Crying Wind My Searching Heart

Chapter One

Moccasined feet moved quietly down the dry arroyo. The only sound was that of leather fringe flapping against bronze skin.

Thunder growled in the distance, and a few flashes of lightning outlined the ragged, purple clouds as I began slowly to work my way up the sharp rocks of the cliff. My hands were already scratched and skinned from clutching at rocks in the darkness. I tried not to think about what would happen if I grabbed a loose rock or lost my balance. I knew only too well it would be a long and painful slide down the steep, granite hill with yucca spikes slashing at my legs.

Straining my eyes, I tried to see the narrow, almost invisible path that led to the secret circle on top of this sacred hill. I wondered if there had ever been such a dark night. A flash of lightning lit the hillside long enough for me to see the large rocks ahead. I was nearly at the top.

I felt dizzy, and my hands began to shake from hunger. I hadn't had anything to eat or drink all day. I had fasted to prove myself worthy to speak to my god.

In a few more minutes I would be talking to my god, Niyol, the great and mighty wind god of the Indians.

At last I reached the crest of the hill, and I hurried over a flat stone buried in the earth. I knew that hundreds of other Indians had stood on this same stone in the distant past to call to their gods for help.

I carefully removed the feathers and stick from my leather pouch and tied them together with strips of rawhide. Then I drew our clan sign in the dust and stood to face the wind.

"Oh, strong and fearful wind, most powerful of all the gods, hear my words—"

I finished my prayer and threw my prayer stick into the wind and quickly turned my back, because to see your prayer stick fall to earth meant your prayer would not be answered. I hoped the wind would catch my prayer stick and blow it into the sky.

The thunder warned me one last time to come down off the mountain before he let loose his storm horses. I quickly ran my hands through the dust to wipe out all traces of the drawing. Even as I did so the sky began to cry, and large, heavy drops of rain hit the tops of my hands and turned the dust on my fingers to mud.

I hurried across the open space to the large boulders that marked the path leading back down the hill. The drops of rain were bigger, and they stung when they hit my face. A loud clap of thunder crashed all around me and made me jump with fright. My buckskin dress was already becoming

wet and heavy, and it clung to me, making it even harder to inch my way down the narrow path. I wondered if lightning would strike me as I clung to the side of the hill and if I would be found dead tomorrow.

My heart raced faster. I couldn't tell if I shivered from the cold rain or from fear or if I just trembled from hunger. I was nearly at the bottom when the gravel, loosened by the downpour, gave way under my feet. I slid the rest of the way down the hill. When I was sure I hadn't been hurt, I picked myself up and brushed off the mud and thanked Niyol for sparing my life. After all, he could have told the lightning to strike me, or he could have killed me from the fall. Wasn't the fact that he spared me a good sign? Didn't it prove I was in his favor? Perhaps it even meant he had heard my prayer.

After I got home I hung up my dress to dry out. It was heavy and sagging from the water it had soaked up. The elk-skin dress weighed sixteen pounds when it was dry, but now that it was wet it must weigh twice that much. Some of the beads on the right sleeve were missing. They would have to be replaced before I could wear it again. My moccasins would have to be cleaned tonight. If I left the mud on, they would be too stiff to wear by morning.

My body ached as I finally crawled into bed. My hands burned where they had been scratched raw. I was still hungry, but I couldn't eat until morning.

“Oh well, it was all worth it if the wind heard my prayer—if—if—“I tried to ignore the uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach and tell myself it was only hunger. I would eat a big breakfast tomorrow morning, and the empty feeling would go away.

