

Susie Black Wolf

Turtle Boy rode high and proud on Spotted Nose. The pinto's body was freshly painted with red stripes and black circles. Five other Cheyenne ponies also cantered through the high grass of the endless prairie. It was Turtle Boy's first war party.

The week before, Turtle Boy fasted for four days, then offered a long strip of skin cut from his left arm to Heammawihio, the Great Spirit. The signs were favorable that the sacrifice had been accepted. The young Cheyenne had later dreamed of riding Spotted Nose while holding two scalps up in the air. Surely it meant they would kill many Pawnees on this war party. Excitement ran through his body like lightning through the sky. Soon he would be a man, a Cheyenne warrior.

It was the moon of the big freezing, a time when heavy snow might fall. A bone chilling wind whipped over the Indians' blanketed bodies.

"Eagle Nose and I saw traces of Pawnees near here," Dog Who Runs Crooked said. "Look where that bend in the creek tries to reach back and touch itself. We saw the remains of their fires there. We saw the tracks of eight horses."

The others whooped.

"Now we can have some fun," Little Crow said. "Soon we will fight the Pawnees."

Anticipation jolted through Turtle Boy's body. Thoughts of the fight to come warmed him so he barely felt the cold. The numbers meant nothing. Six Cheyenne would be more than enough for eight Pawnees. He closed his eyes and had a vision of an arrow from his bow piercing the breast of an enemy. He let loose a war cry. Soon he would be a warrior his people would talk and sing about while they sat at their campfires. Maidens would gaze at him with eyes full of yearning, hoping he would notice them.

Turtle Boy was proud to be on this war party. Little Crow, the leader, was well respected in the lodges of his people. Turtle Boy had feared that he might not be chosen due to his inexperience. Little Crow had beaten a drum in the middle of the camp, calling out to Cheyenne warriors.

“A very bad Pawnee called Galloping Lightning has killed my brother, Buffalo Moon. I must seek revenge. Who of you has the courage to ride with me against this brave and dangerous Pawnee? It may be that some of us will not return.”

Turtle Boy had rushed up to Little Crow before anyone else.

“I will ride with you. I will kill many Pawnees.”

Little Crow had smiled at the audacity of the young Cheyenne.

“You lack experience, Turtle Boy. Even your name says you are not yet a man. But it is good that you were the first to answer my call. You must want to become a warrior. Come then, ride with me. We will revenge my brother.”

Now they were only a few hours away from confronting the Pawnees. Turtle Boy’s arrows were ready, waiting in their quiver to be unsheathed like a hawk’s talons. He was not concerned that the sky threatened snow. The Cheyenne were used to snow. It might slow them, but it would never stop them.

They rode for three more hours. Then rested. Dog Who Runs Crooked rode ahead. Before long he returned at a gallop.

They are only a half hour ahead,” he yelled. “They are riding slow, looking for antelope, I think. They have not seen our sign.”

The Cheyenne braves whooped and ran to their mounts. The horses were ready, their bellies full of the icy creek water and the sweet grass by the water. The Cheyenne rode hard.

Snow started falling ten minutes later. The first flakes were big, heavy, wet, and melted when they hit the ground. They soon stuck. The prairie was frosted in white when they saw the Pawnees. Snow fell from the sky as though it would never stop, as though it would drop from the heavens until the end of time. The wind picked up, blowing stinging needles into the faces of both horses and braves.

The Pawnees were resting in the bottom of a small valley. The falling snow made them look like ghosts on the prairie. The Pawnee horses rooted their big noses in the snow, trying to uncover grass to eat, blowing up little clouds of steam with their breath.

Little Crow took out his medicine bag and squeezed it in the hope that it would provide the good medicine they needed to get the best of the Pawnees. He raised the rifle he had captured from a white man.

“Kiyah, kiyah,” he yelled. “Come with me, my friends. It is a good day to die.”

The Cheyenne charged down the small hill, their bows at the ready, Little Crow waving his rifle. The Pawnees saw them. Three hit the ground. Three ran behind an old oak with bare branches, Two sped around to seek shelter behind the horses. Little Crow shot first. A Pawnee fell. Arrows flew through the snowy air. Another Pawnee fell. The Pawnees released their own arrows at the charging Cheyenne. Red Bear dropped, an arrow through his throat. Turtle Boy saw one of his arrows hit a Pawnee in the chest. He whooped. Now he was a warrior.

