

Chapter 1

Northeast Washington Territory
July, 15 1870
Day One

Delbert stood at the edge of the Sinyekst village and tossed a rock back and forth in his hands. He glared at Pekam as fear and frustration curled in his gut. The rock landed in one hand, then was flung to the other. He'd waited twelve months for this adventure and now it slid to a halt. Promises broken. Hope shattered.

He stopped lobbing the rock and watched the Indian village wake up. Why was this happening to him? What now? He watched little boys pretend to hunt as they waved branches and sticks at one another as though they were spears and knives. Little girls held faceless dolls dressed in buckskin while they sat near their mothers who cooked over open fires and visited. Native words filled his ears. Some he recognized, most he didn't. He tried to decide how to persuade Pekam to guide this outing. Angry thoughts blocked his mind as frustration percolated inside. He turned his attention back to Pekam, a look of regret on his face.

"What do you mean you're *not* comin'?" Delbert Gardner's words sounded as angry as vibrating rattles on a tip of a rattlesnake. Color drained from his face as he stared at Pekam, his longtime Sinyekst friend. *I can't do this myself. I'm sure we'll starve, but I'm not gonna turn back like a coward.*

He tried to stand rigid but his knees wobbled. Anger welled up in his gut. He felt his face redden as deep as the scraggly hair on top his head and looked straight at the twenty-eight-year-old man.

Pekam grinned back. "You'll be fine. You and the other boys will only be gone a few days."

"No! I won't. You're the one whose name means bobcat and for a reason. I don't have many survival skills. You were gonna teach me, us, remember? I'm sixteen now..." Delbert scrunched his face and kicked the ground with the toe of his dusty cowboy boot.

Delbert's skin crawled as he watched Pekam lean against the pole horse corral, arms folded. He stood relaxed. Patient. Delbert tapped his foot. Let his eyes dart from his friend, to the trees, and back again.

Delbert breathed slow and controlled. He studied Pekam's six-foot, tule-pit house and how it differed from his small but cozy log cabin. Smoke rolled out of the circular home made of tightly woven tule-reed mats arranged over a wooden frame. His own home was made on top of the earth, from logs, and was chinked with mud.

"You understand my horse took a hard tumble down the side of that mountain." Pekam pointed to the hill behind Delbert. His black and white Paint horse stood in the corral, leg cocked, head down. "He's still limping and I need to stay here with him. We have races coming up in ten days, and we're counting on a sale the next day. He's favored to win."

"Yeah, I do understand. But I'm not sure." Delbert shuddered. He glanced around and searched for answers amongst the fir trees, hoped the breeze would whisper some words of encouragement. He watched Pekam out of the corner of his eyes. He appeared confident in buckskin pants and shirt, long braids, and beaded moccasins.

“I know you were counting on me, but this colt’s been faithful, and I need to show him the same amount of respect in return. This is how we live, Delbert. Just like your pa ranches, we raise, train, and race horses.”

Delbert toed the dirt. “I know, but still. I wish you were comin’. We’ve planned this for a year now. You and Pa agreed we could do this once I turned sixteen. Three days is all this is supposed to take.”

Pekam ruffled Delbert’s hair. “I realize that. I’m sorry. Besides, I’ll give you detailed directions that will take you right to camp, and we can discuss catching critters before you, Jed, and Ross head out on this journey. You won’t be alone. I won’t leave your quiver empty,” Pekam teased as he nodded at the two boys nearby.

“I hate when you say that.”

Pekam jogged toward his tule-mat dwelling. Waist-long braids jiggled behind him. He glanced back over his shoulder. “Forgot some herbs. Be right back.”

The pit in Delbert’s stomach burned as hot as a cowboy’s branding fire. He glanced around the quiet, empty village. Most of Pekam’s people were gone fishing for salmon up north at Kettle Falls this time of year. Each year they loaded horses, travois, and canoes and made the thirty-five-mile trek to catch and dry the fish—their main staple.

Delbert felt isolated in the mountains filled with pine, larch, and fir trees that surrounded the area. *I’m no good at this. I can’t survive. What am I doin’? We should go back. I’m not my pa. He can do anything.* He dropped his face into his trembling hands.

“What’re you mumbling ‘bout?” Jed asked.

Delbert lifted his gaze and studied his two friends. Jed reminded him of a young larch tree, his thin legs took long strides. His short, sandy-brown hair spread out made him look like a

drenched porcupine. The top of Ross's head came up to the bottom of Jed's chin. Ross's dark brown eyes matched his hair color and he wore a serious look. His muscles bulged.

"You're not gonna turn tail and back out, are ya?" Ross glared at his friend.

Delbert glanced from Jed to Ross and gave them a crooked grin. "No, well, I...maybe. We don't know enough to survive by ourselves. Pekam was supposed to teach me—us, his ways." His gaze dropped to the dirt.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Ross said. "Your pa's an expert. He traps, hunts, herds cows and does it all on one good leg. For the love of coyote bait, we're sixteen." He looked at Jed. "Well, almost. We're men. We can do this. Don't need no help. At least I don't."

Jed snorted. "Where've you been all these years? I know we all don't get to see much of each other with Ross livin' down Lincoln and me over the hill from you, but I figured you knew all this."

Delbert looked away.

Ross scrunched his face. "You spend too much time with your books and rocks. Heck, all ya do is daydream with your ma in front of a cozy fire. You might as well wear an apron."

"It's not like I don't know anything." Delbert clenched his jaw. "I've trapped with my pa, and, yes, I know how to shoot a rifle. I have more hair under my hat than ya think," his voice softened, "but you're right. I rather read my books."

Jed looked down. "No one said you was ignorant. We thought ya knew more, is all."

