

Chapter One

Five minutes ago, I died...again. In another moment I'll stop screaming. Right now the screaming and the rocking are all that keep me from fleeing into the blue-black night. Tears stream down my face, and I grab a pillow to wipe them away. I've had the same dream for as long as I can remember.

I can still hear the mad gallop of horses amid a winter's thrall on snow-blanketed plains. It's not a home I'd recognize in waking, not considering the buffalo hide stretched taut over smooth wooden poles to form the lodges I walk among.

On my way to gather wood for the fires, I see other girls in deer-skin dresses like mine, dresses with uneven hems that form an alternating pattern of fringed v's. I see that some share my labor, scrounging at the edge of the camp, looking for anything to burn. Others stoke dying fires, preparing meals for children who have had little because when winter comes, the game all but vanishes.

As I walk, my breath escapes in steamy wisps and lingers, then dissipates. In this dream, I hear a driving drum beat, and my hand sways and pats my leg as I walk farther from the teepees. It's then I see the sea of horses erupt from tall, withered grass, spurred by white men in long blue coats, all brandishing rifles. For an instant, everything stops and they're looking at me. I'm barely more than a girl—unarmed, terrified, and rooted to the spot.

The lead horse stamps its foot, whining. He tosses his head, moisture dripping from his mouth and nose. The rider jams the spurs against the animal's flanks and immediately it lurches forward. The other horses follow, their massive hooves kicking snow plumes into the air.

The drumming continues, ever louder, faster, and that drumming is my heart. The world seems to slow. At first, the riders press on, past me, toward the camp, and I wonder at this miracle. Perhaps I'm just a girl, not threatening enough to worry about, but it's an illusion. I know because as the riders drive into the center of camp, their rifles echoing across the plains like thunder at the heart of a storm, one rider breaks off, aims his rifle and fires, a gout of flame blazing from the muzzle. The pain hits. My knees buckle, and I fall, my blood spattering into snow not firm enough to pack. The world tilts, and the last horses rush past. There are screams from the camp, rushing feet, the squalling of babies. Dirty snow sprays my body. The soldier who fired the bullet stays, watching. Behind him is another dressed not in blue but brown. There are no stripes on his sleeves, no crossed rifles on his breast. His blonde hair sparkles amid the snowfall. He stands stone-faced, waiting. I blink and my faltering breath spurts steam.

The blue man rides on. The blonde moves toward me, his arms outstretched. His feet, I note with no little wonder, leave no prints. His blue eyes stare, and I see myself in them. They're not the same shade as the officer's uniform. They're a deeper, more penetrating oceanic blue, like the color of the sea at dusk. His mouth twitches, his expression breaking for just a second. He reaches to gather me to him, and I cry without tears.

That's my nightly dream and it terrifies me. I shake uncontrollably amid the twisted knot of the bedclothes and glance at the nightstand where I have set a framed picture of my mom and dad holding me when I was a toddler. Even then my bronze skin made my mother look like an albino. Yet next to my father I'm a lot lighter, the mark of being the "half-breed" some have called me. Although in the picture my short, spiky hair is the same glossy black. My dark eyes match my father's. Next to that photo is one of me and Jimmie Abram, my guardian, taken five years ago at a zoo—long after the family I'd known as a child was gone.

"Lizzie, you'd better get a move on or you're gonna be late!" Jimmie yells from downstairs. He's probably just gotten off his shift or the screaming would have brought him up here in a hurry.

"Argh," I mutter, looking at the clock beside my bed. 7:15. I jump out of bed and slide into a pair of jeans and a black sweater. I grab a clip and wind my hair into it, turning to my reflection. The dark shadows beneath my eyes make me look sick. The hair piled atop my head tumbles in black waves as I jerk the clip free. No sense calling any more attention to my sleep disorder than necessary. Besides, with any luck, everyone will assume it's from being nervous about transferring schools.

"Lizzie?" Jimmie says, lightly knocking. "You even awake?"

"Yeah," I yell, a little more loudly than I'd intended.

"Breakfast?"

"No time." I grab my handbag and open the door. As I'd expected, he's still wearing his uniform. His security job pays a little over minimum wage, but it's all he could find in this spit little town he didn't want to move back to. It was the town he and Dad grew up in. The town Jimmie says took his best friend. They're been no proof, of course; after all, Indians run off all the time, right? Jimmie never believed it. In the years since, he's tried to take care of me like I was his daughter.

I sling my handbag over my shoulder and troop down the stairs.

"Lizzie," he yells, still watching from the top of the stairs. "Be careful." One hand grips the rail, the other holds his hat.

"I will. Promise."

I grab my keys from the hook over the phone, slip on my jacket, and fly out the door. The cold air slams me, and I gasp. Above, an endless gray canopy, heavy with snow, shuts out the sun. I trudge down the drive and climb into my Jeep. Okay, it's not the best vehicle for this place, considering that in winter, the cold condenses more on the inside than outside, something Jimmie has promised to fix. This morning, I just hope the CJ5's defroster works better than I remember. Jimmie's often commented about getting me a new car, but I love this one, even with its flaws. They're what gives it character.

