

Hannah's Journey
Gardner Sibling Trilogy
By
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Chapter 1

Northeast Washington Territory, 1870

He marched toward me as though off to battle. Long braids thumped his bare chest with each step. His eyes glistened in the afternoon sun, tugging my attention to his bold posture and sharp-edged face. My gaze dropped to his pursed lips and clenched jaw and I groaned, eyes searching for somewhere to hide because in reality, he was my enemy. At every opportunity he made his opinions loud and lucid—girls like me should not race against Indian boys. I rubbed the light skin on the back of my hand. He strutted up to me, keeping his gaze on mine, mouth opened.

My gaze darted from side to side and as I realized my show of fear, I planted my feet, lifted my chin, and stared back at him, knees quivering.

“Why are you still here?” Wind Chaser said.

He glared at me with coal-colored, wide-set eyes. For a minute I thought he might raise a hand and strike me. I took a couple steps back, hoping I was out of reach. He stole those steps back, coming closer than before. I squinted my eyes and curled my upper lip, taking a moment to gain a speck of control before answering. "Because I'm racing today." I leaned close and got a whiff of his sweet-venison breath. "Like you." I stood tall, turned, and walked off.

"You are not as strong a rider as your *Sinyekst* aunt!" Wind Chaser cackled.

I whisked past him, bumping his shoulder. I pulled up my brother's tattered britches hidden under my skirt as I marched to my horse. My belt had broken just before departing for the race, leaving me no time to hunt for a replacement. Now I wished I'd taken the time. I hated the confinement of suspenders and refused to wear them, certain my Indian aunt had an old piece of buckskin laying around that would suffice.

No one was going to talk me out of racing. *No one!* I may be a brown-haired girl in britches, but at sixteen years of age I was woman enough to handle this affair. I glanced over at my horse. With ears pricked forward, she was alert and ready. Hands on thin hips, I breathed in deep, then exhaled the insults.

"What did he say to you this time?" Falling Rain coughed and handed me my horse's reins. After a long bout with a sore throat and fever, her normally dark skin paled her round face. Shadows masked her tired-looking eyes. She had remained with her father while the rest of the women went into the mountains to pick huckleberries. This gave her time with the grumpy healer to learn more about native medicines.

I shook my head. "Nothin' new."

"Then why do you look like he pulled your pigtails and threw dirt in your face?"

I shrugged. “He said I will never be as strong a rider as my aunt.”

Falling Rain shuddered. “He is lower than a snake’s belly and you know nothing is lower than a snake’s belly.”

I cringed. “And nothing smarter either.”

Falling Rain hugged me and boosted me up on my leggy mare, Moonie.

I nodded at her. “Reckon it’s time to give these boys a respectable lickin’ they’ll never forget.”

“Be careful.” She stepped back.

I spun my horse around and found my way to the other racers. I scanned the area to examine my competition. Not much for men. Seven scrawny, dark-skinned boys slouched on top of their horses. They all rode bareback and bare-chested with buckskin leggings and moccasins. The only one riding in a saddle, I set my boots deep in the stirrups.

The Indian boys glared at me. One spit on the ground next to Moonie’s front foot. Another raised an arm, war-whooping and screaming Sinyekst at me. His words sounded harsh, like when whites used curse words when riled. I recognized “stupid dog,” “go home,” and “woman’s work.” My skin crawled as I fought the urge to retaliate. I bit my tongue in order to obey Pa’s words of wisdom—never quarrel with a fool! Wind Chaser sat on his horse and glared at me. My fear of him shifted to hate.

White knuckled, I reined my horse into the spot I thought we might begin.

The other racers pointed and laughed. Then they moved into position a ways north where a wide meadow stood between the mountains and the Columbia River.

I lifted my chin and followed them, pinning my sights on the trail that disappeared through the woods. I rubbed Moonie's neck. "We can beat these no-accounts."

Falling Rain tucked herself between a couple of younger cousins who wore doeskin dresses that fell below their knees; long, black braids hung over thin shoulders, their feet black with dirt. She smiled, giving me a look of encouragement. I nodded, then stared at the tree line in front of me.

A loud *thwack* from a hand drum bayed on a slight breeze. I kicked Moonie. She lunged forward, instantly ahead of the others. Her hooves chewed up the prairie grass, kicking dirt in her wake. We made our way to the forest edge, wound through trees and hog-sized rocks, and climbed up a steep hill. I passed one boy as we crested the hill. He grabbed at the collar of my dress, but I managed to wiggle out of his grip.

At the base of the hill, we jumped over a creek. While one horse balked, I shot past him like an arrow out of a tightly strung bow. We galloped through trees and around a bend, turning back in the direction where we began. Moonie crept up on Wind Chaser's horse, her breaths coming hard and fast. "You can do it." I kicked hard. Her legs stretched forward with each step.

Wind Chaser glanced back, a look of surprise swept across his face.

By the time we galloped past the spear marking the finish line, it was not enough. I circled Moonie down to a walk as the others straggled in. *I almost had him!* My body shook as adrenaline surged through me. Racers bumped their horses into mine, unquestionably on purpose. From the beginning, threats and insults made it clear I'd not been welcome.

Wind Chaser rode up beside me. "Stay home. You will never beat me."