They charged through the camp. A Pawnee arrow stuck in Rabbit Foot's shoulder. He dropped to the ground near the oak. A Pawnee leaped out and ended the Cheyenne's life with a chop from his tomahawk. Turtle Boy rode past the big Pawnee who had hit Rabbit Foot. He reached out with his bow and touched him. The brave jumped in surprise. What a day for Turtle Boy! He had killed one warrior and counted coup on another. In the coming years, he would sing of these feats to his sons and grandsons.

The Cheyenne gathered on the top of the small hill on the other side of the valley. There were four of them left: Little Crow, Turtle Boy, Dog Who Runs Crooked, and Eagle Nose. Five Pawnees were still standing, including the big one on whom Turtle Boy had counted coup. The Cheyenne charged again.

Susie woke up from her vision, hardly knowing where she was. Then she recognized the familiar form of the sweat lodge. What a vision! It had all been worth it.

Susie's quest for a vision had begun several weeks earlier, while she was working on the line at the Crystal. A strange feeling, like someone else was inside her mind came to her while she was doing routine and repetitious work, like chopping mushrooms or weighing out calamari. It was as though the main part of her mind, free to wander while she was engaged in such average tasks, was searching for the other presence she sometimes felt. It bolstered her belief that she had been someone else in another lifetime. She was convinced that the spirit or soul of this being still lived on inside her.

At times, she would have quick visions of being on a horse and seeing prairie that stretched endlessly into the horizon. Other times, she saw arrows in the air, snow so white it could blind you, and a wolf as black as the ladle she used at her station. Had she

been a Plains Indian? And if so, which tribe? She wished there were some way she could find out.

Susie had always enjoyed cooking and handling food, which is why she had become a line cook in one of the best restaurants in the Country Club Plaza of Kansas City, Missouri. It was her dream to rise to being a chef, although she knew this would not be as easy to achieve as it was to envision. Most chefs were men, and women cooks were seldom highly regarded. Even at the Crystal, she was the only woman line cook.

In her life away from the restaurant, she had always loved nature, especially camping out, riding horses, swimming, hiking, and cooking in the outdoors. She even had her own secret place, in a vacant lot, near 46th and Main, close to the apartment building where she had lived while growing up. From the age of twelve on, she would go there to get away from all the noise and stress of the city, high school, and later, her job. She had found the perfect place while exploring one day. It was hidden from the street, near a stone wall that marked the boundary of a private residence. She had made a small fireplace for warmth and cooking. Sometimes, she stayed overnight in a tent. .

Even as a young girl, she had felt that she was born to live in another time. But only recently had she sensed another presence somewhere inside her. When this other being had touched her for the fourth time, she made a pilgrimage to her special place and fixed steak, roasted corn, and garlic bread. She leaned back against the old elm, close to the fire, and contemplated what it all might mean. Was there some sort of connection between her visions and the secret place? She thought for hours and finally decided this was where she had to seek the meaning of her visions. The next day, she rode a bus downtown and went to the main library.

Susie found many books written by and about Indian shamans and medicine men. They all stressed the necessity for purification, the sacrifice of living flesh, and fasting if one were to achieve a vision such as the one she was seeking. She realized she would need a sweat bath and she studied how to make one.

The next weekend, she got her friend Roger to take her out to the Missouri countryside to search for willow and cottonwood branches, as well as fresh country grass. She gathered rocks that were round, dull, and hard, none that were sharp, shiny or brittle. They would be perfect for heating the main pit of the sweat lodge.

The following weekend, she began by scooping out the earth where the pit would be, spreading it in a little ridge leading to the west from the entrance. She took sixteen willow branches and stuck them in the earth, then bent them to form the backbone of the lodge. She covered these with a blanket that she had been given as a child. It was yellow and red and black with pictures of buffalo and Indians riding horses. She placed the rocks next to her fireplace.

She waited until she had three days off in a row. Four would have been better as four was a sacred number to the Indians, but she had to work with what she had. She prepared herself by cutting four small pieces of flesh from her upper left arm. This would be her offering to the spirits. She started her fast, one that would last until the morning of the day she had to return to work.

She heated the rocks until they were red hot, then brought them one by one into the sweat lodge and placed them in the pit. When it was full, she stripped off all her clothes and poured water over the rocks. She sat next to the steam that rose and breathed it in, absorbing the spirits within. When she was completely purified, she relaxed and waited

for her vision. It didn't come until late in the third day when she was feeling very light-headed from the lack of food.