“And me a cardiac arrest,” he’d once muttered, shaking his head while looking at the paint job, something else needing to be redone. “I promised your parents I’d look after you. I never should have let you talk me into getting you this thing.”

“I like this thing!” I retorted, patting the hood. “She’s perfect.”

“If you say so,” Jimmie replied, folding his arms across his chest.

As if to prove her worth, the Jeep defrosts in about ten minutes. Rather than going inside and listening to Jimmie worry, I shiver inside the Jeep. Once the windshield has cleared, I push the clutch and ease the gas pedal. The Jeep lurches forward unexpectedly. I sigh. Six months of driving it, and I still haven’t totally acclimated myself to its weird little quirks. Maybe I never will, I muse while driving the two miles to an old brick building nestled next to the cemetery where a mist falls across the landscape. It suggests this area is lower than the surroundings. Who in his right mind puts a school next to a cemetery?

Taking a deep breath, I edge into a lot filled with vehicles spread far and wide across the economic spectrum. Most are like mine, old hand-me-down cars which have definitely seen better days. There are also what appear to be a handful of construction trucks and vans. Students mill around the parking lot, congregating as they talk about their weekends. The minute I step out of the Jeep, I feel eyes on me. From what I can see, I am the only Indian. Another big surprise. I’d been the new girl before, but it hadn’t happened in such a small school that seems to close in around me. I am used to having five hundred in my class, not fifty. Then again, this is Hauser’s Landing, a town with a booming population of 5,321.

Talk about an exciting place. Probably this weekend, they’ll all gather at the one stoplight in town and watch it change, then maybe lunch and tossing burning hay bales from the back of somebody’s pickup. And then? They’ll roll up the sidewalks and it’ll be like Salem’s Lot around here. Small-town way to kill a vampire? Bore it to death.

Dodging eye contact, I grasp the only notebook I’ve brought and step toward the school, which appears to be two vastly different buildings joined at the ends, kind of like a chimera. The front end seems much newer, the bricks more appealing than the rust-colored half. Some windows are so old, peering through the glass distorts whatever is on the other side. Charming. I crane my neck to take in more of the building and quickly realize there is construction going on near the back.

A tall, blond girl with too many teeth strides beside me as I head to the entrance. I feel her silently watching. Her friends also stare, noting my every move. Should I break into a dance and start making noises like everybody sees in the movies? Do they want to play Cowboys and Indians already? I grit my teeth and grab the front door, wishing my shadow would leave.

“You’re Elizabeth Moon, aren’t you?”

“Yep,” I mutter, walking faster. Where is the office?

“I’m Shelly Roberts.” She must have caught my lost expression because she points down the hall. “There’s the office just ahead.”

“Thanks.” I step toward it, wondering if she will follow there, too, but her feet stay put. Biting my lip, I resist asking how she knows my name. It’s irrelevant because if she knows, then so does everyone else.

As the tardy bell has yet to ring, I watch a flurry of parents and students demanding various things, like appointments for the upcoming parent-teacher conferences to complain about an unfair teacher. Sensing things will ease at the start of first period, I stand back and let the chaos happen, figuring the secretaries will eventually see me. It delays the inevitable.

“May I help you?” a woman asks, sitting behind a desk with a nameplate that reads “Beth Adams.” I can tell by her nervous frown she is trying to place me, and she figures it should be easy, but I’m not familiar. I’m not white enough.

“I’m Elizabeth Moon. Jimmie Abram called last week.”

“Just a second,” Ms. Adams finally says, consulting her computer. “Yeah, we did get your schedule worked up. Did you bring your shot record and birth certificate?” I can tell she thinks I’ve forgotten. Then again, she doesn’t know how seriously Jimmie takes school.

“Yeah, I’ve got them,” I say, tugging them from my binder and handing them to her. I am weirded out by the way she reads over my birth certificate. Her index finger scans like she’s reading Braille. The smooth pace abruptly stops when she comes to my father’s name. An uncomfortable frown contorts her features. Just another brick in the wall.

“I’ll be right back,” she manages, walking to the copier. On the way back, she stops by the printer and pulls a single sheet off the top, scans it, and then hands all three items to me.

“Here’s your schedule, hon.” She turns and calls, “Gail? Come here.” A short brunette steps into the room, eyeing me as she goes to Ms. Adams.

“Gail, this is Elizabeth Moon. Can you show her to Mr. Maguire’s room?” Ms. Adams glances at the clock above her desk. “At least she won’t be too late.” She grabs a pad of slips from her desk and quickly fills one out before handing it to me. “Give this to your teacher.”

“Thank you.” I take the slip and follow Gail down the hall.

