



CHAPTER 1

HUCKLEBERRY MOUNTAINS CIRCA 1700 A.D.

HOW FAST COULD A YOUNG BOY RUN in new moccasins, I wondered. I ran like the wind. My mind and my senses were one. My pounding heart was a drumbeat with which I kept perfect time as I ran harder and harder. An easy grace was mine. The power of being alive exhilarated my spirit and I felt the wind as it blew by my face. I bolted up the small knoll and yelled my war whoop, not in challenge or defiance, but in the sheer wonder of innocent joy and happiness.

My mother had just finished my new moccasins. She said I was growing faster than a young colt. I loved new moccasins. The deerskin tops and sides with the buffalo sole smelled like gentle smoke and felt like soft furs.

Mother, Noona, I called her, always cut three fringes on each side and etched a design across the top that looked like a deer hoof print inside an arrowhead. She said it was her wish that I be swift and strong like the deer and become a good hunter someday. I never questioned it. I just knew she already made it to be that way for me. I got my first deer when I was seven, an elk when I was eight. Soon I would ride with the men on my first buffalo hunt.

RED THUNDER

My father, Peepa, guided me to be a warrior. I never questioned him because I knew this, too, was a road already made for me.

Not long after my birth, Peepa and my Grandfather, Sila, took me and sang songs as they held me up to be recognized by the Mother Earth and all of nature. They dipped me in the cold running creek and asked the great waters to recognize me, cleanse me, and protect me on the road of life. They thanked the Great Creator, Kolunsuten, for my life, putting my first footprints in the sand alongside the stream so that I'd be known and taken care of on my life road.

My Grandfather, Sila, rubbed the ground heart of a special hawk mixed with white clay powder and herbal medicines on my chest right above my heart. He called upon the Kolunsuten to pity him and sanction this ceremony at my birth and to allow him to call upon the great warrior bird, the hawk. Through sacred words and incantations known only to a few of the elders, Sila invoked the great bird to impart some of his great warrior strength and bravery to me.

Then, in the teepee with the hawk feathers, he fanned me with the incense of blue spruce needles and cedar. As the soft power of the feathers extended the magic of the incense to me, he announced that my childhood name would be Sun Boy, because the sun came out from behind clouds as Sila meditated for my name. Someday, when I became a young man, I would get another name, my manhood name.

But today, all I cared about was the exhilarating feeling of freedom and strength vibrating through these huckleberry mountains, our late summer and early autumn home. We called them Grandmother and Grandfather Mountain and Grizzly Bear Mountain. But all the mountains in this area were our huckleberry gathering camps. To me, this was a paradise, heaven on earth.

The huckleberry mountains were at the center of our country. They were big peaks, some of them bald at the top and covered with flat, jagged rocks. The higher you went, the smaller the trees became and the taller the grasses grew.

Where I stood, above the tree line, I studied the large shale rocks scattered and stacked about the mountain side. And behind me, I admired the details of the bear grass growing in big clumps, wiry and tough.

From there, I could look far off to the east and see the Bitterroot Mountains. In the north, I could see the jagged mountains up by the big lake.

HUCKLEBERRY MOUNTAINS CIRCA 1700 A.D.

Some of our people had their huckleberry camps there.

To the west, well beyond our beloved lake, was the flat and open country where the sagebrush grew. Well to the south, were our neighbors, the Ni-mee-poo (Nez Perce) people.

It was a vast landscape. In late summer, the colors of the land, the grasses, trees and plants, combined with the many lakes and rivers, made a magnificent view. The short, sparsely-spaced evergreen trees gave the land a special color and feel that contrasted with the light buckskin-colored grasses of summer. Many wild flowers blossomed this time of year.

I breathed in the warm air as if it were a great medicine. My parents and grandparents always said it was a wonderful medicine and that with it I could smell the high country aromas of bear grass, mountain spruce, and wild flowers.

Even the air felt different in the huckleberry mountains. Although the day was warm, there was a light crispness in the air. Maybe it was the high mountain boulders that gave the unique smell. There were so many large, flat rocks scattered about.

Mountain woodpeckers and many other birds were plentiful. Looking out over the cliff, I could see a lone redtail hawk soaring below me hunting for food in the canyon.