The last thing I remembered before I fell into an exhausted sleep was, “If he heard my prayer, if—if—“

I was glad I believed in the wind god. He was the most powerful of all the Indian gods. The bear god was strong, but he slept all winter. I didn’t want a god who was asleep half the year. The snake and horned toad were ugly gods. I didn’t like them. The wolf and eagle were beautiful and clever, but they could both be killed, and you could see their bones turning white in the sun. The sun god was mighty, but you couldn’t call on him at night, and during the day, clouds could cover his face. No, the wind god was the best. He could be everywhere. He couldn’t be caught or killed. He could blow your house down. He could tear at you until you couldn’t stand up against him. He could be so cold he could freeze you to death or so hot that you would faint from his hot breath. Of course, the wind was a fickle god; he could be good or evil; he could answer your call or not as he chose. But a god can’t be everything. A god can’t be perfect, and I was satisfied with this one.

It was Grandmother who had taught me all about the Indian gods and legends. I had been with her ever since I could remember, ever since my mother had abandoned me.

I was never really sure why she took me in when my mother left me behind. Grandmother had seven sons and four daughters, and certainly didn't need another mouth to feed. I knew she was disappointed I was a girl. In our culture sons meant everything, and a daughter was practically worthless. Whenever a girl was born, people would shake their heads sadly and say, "Don't feel bad, maybe the next time you will be lucky and have a son."

After a few years had passed, I was big enough to help with the cooking and cleaning and any other work that was considered too lowly for my uncles to do. I learned to do "woman's work"—chopping wood, skinning the animals my uncles killed for meat, gardening, and feeding the livestock. I was too skinny to be very much help, and many times I failed to do things because I wasn't strong enough. My grandmother would shake her head, throw her hands up in the air, and say, "You are lazy! You are lazy!" then she would scratch my arms with her fingernails until they bled to let the lazy blood out of my body so I could work harder.

Grandfather had died when I was small, and gradually my aunts had married and left home. My uncles had drifted away, one by one, until there was only Grandmother and me left in the little house.

Grandmother's face had a thousand wrinkles and looked like old leather. Her eyes were black and sharp as an eagle's beneath her hooded eyelids. Her hair was white as snow, and she wore it in two braids. When she was a young woman, she had been beautiful. Her hair had been black and shiny and had hung past her hips. When Grandfather had died, she had cut off her hair to show she was in mourning. She had taken a knife and cut the palms of her hands to show her grief. In the old days Indian women often cut off their fingers when they lost their husbands.

Now her hands were wrinkled and scarred and her left thumb had been injured so that the thumbnail was always split down the middle, but her fingers were nimble for a woman her age and she could do finer beadwork than any other woman in the valley.

Grandmother. *Shima Sani*—"Little Grandmother," we called her. She looked a hundred years old. She wasn't sure but she thought she must be in her eighties. Of course, even if she had known exactly how old she was, she wouldn't have said so, because there was always the danger that the Spirit Horse would hear her and say, "I did not know you had lived so long. It is past time for you to die." And he would take her away. Most of the older Indians would say, "I am 104 years old." That seemed to be a favorite number to say, but it was unlikely that any of them were much over ninety.

Shima Sani was orphaned when she was a small child and had worked in other people's cornfields to earn enough money to keep herself and her two sisters from starving. When she was about fourteen, a laughing young Navajo man came riding by on the most beautiful black horse she had ever seen. He didn't even speak to her, but a month later he came carrying a shawl for her and a cigar box half full of nickels for her sisters. She married him a week later and followed him to his small farm in Colorado, where he, too, raised corn. There they had eleven children.

I couldn't remember Grandfather very well since he had died when I was still small. I could only remember his dark, tough skin and his loud, happy laugh and his whiskey smell. He was walking home from town one night, after spending his entire week's wages on liquor, and he passed out. The next morning his son Cloud found him frozen to death in a cornfield less that a quarter of a mile from our house.

I knew none of my uncles grieved for their father. He had beaten them too many times in his drunken rages and had nearly killed some of them. Once he had broken Pascal's arm.

Although Cloud was the youngest of my uncles, he was the tallest and the strongest. When he walked through the door of our house, he seemed to block the whole doorway.

His head would touch the top of the door entrance, and his shoulders would almost touch each side.