“So, you’re the new girl,” Gail says, sizing me up. As we walk, we pass a few students. Most have the same reaction, staring openly at me. I’m used to having guys stare. While they don’t especially care for the fact I’m not like them, they do appreciate what the difference does for my face. And I know to stay away.

“How did you know there was a new girl?” I ask, trying not to seem suspicious.

“It’s a small town.”

Before I can edge out a response, she stops in front of a closed classroom door. “This is Mr. Maguire’s room. American History.”

I look down the hall to where it appears a makeshift wall cuts off part of the wing. “What’s down there?”

Gail turns. “More classrooms being added on, a few old rooms being converted. It’s been like that for months so there’s no telling how much longer we’re going to deal with the hammering and stuff.” Gail turns back to the door and knocks. She waits for the teacher to acknowledge us before opening the door.

“Yes, Ms. Bellows.” He stands at the chalkboard, his back to the notes he’s been neatly printing.

“This is Elizabeth Moon. She just transferred.”

Sensing this is as good a time as any, I try not to think about all the people staring at me and hand Mr. Maguire the slip. I’ve had enough of being on display.

“There’s only one empty seat, Ms. Moon.” He gestures to the back of the room, and in order to get to it, I have to pass every aisle. I bite my bottom lip and head that way. Gail’s gaze is fixed on a boy in the last row, in the seat next to mine. His long hair appears slightly wild in a sensual way, as though he’s just gotten out of bed. While he’s not particularly attractive, he definitely has money, which tends to make everyone think he looks better than he really does. While most everyone else appears to be wearing casual clothing, his sweater hints at GQ rather Walmart.

Even as he takes in my face, his eyes widen, his full lips purse, and I can almost hear the whistle he’s barely holding back. A seductive smile lights his face, and I force myself to look away as I take the seat. My heart races, and I half stumble. Laughter erupts, and I tell myself it doesn’t matter. They’ll forget I’m the new girl soon enough. Amid the laughter, Gail slips out.

Mr. Maguire steps to the lectern. “Okay, yesterday we talked about The Sand Creek Massacre; now let’s follow the trail of the Cheyenne another four years. By this time, where were Black Kettle and his people living?” He peers through thick glasses at the students, looking for volunteers. Me, I’m cringing because even though I’m only half-Cheyenne, people assume I know all things Indian. It’s like expecting all the people who live in China to be on a first-name basis.

No one holds up a hand. He’s still looking. Then he turns to me. “What about it, Ms. Moon? This topic probably has a lot of significance to you.”

“The Washita River in Oklahoma.” I guess it’s a good thing I know my history because I sure don’t know nearly so much about my heritage. It’s not that I haven’t tried, but in the eyes of the full Cheyenne, I’m only part complete, and where the traditionalists are concerned, that’s not enough. Besides, even a lot of full bloods are raised white. Despite the ancestry, they know

about as much as I do, which isn't much. It's one thing to act the part—the braids and shades Indian. But it's another to know, to really, really know. No matter how hard I try, I never fit in. I look enough like a Native American to whites, but to Indians I'll never be accepted so pretty much what I know of my heritage comes from a lot of books. I just wonder how different things might have been if my dad were still around. I wonder what kind of things he would have taught me.

“And what was the significance of November 27, 1868?”

My whole body stiffens, and I don't want to think about this. If I close my eyes, the residue of the nightmares surfaces. I open my book, trying to distract myself.

“Ms. Moon, do you know why that day is important?”

“Yes,” I snap. “Custer attacked the camp, killing Black Kettle and many of the others there—mostly women and children.”

“Very good.” He turns to the board to point out the notes he wants us to remember, but I block it out, hating the way everyone is staring, like I'm some kind of museum exhibit. I pull out some paper and a pen, hoping to focus on what he's saying, but his voice is so monotone I find myself drifting, eyelids fluttering and finally snapping shut as I merge into sleep.

“Wake up!” a voice hisses.

I jerk upright. Panic seizes me as I realize I'm not at home and the dream has found me. All eyes are on me, especially the brown irises of the guy next to me, his mouth still twisted into a smirk that flashes his white but uneven teeth.

I wipe my face and sit up as Mr. Maguire stares at me. I can tell he's debating on whether or not to call attention to my behavior or let it slide. The bell rings before he can decide, and mostly everyone is out of their seats, heading for the next period.

“Hey, dream girl. Time to move on.” Griffin gently pushes my arm from atop my binder so he can read my schedule. “We've even got the same class next.”

I stand, wondering if I can find the next period by myself. Then he thrusts his hand toward me.

“I'm Griffin Hauser.”

I stiffen. “As in Hauser's Landing Hauser?” I feel panicked, as though I can't breathe.

“One and the same.”

We've almost made it to the front of the room when I spot him—the blonde from my dream. He's about 6'4. His black sweater accentuates his pale blonde hair and golden skin. Even in this

fluorescent light, he is beautiful. My throat catches, and I flash back to the dream, unsettled. My knees buckle. Griffin quickly catches my wrist and keeps me upright.

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