

Chapter 1

2015 San Poil, Colville Reservation, Washington State

When the bus rattles to a halt in front of the Republic High School, my tummy knots. Will he be in school today? I drag myself off after everyone else unloads. My hand hovers over the door handle until I finally push through the glass entrance. Jocks, who act as if the hallway's their private football field, slam me into one of the glass trophy cases. I catch my breath and allow my gaze to hone in on one of the few art projects inside, hoping my idea for this year's project will speak volumes.

Something in my life has to matter.

I drop my backpack off at my locker and head for the elementary building where all grades share the cafeteria. The smell of boiled eggs and sausage patties fills the brick-walled room. I grab one of each and add a strawberry yogurt, hoping it will help untwist the knots. This morning the tan walls feel cold and dreary while the checkered floors spin my head. Where is she?

"Hey look, it's Charnaye Toulou!" Hagan's voice echoes off the walls. "Horse racin' Indian princess. I saw you in Omak this summer eyeing the hill. Suppose next you'll try and take on the suicide race." He laughs. "A bunch of your racing buddies seem to think you could handle it. Can you?"

I cringe, nausea bubbling up my throat.

A small group of students gathers around us. Why can't people mind their own business? What makes me the target? Does the color of my skin really matter?

"But you don't have the guts for something that big, do ya. A scrawny thing like you might as well stay on the small fair tracks." He takes a step closer.

I step back and hunch my shoulders into a protective stance. This year can't get over quick enough.

"What's your shirt say today?" Hagan Hurst's eyes drop to my green Native Pride T-shirt. "Come on, worn-out cowboy boots? Where's your moccasins and buckskin?" He looks at his friends and they all laugh. Even some of the girls giggle. "At least you got the braids right."

"Get a life." My face scrunched, I spin around and shoulder out of their inner circle.

"Where is she?" We need to discuss our art project. My heart races as I zigzag around the students. *I hate him!* Our lack of money shames me.

"Char!" Jill Lamore's voice sounds behind me.

She waves her arm. The green bow in her short, flaxen hair matches her eyes. Her flip-flops snap with each step. We find a couple of empty seats in the corner and settle in. "Should we paint or do photography for our project?" Her long, slim fingers stroke the air.

Hagan's bigotry makes me shudder. I clear my throat, shaking away the moisture pooling in my eyes. "Whatever we decide, our project needs to be good enough to highlight the display cases. There needs to be more than sports trophies in there." I swallow the boulder lodged in my throat. "I'm sure we can come up with something that will take it up a notch in class."

Peone, Girl Warrior

“Art. Let’s create something with a little kick in it. Something that includes peace and hope...and harmony...for everyone—of any race.” Jill lifts a brow and takes a long swallow of milk.

“Harmony, huh?” Hagan leans over my shoulder. His sulfur-like breath brushes against my neck.

I elbow him. “Get away from me!” Sick of years of his racial comments, I feel like I’m at the end of my rope. But for my family, I’ll hang on.

He claps me on the back and strides away. “Catch you later, Miss Native Pride.” He stops and turns, his sharp, gray eyes boring into mine. “See you next week in archery.” He smirks and flicks his head to the side. Red locks the color of flames from hell flip off his freckled forehead.

His laugh bounces from wall to wall as his cowboy boots click down the hall, his posse slinking behind like dogs on a leash. The rainbow of the “Six Pillars of Character” banner hangs on a wall. I shake my head.

Trustworthy: not at all. Respect: they don’t know the meaning. Responsibility: they no doubt think theirs is to trash girls and Natives. Fairness: this makes their eyes cross because they have no idea of the meaning. Caring: not a thread runs through their iced veins. Citizenship: the cowboy way, not exactly how I was taught. Worthless culls. Every one of them.

“Don’t pay any attention to him. He’s such a creep,” Jill says. “You’re beautiful and talented. Best jockey around.”

Heats tingles up neck. “I won’t.” I open my yogurt and dip in the plastic spoon. “What a jerk. *Loot hamink e he hahoolawho.*”

Jill stares, mouth open. “There you go, talking Salish again when you’re mad. What does that mean anyway?”

“I just called him the snake he is.” I lick yogurt from the spoon. “Creator listens to me when I speak my language.” Plenty of females have entered and qualified for the Suicide Race. Why can’t I? It’d be the perfect way to prove myself, a rite of passage after all. The money I’d earn could spruce up our rickety shack. Lift the heavy weight that seems to bear down on Mom’s shoulders.

“I bet He does. I’ll be praying Hagan finds the end of himself...in a steaming heap of you know what. He’s sure got something coming his way. Hope it stings.” Jill taps her pen on the table. “You look like you didn’t get much sleep.”

“Precalculus, U of W application, Gates scholarships, the pressure’s getting to me—it’s too much.”

“The price you pay for brains.” Jill’s expression softens. “Sorry the fair got canceled. You would’ve won all your races.”

I stir the yogurt and let it slide off the spoon. “Thanks. I still have the Okanogan Fair and a couple weeks to prepare. Things’ll work out. They always do.” Or was I simply trying to convince myself it would? I finish my yogurt and push my tray aside.

“Let’s get back to the art project. How about this girl-warrior thing. I can see a Native woman, such as yourself, with bow and arrow, Hagan’s head as the target...” Jill gives me a wide grin.

I chuckle. “Idnit! I like your idea.”

Peone, Girl Warrior

The bell rings.

I sigh. “Ready for AP History? More about the 1600s and colonies and war, oh joy.
These weekly exams are gonna kill me.”