No one was as big or as important in my life as Cloud. It was always an event when he came to the house. I looked forward to seeing him because he always livened things up with a story. Somehow he could take the most common, ordinary happening and tell it in such a way that would make it seem like an adventure. He was my idol. I thought no one in the world could be as strong or as handsome as Cloud. He could follow animal tracks no one else could find and tell you within an hour when the animal passed through. No wonder he was the best hunter and trapper around.

My Uncle Flint was as tall as Cloud, but he was thin and didn't have the weight or strength that Cloud had. He was quiet and moody and never joked or laughed the way his brothers did. I wanted to feel close to Flint, but he always withdrew whenever I tried to be friendly, until I finally gave up and accepted the fact that Flint and I would never be close. We would always be strangers.

Pascal was several years older than Cloud and Flint. He had a sad face with deep lines around his mouth and a crooked wrist that hadn't been set right after Grandfather had broken his arm years ago. He was a quiet man—too quiet. You could never tell what he was thinking.

Once Shima Sani had tried sending me to the school in town but it was a disaster. The other children in my class were all non-Indians and had made fun of my name, Crying Wind. They called me "Bawlin' Breeze." There are few things more precious to an Indian than his name, and their jokes hurt me deeply. They had called me a wild savage and laughed at the beads I wore in my braided hair.

"Indians eat dog meat," they would call after me. "Hide your dog, or Bawlin' Breeze will eat it for supper—eat it raw!"

A few times I tried to tell them that if a person were starving to death he would eat anything to survive. Besides, Indian dogs weren't pets. They weren't the pampered, useless, spoiled things dogs are now. They carried small travois loaded with clay pots and blankets. They were watchdogs for the camp. When there was no game to hunt or when there were blizzards and the snow was too deep for the men to go hunting for meat, the dogs were already there in the camp and could easily be caught. Dog stew saved many people from starving in hard winters. Perhaps, when all was said and done, the Indians thought more highly of the dog than the white man, because the Indian's life often depended on his dogs.

I tried to tell them we weren't savages. It was the Indians who taught the white settlers about foods like jerky, popcorn, maple syrup, peanuts, corn, potatoes, rice, fruits,

berries and nuts. The Indians even had chewing gum hundreds of years ago. Most of the food the early settlers had was a result of the Indians' teaching them how to hunt, what to plant, and how to prepare what they caught and grew. But they never listened to me. They didn't care about history or facts; they only cared about having someone to laugh at.

I ran home in tears day after day while the other kids chased me, throwing rocks at me and calling me names. Finally, one day I decided I wouldn't take it anymore. Instead of running, I stood my ground and put up a fight. It was a short one because one of the larger boys picked up a long stick and hit me across the mouth.

Blood gushed out and I was sure he'd knocked out every tooth I owned. The sight of blood sent panic through the mob and they turned and ran, leaving me alone in the schoolyard with a swollen mouth and blood dripping off my chin onto my only dress.

I ran all the way home. Grandmother had seen me coming and was waiting at the door for me.

I told her what had happened as she wiped away the blood and changed my clothes.

I was relieved to learn I only had a split lip and cut gums and that none of my teeth had been knocked out. My mouth was so sore and swollen I couldn't eat or talk for a couple of days. I enjoyed being petted and pampered by

Grandmother and my uncles, who were furious at the way I'd been treated and called my attackers a pack of yellow dogs.

Cloud had been so angry he'd gone to the schoolhouse to talk to the teacher, but she wasn't interested in our problems. She said her job was to instruct the children in the classroom from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., and anything that happened to a pupil after 4:00 on the way home was none of her business.

Cloud had come home with his temper blazing. "White man's schools!" he spat. "Let them be for the white man's children. Cry will not return!"

Grandmother nodded in agreement.

I could have shouted for joy. I would never have to return to that daily torture they called school. No more being taunted or chased or beaten up! No more angry looks from teachers. No more pointing fingers and laughter from the children.

True to my uncle's words, I never returned to school. Grandmother received several letters from the school demanding that I return, but she just threw them into the fire and never bothered to answer any of them. Once some people came out in a big fancy car, but Grandmother met them in the yard and spoke to them while I hid inside the house. I don't know what she said to them, but they never returned, and the subject of school never came up again.