This time of the year, it would be hot down below. But it was comfortable high up, especially in the shade. The sun was a brilliant yellow, almost white at times, and the sky was huge, never-ending. How could any blue be that bright and colorful? It was mostly clear, but held a few high, round clouds. When I stared at them long enough, I felt a strange floating sensation. It was magical.

The mountaintops were connected by saddles and valleys of mixed evergreen trees, meadows, and large jagged looking rocky areas. Everything seemed ancient to me, as though it had seen the beginning of life.

The mountains and hills rolled out from my view, seeming to go on forever. In the distance, a gentle haze hovered mysteriously and yet harmlessly and peacefully.

My Sila and other elders often talked of sacred sites where miraculous things occurred as all of Creation prepared for the coming of mankind. Maybe something had happened here, too.

As I ran across the saddle between the mountain peaks, I slowed to peer down the ledge. Below was a big huckleberry patch and my mother, Noona,

RED THUNDER

was there with my sisters, aunts, and grandmother. The flat, jagged rocks hid me from their view, and I decided to sneak up on them. I knew I would try to get up as close as I could, then jump out and scare them. My heart filled with excitement at the idea of such innocent mischief. Noona said my eyes always twinkled when I was up to practical jokes, so she could tell when to watch me.

But this time I was hidden, and I would be as silent and invisible as the greatest of our warriors and hunters. Well, at least I would imagine it this way.

Uncle always said, "Go still first and be silent, like the deer. Pull in all your energy, all your sounds. Make no sudden movements with any part of your body, not even your eyes. Don't bob up and down. See the ground without looking at it and never step on anything you don't intend to."

I tried my best this time and made no mistakes.

Gradually, quietly, I moved down the steep mountainside. Even my breathing became slow and smooth. I tried to calm my feelings and my thinking. It was all falling into place. I felt invisible and a part of the land. I was totally concealed and I knew it. Near the bottom of the rocky cliff was an open area with only scattered brush. I would have to time my movements through the opening with Noona's berry picking motion.

As she reached to pick, I made my move, a smooth, hunched over trot, and hid behind the first bush as though I were part of the bush and always had been. I slowly moved my head to look out between the limbs. So far, so good.

The other bushes were close. I knew I had it made now. My heart pounded, my mind raced with excitement. This time I will do it.

Closer and closer I moved until I was one bush away. Now I will jump out and surprise her, I thought. Just as I set myself to lunge forward, without turning and looking, Noona said "Hello, Sun Boy. How's my son today? Are you doing what your father told you to do?"

"Oh, Noona. How did you know I was here? I never let myself be seen at all," I said with disappointment in my voice. All my excitement and anticipation drained.

"I just knew," she said, "and I felt comfortable with the presence, so I said to myself 'It's my son.' Keep practicing, but talk to the land and the forest and the animals that have the power to camouflage and conceal. They must authorize you to use a part of them to conceal yourself."

HUCKLEBERRY MOUNTAINS CIRCA 1700 A.D.

That's exactly what my father, Peepa, my grandfather, Sila, and my uncles said to me all the time. When would I ever get it right? I complained in my mind. But I would never say it. I already knew to watch what I said because life might become the way I talked.

Noona saw my mild disappointment and quickly added, "You almost have it though, son. I barely noticed you at all."

Right away I felt tall and proud. She could always do that for me, even with just her approving smile.

"Your sisters, cousins, and younger brother are playing right down there. Let me see if you can sneak up on them," she challenged.

I didn't need that invitation twice. Bold and determined, I took off with the youthful joy of mischief and adventure. I knew they would never detect me.

I stalked through the brush. First I saw my baby sister. She was giggling and chasing butterflies. Her eyes were lit up and her whole chubby face smiled as big as the mountainside. Her dark hair was shiny black and her dainty little buckskin dress and tiny moccasins made a picture of pure, complete innocence and loveableness. I could see in her the freedom and joy I had felt running along the mountain saddles. It made me want to laugh and giggle with her, but I tried not to make any sound.

Wherever baby sister was, my older sister would be and maybe my Grandma, Checheya, too.

"Eeee, Eeee, Eee!" I heard my Grandma, Checheya, holler out. This meant someone had to come and fetch her berries because her basket was full. I knew the attention was turned on Checheya. It was time to move.

I lunged out from the bush. "Rauwr, Rauwr," I growled and groaned. The girls all screamed and scattered. Little brother jumped then started to laugh. Grandma, Checheya, chuckled and the girls started to giggle but still tried to pretend they were afraid.