“Stay home!” The others chanted in their own language. They also made references to cooking and sewing. I figured the Good Lord would not have put this desire in me if it wasn’t what he’d wanted. I was certain of that. Aunt Spupaleena had cleared the way for me years ago, and I figured it was up to me to keep that path open for those yet to come.

One boy grabbed my wrists, holding tight. “If you try and race again, we’ll take it out on your little sister!” He laughed and rode off.

“Touch her and I’ll kill you!” I swatted at him with my rein and lifted a hand for a second go at him, but was blocked by another Indian boy whose scarred face resembled a shadow of death. His dark-brown eyes pricked at me like a serpent’s twisted lies. My gut told me to spin Moonie around and kick. Yet I stared at the boy, unable to move.

“You do not belong here,” another Indian boy said.

I studied him. “Who are you?” He looked familiar. I leaned closer. “What’s your name?”
Where do I know him from?

“I am a friend of Wind Chaser—”

“Friend?” I grunted. “Didn’t know the sidewinder had friends.”

He sneered at me. “My name is Silent Thunder—”

“Is there such a thing?” I said.

“Stay home! Or you will be hurt.” He kicked his horse, ramming him into Moonie.

I slapped him with my reins until he backed away. “Stay away from me!”

Wind Chaser crowded me and in a low, snarl said, “Listen to us. Or you will not come out of the woods alive.”

I raised my hand to slap him across the face, but Wind Chaser grabbed it, twisting my wrist.

“Let go, you—”

“Hannah Gardner!” Mama’s footsteps kept the same pace as Uncle Pekam’s hand drum during ceremonies. “What are you doing?”

“Think about what I have said.” Wind Chaser shoved my wrist, turned, and trotted away.

I dismounted and wiped the sweat off my brow with the sleeve of my shirtwaist.

“What are you wearing? Britches under your new calico skirt? This is absurd! No lady dresses nor acts in this manner. No daughter of mine, that is. Who is that boy and didn’t your pa and I tell you no more racing?” Mama set her hands on her hips. Her slight frame was no comparison for the growl in her voice.

My gaze dropped to the ground. “Yes, ma’am, you did tell me no more racing.” I pushed dirt around with the toe of my boot. “But I know I can ride as well as Aunt Spupaleena—”

“Hannah! Listen to me.” Mama placed a hand on my shoulder. “You know we are not like the Sinyekst. They come from the Arrow Lakes way up north in Canada. They are strong and—”

“And I’m just as—”

“That’s not what I mean.” Mama sighed. “We love them like family even though we are not blood. But we have different customs and practices. They have their ways and we have ours.

No better, simply different. And yes, you are an accomplished rider. Darling, there is no future for a young lady like you to race horses. Your future is with a husband and raising children.

That's the way things are. Please—”

“No! Those are your plans, not mine. You know I'd rather be in a saddle than bent over an iron stove, stirring a pot of beans.” I rubbed my wrist. “Yes, someday I want to have a husband and children, but for now, I wanna race. I know how to garden, quilt, sew, tend to the sick. You've taught me those skills. Let me do this before I choose to settle down.”

Mama shook her head and with fear in her voice said, “No!” She took hold of my wrist. “Now come along. We're going out with Smilkameen to gather herbs. Learn more about their medicinal purposes.” She tried to tug me by her side.

“Ouch!” I pulled free and ran back to Moonie for a second race. “Watch me, Mama. I'll prove to you how good I am,” I shouted over my shoulder.

“Hannah, if you get on that horse and ride, I will find a girl's boarding school for you back east. Remember, that's where my roots are. There is always Aunt Erma's in Montana. That would be more suitable.”

Her words stopped me from mounting. I faced her, upper lip curled. “Is it Elizabeth Gardner's way or no way? My dreams have no importance?” The stench of soaking deer brains matched how I felt about my mama's will at that moment. She took a step toward me. I took a step back.

“I did not raise you to speak to me that way.” Her chin trembled. She sighed. “Yes, your dreams have meaning. We all have freedom to plan and dream. But with that freedom we have responsibilities. We cannot run wild like a tumbleweed in whichever direction the breeze blows

us. When I crossed this land as a mail-order bride to meet your father, I was filled with fear. I knew with the death of my folks, I needed a change so I wouldn't go mad. I had plans and dreams of my own. But I chose to swallow my pride and see the path ahead as an adventure into untamed territory. I chose to roll up my sleeves, leave my fashionable dresses with cousins, and make a life for myself. Out here with your father, we've made a respectable life. A happy one. We have a better life than I could have ever imagined had I remained in Virginia. A home. Love."

I could tell she was fighting tears. At the same time I had a notion to stand my ground. A storm brewed in me I'd never felt before. My hands sweat, and my face felt blazing hot. "But that's your life, Mama. Not mine." My voice squeaked.

Mama dropped her gaze and sighed. "You are difficult and stubborn. I'll remind you of your options. Come with me now, or off to boarding school you go."

Falling Rain cleared her throat. "Hannah, they are waiting for you."

I nodded.

Mama squared her shoulders. "Hannah, put your horse away. I *will* see you and Falling Rain back at the village." Mama lifted her green skirt that matched the shade of her eyes and headed for Spupaleena's tule lodge.

I turned to Falling Rain. "I'm ready."

"What is a girls' school?"

"A prison, and I'm dead certain I'll never set foot in one."