The experience made her feel as though she had been transformed into a new person. Had she once been a young Cheyenne on the verge of becoming a warrior? She couldn't have wanted anything more. For many years she had felt a kinship with Indians. Like them, she loved the outdoors and all nature. The thought that she had once been an Indian made her very happy. The next time she went to the library, she checked out several books about the Cheyenne.

The aftereffects of her vision made Susie feel so good that she almost forgot about the problems she was having with her new boss at work. Ben Ledd had recently been transferred from the Minneapolis branch of the Crystal restaurant chain to manage the one in Kansas City. It had not taken him long to change the routine. He soon moved Susie to a new station, one for which she had not been properly trained. And Ben expected her to do a lot more work.

One day, Susie had a chat with Elena, the assistant manager.

“Why is he doing this? If he just let me do the things I know, everything would go a lot smoother.”

Elena was a dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty about the age of Susie's mother. Her slight accent hinted at her Chilean origins. “He must want to make all the cooks quit. Sí, for sure, that's it. He wants to make, you know, a name for himself. All you cooks earn good money since you've been here for a while. If he can make you quit, he can hire cooks for less money. Then the owners, they will say, ‘Oh my, you are doing such a good job.’”

“That’s terrible,” Susie said. “I worked hard to become a good cook. And now he’s got me on the broiler. I just massacre fish there. I hate that.”

“Just do your best, Susie, and hang in there. Don’t let that *pendejo* get to you.”

Susie pushed a mischevious strand of reddish-blond hair back under her chef’s hat and kept chopping parsley into very small pieces. Elena strolled down the line to check on another cook.

Ben seldom had anything good to say to Susie. It was always something like, “That’s below average work, Susie. I’m sure you can do better. You’re not really earning your pay now, are you?” She wondered if maybe he had it in for her because she was so popular with the other cooks.

But now she had something quite remarkable outside her job. The next time she had days off, she rushed back to her special place and heated more rocks.

The air was white with snow that seemed to blow from all directions. Turtle boy was alone, no longer sure where Dog Who Runs Crooked and Little Crow were. Eagle Nose was dead, killed by a Pawnee arrow. But the hated Pawnees had paid for his life. Only one had survived the second charge: the big one Turtle Boy had touched with his bow. He had somehow leaped on his horse and rode off. The three remaining Cheyenne had scalped the rest of the fallen Pawnees. Two Pawnee scalps now hung from Turtle Boy’s belt. It made him proud. He was prouder still for counting coup on the big Pawnee.

Little Crow had been hit by a Pawnee arrow.

“Just a scratch,” he said, pulling the arrow out, grimacing only a little as he did so.

“The raid was good. More dead Pawnees lie on the prairie than dead Cheyenne. We can go home now. The fun is over.”

They left in a blizzard, and it got worse the more they rode. After about three hours, Turtle Boy lost sight of the other two. He could only see a foot or so in front of him, the snow was blowing so hard. The others might be miles away. Or they could be ten feet from him, also not able to see in all this whiteness.

He rode for another hour until he finally knew he had to stop. He was getting nowhere and it was possible he was even riding in circles. It was impossible to see any stars, and he needed to pick out the bright one that would guide him home. Without it, he was lost. The air was freezing, numbing. The cold was now his enemy and he knew that if he didn't find shelter soon, he would die. But there was nothing to keep him warm. Only the snow itself. And maybe something else. He tried to lead his thoughts away from the something else.

He dug a hole in the snow. It was tough going. The wind blew harder and harder, covering his old work with new snow. It came to him that he had to make a choice. He thought of the great Cheyenne, Sweet Medicine. Once he had been trapped in a snowstorm. He had killed a buffalo and cut out its stomach, then crawled into the dead beast to wait out the storm. But there were no buffalo here and it was unlikely that he would find any. He looked at Spotted Nose.

He put his left arm around the horse's neck and talked directly into his ear.

"Ponies don't live as long as the Cheyenne do, my old friend. And you have already spread your seed on this earth. You have sons and daughters and soon will have grandsons and granddaughters. My seed has yet to be spread. I have no one to remember my name when I am gone. So I only do this so you can help me to survive. Then I, too,

can live on in the way that you will live on. I love you and will love you always. You will forever be my best friend.”

He slit the animal’s throat with his sharp flint knife. He moved away from the horse. Its mane was wet where his head had rested. Perhaps from melted snow. He pushed the big body to the left as the horse crumpled, its knees bending. He sliced the big belly open. The intestines slid out, steaming up the snow. He shoved them to the side, saving the liver. He hollowed out the inside with his knife, scraping out excess fat and blood. The body was still warm. It would give him heat for a time. He hoped long enough to get through the blizzard.