I picked up my baby sister, Rainbow Girl, and I swung her back and forth. I twirled her over my shoulders just to hear her contagious laugh. Everybody rushed toward me and grabbed hold, trying to join in on the play and the laughter.

As we settled down, my Noona ordered, "You girls better pick some berries now. It's okay to play around a little, but you'd better learn to enjoy yourself working too," she explained, and we all knew she was right.

"Sun Boy, have you finished what your Peepa told you to do?" she asked,

RED THUNDER

remembering my work assignment.

"No, not yet," I answered, "but I'm going to do it now."

Peepa, Sila, and Uncle went down the mountain to the lake and the river right after the morning meal to get fresh fish because Checheya said it would be good to have some right now after several days of smoke dried deer meat with dried bitter roots.

I liked the deer meat with all the huckleberries I could eat. The foods and the berries, together with the mountains, I just knew it made for powerful strength.

But I was supposed to go to the shale and rocky cliff to look for flint and arrowhead material. Sila had already prayed over there and left an offering of tobacco asking for permission to take some of the flint and other flat rocks for tools and weapons. He said he already told the mountain and the site that his grandson, Sun Boy, would be back today to gather some more. So I was supposed to just say a few words about what I was doing there, who I was, and then go ahead and gather more.

I tried to be careful not to be too rough or intrusive by throwing rocks around while combing for flint, but to look gently and reverently, asking for the right stones while I searched. I found one and then another. In just a few hours, I had six really good stones; several of them might even split into two or three arrow tips. I knew Peepa would be pleased.

I thanked the rocks and the mountain for accepting my family and me and caring enough to help us by again providing these essential materials.

The next mountaintop over was only a little way off but I hadn't been up there yet this year. I knew I could see all of our country, the lake, the rivers, the valleys, and the great birds flying below. From there just to the east, I could see the sacred lake and the prayer and fasting grounds where the Great Thunders dwelt.

This peak was called "Bald at the Top." It looked bald from three sides, but it actually had grass on the top and some small brush and trees on one side. It was the tallest in this group of mountains. It rose up like a giant, wild, upside-down carrot.

Without thinking about it, I was already on the way up.

It's a steep and difficult climb, but Peepa said to never think about it that way. "To be strong, your thinking must be strong first," he said. "The most powerful of our people don't think weak, lazy thoughts or how to get away with something by doing less," was his explanation.

HUCKLEBERRY MOUNTAINS CIRCA 1700 A.D.

Finally, I reached the top. The impressive beauty quieted me while my heart and mind tried to absorb the honor and privilege that were mine at that moment. Just to behold the great miracle of the Creator—Mother Earth—and all of the holy creation was overwhelming.

I could see our entire country and beyond it. Looking down, I saw the lake reflecting the brilliance of the blue sky. The shadowy river that meandered into the lake was more winding and crooked than I had ever realized.

Standing on a granite ledge, I could peer straight down the cliff into the canyons and valleys below.

The air smelled different up here on the very top. It was crisp, and absent the fragrance of our evergreen trees. Maybe it was the smell of the giant rocks in the warm sun, but it was just different.

I didn't know how to speak my thoughts or my feelings. I wondered how many of our elders from past generations had stood here and been recognized by this ancient place—the altar of the Amotken, my Sila called it. Often, when our people prayed, they faced the tallest mountain in view and called the Creator, Amotken, "the spirit seated at the top." Otherwise, we called Him the Kolunsuten.

The wind blew gently into my face, my long hair flowing and bouncing with it. I could smell the wild flowers and the huckleberries from below. It was a fragrance that whispered its sweetness to me.

I could sense something from the plant life and trees. They were happy. They had feelings and they let me know their life was sacred, precious, and powerful too. It was like a dream, but it was real.

The sacred bird, the eagle, flew by and checked on me to see who was here on the mountaintop. "Ahh! Great and holy one," I called to him. Thunder rolled across a distant mountaintop.

Peepa and Sila told us to always sing at these times, but to make the feelings that are beyond words a part of our song. I tried, but I didn't really know how. So, I just looked and daydreamed, and then I sang a little again.

I felt moved to climb near the ledge again. The view looking straight down made me feel like a noble or majestic eagle. I sang my song with more intensity, but this time I put out my arms and flapped them like wings. I was the great bird for a few moments. Maybe I would just take off and fly away.