and reached down to grab her moccasins. Willow, beaming at her husband-to-be, ran her fingers through his thick white hair as he knelt to lace up the knee-high moccasins. He had never seen the wounds on her ankles. It was plain that shackles had caused the bruises and open sores that had not healed. “Willow, you cannot wear these anymore. They will keep the wounds open. They need air to heal. Can you go barefoot to your sisters? She can give you a pair of low moccasins.”

Slightly relieved, Willow nodded yes. She just hadn't wanted anyone to see them yet, but now it hardly mattered.

He pulled her to her feet and hugged her one last time before pulling her tunic dress off the deer antler peg and slipping it over her head as you would a child. Willow smoothed it down over her hips and went over to the pail to splash cool water on her face. Snow Eagle blew out the candle and took her hand as they walked out the door. After they stepped off the porch, he swooped her off her feet. He laughed, "I will carry you!"

"No, put me down, I'm fine." she giggled, kissed his cheek, and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Galoni, the Fruit Moon was gliding high over the river when they strolled toward the chief and her sister's lodge. Evenings were starting to cool down at last.

As late as it was, a lantern still glowed through the open cabin door. Snow Eagle tapped on the door. He was greeted by his brother, whose grin broadened when he saw that Willow was in his arms. "I wondered how many nights would go by before you knocked on my door, brother," the chief teasingly said, as Enola grabbed Willow's hand and pulled her past the two men.

Both women were like young girls giggling and hiding a big secret. "Brother, would you marry us tonight?"

"Oh, yes he will!" Enola exploded with excitement. "Let's go to the water and say the words under the blessing of Father Sky. You men go out and knock on doors. There is much to do to prepare for the ceremony. Get Hidden Doe and Painted Turtle to bring what is needed. We will be there shortly." Enola pulled Willow away from Snow Eagle again, shoved the men out the door, and turned the latch so they couldn't come back in.

Willow was dazed from being tugged back and forth, but her color was high and joy was radiating from her twinkling eyes.

The brothers shook their heads and looked at each other not truly comprehending how they got to the porch and locked out of the cabin. Laughing at each other, the chief hugged his brother and congratulated him. "We'd better get started or we'll both be sleeping out here on the porch," the chief suggested.

Snow Eagle slapped him on the back with a grin. “I guess we know who really runs this tribe, brother. Heaven forbid if we aren’t ready when Enola makes her entrance with my bride!”