He ate the liver raw. He could feel its power enter his body, warming him, giving him strength.

“Now you are part of me, Spotted Nose. My children will also be your children. We will always be together.”

When the liver was gone, he crawled into the big belly, covering the outside with his blanket. The wind still blew hard, but the blanket and the horse’s body muffled the noise and warmed him. After a while, he went to sleep.

When Susie came to, she shed a tear for the brave pony, Spotted Nose.

Back at work, her job seemed like a dream and the weekend visions were more like reality to her. She sometimes found herself drifting away, dreaming of a young Cheyenne brave, wondering what his fate had been in the deadly snow.

“Where were you, Susie?” The harsh voice belonged to Ben. “You looked like you were in a different world. “You need to concentrate on your work, young lady. Oh, and

by the way, don't leave until you shuck all the oysters that came in today. I expect an exceptional dinner crowd."

Susie nodded, then sighed to herself. She certainly didn't need all of her mind to cut onions or chop mushrooms. Now if she had been deveining shrimp, that was another matter entirely. You couldn't make a mistake there or you might cut a finger. The thought made her wonder how Ben's finger would look with a piece of it sliced off.

Two nights later, she had a dream. Ben was dressing her down, giving her a hard time. She had snapped, picked up a cleaver, lifted it in the air and looked at the top of Ben's head like it was a thick piece of round steak. The dream Ben yelled, "Stop!" She woke up then, scared and shaking. Susie abhorred violence, but maybe Ben was driving her up to and past the breaking point.

The next day, she came into work, changed into her cook's uniform, walked through the main part of the kitchen and picked up the ladle, scoop, and tongs she would need that night. She set her equipment down at her station, then proceeded to the steam table, where a magnetic knife holder on the wall held the cutting knife she needed for her night's work. She gasped when she saw the same cleaver from her dream. She had no memory of it ever having been there before. Her heart jumped and her face got white. She ran over and found Elena.

"This is not good, Susie," Elena said. "This is like the dreams the Indians in my country have. To them, dreams are more real than life itself. Don't let this dream come true for you. Fight it. If you do like your dream, you will only go to jail and ruin your life."

Susie sensed the truth in Elena's words. She reached for an inner strength and calmed herself. Still, every time Ben spoke to her that evening, she twitched as though shocked by electricity. Ben probably noticed this, as he harassed her more than normal that shift. It was a long night for Susie.

The rest of the week went by like a glacier as she waited to return to the sweat lodge.

Turtle Boy slowly made his way through the snow drifts on crude snowshoes he had made from Spotted Nose's hide and sinews. He had cut long strips of the horse's meat to fuel him on his journey home. Each day, he rested until it was dark. Then the moon lighted his path through the snow, and the light from the bright star guided him. He dug a cavern under the snow to sleep in during the daylight hours. It kept him warm enough.

He saw a pack of wolves on the third night of his journey. Before long, they got closer, bolder, ready to strike. He counted six, too many for him to hold off if they surrounded him and rushed in. One would surely catch him from behind while he fought off the ones in the front and the side. He had seen them take down much larger animals, such as deer and elk. Still, he had something the deer and elk did not have: his bow and arrows.

He knew he had to act when a gray and brown wolf got within twenty feet. He nocked an arrow in the bow he had made from juniper wood. It was a good one. True, it was not so strong that other braves could not pull it. Turtle Boy himself was not yet that strong. One day, when he came to his full growth and strength, he would make a bow that few other Cheyenne could pull. For now, this one would serve. The wolf made a small step forward. He shot. It hit the animal in the side, going most of the way through its body, surely piercing its heart. It dropped in its tracks, darkening the snow with its blood. A

big, black wolf, probably the pack's leader, approached the dead wolf and sniffed it. The animal howled, setting off a chorus of howls from the rest of the pack.

Turtle Boy stood at the ready, poised to shoot again, controlling the fear the eery cries brought out in him. He knew he could kill one or two more of the wolves. But they would surely act faster than he could nock and release arrows. One of them would bite him, causing him to lose blood, weakening him. Then the others would move in and finish him. He would soon be nothing but bones in the snow.