"Have you ever bagged a deer, grouse, anything?" Ross asked.

Delbert shifted his weight before shaking his head.

"Nothing?" Ross screeched.

"Nothing. I admit it. I'm worthless," Delbert snapped back.

"You're not worthless," Jed said. "I still wanna go. We can do this. Between the three of us I 'spect we can figure it out."

"Yeah, it's not that tough. We gotta go." Ross's eyes sparkled. "We'll have an adventure: hunt, fish, camp and all under the stars. I feel like I can't sharpen my knife fast enough."

"Pekam told me he would teach us some things before we headed out. So let's spend the night here and leave in the morning," Delbert suggested.

"Okay, after we eat breakfast, right? Your Aunt Spupaleena's cookin' alone is worth the wait, or so I hear," Jed said as he punched Delbert in the arm.

Delbert swallowed hard and wiped the sweat from his eyes. The heat spiked as the afternoon sun hung high in the sky, but the breeze and scent of cool water wafting off the meandering Columbia River called to Delbert and his friends, inviting them to splash in its coolness.

Delbert studied the river and noticed all the rock islands he hadn't paid much attention to in the past. The river rippled around the solid masses and pooled between them, creating only a couple safe places to cross. A gentle, but swift flow swept the water downriver.

"Let's go for a quick swim before we meet up with Pekam." Ross scrunched his face at Delbert's hair as it spiked as straight as a patch of new spring grass.

Delbert lifted his chin toward the river. "You guys go. I'll be right behind ya. I wanna check on his colt."

The wiry boys sprinted toward the river. "Don't take too long," Jed shouted back over his shoulder.

Delbert waved them off with a sense of relief and took time to think their adventure through. He watched his pals head to the river. Cracks of doubt tugged at his heart. *Can I pull*

this off? Will Jed and Ross be much help? He rubbed the back of his neck as the two disappeared down the hill to the beach.

He slipped behind Pekam and watched him wash and place herbs on the colt's legs. The colt stood quietly as Pekam wrapped each leg with strips of buckskin. The horse remained quiet while he was rubbed down with a poultice made of inner fibers of willow bark and honeysuckle root.

"How'd you get him to stand that way?"

Pekam jerked around as the horse shuffled sideways. "Hey, what are you doing? I thought you would be at the river with Jed and Ross."

"I...I..."

"You what?"

Delbert shrugged. "I wanted to watch you doctor your horse. That's all."

The startled look on Pekam's face turned soft. "I know. Sorry." He relaxed his stance. "You startled me—us. Here, you want to help?" He reached for some buckskin strips and tossed them to Delbert.

Delbert caught them with one hand. "Sure."

They worked in the stillness of the morning. No words were spoken between them.

Later, Pekam asked, "Delbert, what are you so afraid of out there?"

The searing fire in Delbert's stomach burned hotter. "I'm not sure." He quit wrapping a hind leg and thought for a moment.

Pekam's horse lowered his head and blinked as silence lingered.

"I've watched you with your Pa," Pekam said. "You have plenty of skills. I'm not sure about the other two, but I know you do. Why don't you believe that?"

A mix of irritation and embarrassment seared his nerves. He squeezed the bandage, wanting to drop it and run off, but stroked the horse's leg and continued to wrap the wound instead.

"You don't have to be a skilled trapper or hunter to get the job done." Pekam peered at Delbert.

"Don't I?" He sighed. "You know I prefer to study geology with my ma and read books about, well, anything to do with rocks, minerals, and rock formations. It's something we share. Minerals are more important than folks realize." Delbert finished wrapping the leg and checked his work. "That part of the Lord's creation is what sparks a fire inside me."

The colt lifted his leg to get a feel for the wrap. He shook it a couple times, looked back, and snorted.

Pekam tied a thin strip of buckskin around the front leg to hold the wrap tight. He stretched his long, lean muscles and ran his hand down the Paint's withers. His soft facial features made him look younger than he was.

Delbert thought of how Pekam and his sister, Spupaleena, had spent the past twelve years raising a large herd of Paint horses. They had become some of the toughest and fastest racers in the territory. "Look at what you and Aunt Spupaleena built. Her dream came true. With your help. What I see is hard work and persistence has made your dream come alive. I want mine to happen. Just like yours did. Even if Pa thinks I'm soft."

Pekam's coffee-colored eyes narrowed as he looked down at Delbert. "I agree that there's nothing like exploring what the Creator has laid out for us. But He also expects us to work. We have to hunt and fish for our food, make our own clothes, and care for those we love, both human and animal. And why do you think your pa doesn't support you I know he does."

“What do you mean? I know we have to work to survive.” Delbert fiddled with a strip of buckskin laying over the fence pole. “I don’t think my pa supports me because he doesn’t ask me to go with him anymore.”

Pekam nodded and thought a minute. “Learning about what interests you is never wrong, like studying rocks and minerals, but that’s *not* more important than the tasks we perform to stay alive. This country is rugged and cruel. With hard work, your quiver will remain full.” Pekam rubbed his horse. “Maybe you should talk to your Pa about why he doesn’t ask you to tag along?”

Delbert stroked the colt’s back. “Full or empty, I’ll let the Lord fill my *quiver*. And. Well. I reckon I could ask. I just figured he didn’t want me with him.”

“I think you might be surprised. Perhaps you and your pa need to talk this over. Anyway, grab your weapon of choice and let’s get started.”

“Doing what?”

Pekam groaned.

“Oh, yeah. Huntin’ lessons.” Delbert’s expression brightened.

“Go get the boys. I think it’s safest to start with one weapon. Perhaps a dull arrow. With cattail fluff on the end.”

Delbert headed for the river, unsure whether to laugh or be offended.