The black wolf ceased its howling. It stared at the Cheyenne for one minute, then another. It urinated in the snow, then turned and trotted off, in no particular hurry. The other wolves followed it. Soon he could no longer see them. He went to the dead one and skinned it. He used the fur to line his moccasins, make them warmer. He cut off strips of meat to eat later. He gulped down the raw liver as he sat in the snow next to the body of the dead wolf.

Later he cut off the paws so he could save the claws. He would use them to make a necklace to remind him of the time they went after the Pawnees. He would save one claw for his medicine bag. A wolf's claw would be good medicine. It would help him kill many enemies and many buffalo. It would protect him from the white man's bullets and the Pawnees' arrows.

He thought about the big, black wolf that had stared at him so long. He wondered what the wolf had seen. An enemy to respect, perhaps. In his eyes, he recognized the black wolf as a wise leader. It had seen that the wolves could kill this animal on two feet, but would lose too many of the pack doing so. And the leader was not willing to pay the price.

Perhaps the black wolf was a wiser leader than Little Crow had been. True, he had killed many Pawnees. But too many Cheyenne would never return to the campfires of the people who loved them. Turtle Boy pondered on whether he would become as much of a man as the black wolf was a wolf. "Ki-yah!" he yelled into the night. He was ready for a new name. Turtle Boy was the name of his youth. Black Wolf would be a fine name for a Cheyenne warrior. And he was sure Black Wolf would be wise, brave and a good leader on the warpath. Just like the black wolf in the snow.

Every day, he picked out traces of the wolf pack. The black wolf had them following the Cheyenne, waiting until he was too weak to fight them off. He knew that if the leader ever judged him to have lost his strength, the pack would charge and kill him. They would no longer worry about losing one of their own. He vowed the wolves would never have their way.

As he trudged towards the Cheyenne lodges, Turtle Boy was filled with the sweet memory of how the maiden, Doe Walking, had smiled and locked her eyes on him for a long time when he left to fight the Pawnees. He dreamed of her as he left footprints in the snow. When he was home, he would wander through the camp at night, playing the flute until he drew Doe Walking out to share his blanket and talk sweet words.

In the spring, he would go with another brave, perhaps Dog Who Runs Crooked, if that Cheyenne also made it back, and steal Pawnee horses. He would leave twenty or more by the lodge of Doe Walking's father, proof of his worthiness to have her as his bride. Before long, Doe Walking would be the wife of Black Wolf, the brave Cheyenne warrior, and the mother of other Cheyenne warriors and maidens. At night, they would

hear songs sung about the fight with the Pawnees and many other stories of Cheyenne bravery.

One morning, at the end of his night's walking, he greeted the coming day. The sun was rising, turning the sky a dark plum color that slowly faded into a rosy hue. It would be a good day to die. A good day to be a Cheyenne warrior. That night, when he could barely shuffle anymore, he saw the campfires of his people. One of his toes felt funny. Numb, probably frostbitten. He found the strength to keep putting one foot down in front of the other. From time to time, he fell. He staggered like a half-dead man until he passed the first teepee, where he collapsed in the snow.

When Susie came back to where her body lay in the sweat lodge, she marvelled at her Cheyenne. He was so brave, so purposeful. If only she could be like that. True, it was a different world now and she could never kill an enemy with a bow and arrow or a meat cleaver, but there had to be an answer to her problem. It was truly impossible for her to keep putting up with all the abuse from Ben. She had to do something. Only, what would it be?

"I hid the cleaver, Susie," Elena told her the next day. "That way you can't use it on somebody's head."

"Thanks, I don't think I could do that, but now I won't be as tempted."

She went on chopping flatleaf parsley on a three by one foot cutting board placed on her steel table. She was so intent on thoughts of Black Wolf that she didn't notice Ben come up until he put his hand down on the board and gave her a belligerent look.

"Listen here, Susie," he said.

The nine-inch blade flashed in the air as fast as one of Turtle Boy's arrows. It came down right between Ben's index and middle fingers, making a thudding noise in the wood, then vibrating back and forth for a few moments.

"Kiyah," Susie yelled.

Ben turned white, pulled back his finger and looked at it for blood. There was none.

"You're crazy," he said. "What are you, some kind of wild Indian?"

Susie merely showed him a stone face, saying nothing. He turned and half-ran to his office. She marched into the restroom. She glanced in the mirror and saw a twenty-four-year-old woman with blue eyes and reddish-blond hair. It was an attractive woman, with traces of stress lines in the forehead and cheeks. Susie tossed water on her face. When she looked again, a Cheyenne warrior stared back at her.