Grandmother gave me the proper education for a girl of my age. I was taught how to skin animals and tan their hides, how to do beadwork, and how to make medicine from plants. During these long days of tedious chores she would tell and retell the stories of the glorious days when the Kickapoo were the "Lords of the Plains."

"In the old days—"she would begin, and I would listen carefully, anxious not to miss a single word of the exciting accounts of our tribe's past history.

Over and over she would say, "Kickapoo is a name to be proud of. Our real name is *Kiwigapawa.* It means 'He moves about,' because our people were always restless, always looking for a home and never finding one. We were always searching."

I would feel a pang of anger as I remembered how the people made fun of the word *Kickapoo* as if it were some kind of joke. They would say "Kickapoo" and laugh. They knew nothing about the honor or meaning of our tribal name.

Grandmother's voice would go on, "Our people fought everyone. There was not a tribe anywhere that did not fear the name Kickapoo. They were no better warriors than ours. Creek, the Osage, the Cherokee—we fought all those tribes and we always won. The Fox and Illinois Indian." She would laugh, "We wiped them from the face of the earth. Our people fought the French, the British, and the

Spanish and drove the traders from our lands. We killed the missionaries and burned their churches." Her eyes would snap with fierce pride. "There was no one who could win over the Kickapoo. Our warriors didn't think the odds were fair unless they were six to one against us. People's hearts stopped with fear when our name was spoken. From Maine to Mexico, our warriors left a bloody path."

She told me some of the stories about the great battles dozen of times, but I never grew tired of hearing them. Perhaps other children went to bed with stories or nursery rhymes, but I went to bed hearing about blood-chilling raids of the Kickapoo warriors. My heart would pound with pride at the stories of our past victories against our enemies and burn with anger at the stories of the lies and broken treaties thrown at us from the government.

Grandmother loved telling stories about Kennekuk, who was called "the prophet." Kennekuk had started a new religion among the Kickapoo in 1830. Although it wasn't the old Indian religion, neither was it Christianity; but it was enough of both to keep the "new white man's religion" from getting started in the tribe.

Kennekuk died from smallpox about 1850. Before he died he promised he would rise from the dead and come back to life in three days. His body was buried in a dry well, and a large group of his followers waited beside his grave for his last prophecy to come true. At the end of the

three days many left, but some stayed on a few more days. More left each day until finally everyone was gone, and the body of the prophet remained at the bottom of the old, dry well on the dusty Kansas plains. Grandmother would always add, "But who knows, the prophet may return some day."

She told me about the battle of Bad Axe and the Black Hawk War and the battles of Dove Creek and Rush Springs. She told me about Chief Keotuk, Chief Kapioma, Chief Ockquanocasey, Chief Quaquapoqua and Chief Wahnahkethahah. Names like Whirling Thunder, Little Deer, White Horse, and Big Elk would echo in my head as I pictured them swooping down on their enemies, killing them and galloping away with enemy scalps and stolen horses.

Time seemed to stand still on the reservation. One day was so much like the next we didn't bother to keep track of the months, only the seasons. I knew before I got out of bed that each day was the same, yesterday, today, tomorrow, always the same. Only a birth or death in the family would change the monotony.

When one of my aunts became pregnant, everyone was overjoyed that there would be new blood in the family—but the happiness turned to tragedy when twins were born. It was a bad omen to have twins, because everyone knew that a woman was to have only one child, and the second

child was an evil spirit that was following the first from the darkness before birth. The second baby lived only a few days. It became weaker and weaker, and then it died. The first baby thrived and grew strong and fat. My aunt told everyone that she just hadn't had enough milk for the second baby. I had never seen a set of twins on the reservation. Something always happened to the second baby, but no one spoke about it. Some things were better left unsaid. People on the reservation understood how things must be and the Indian agent and other authorities couldn't be bothered—so another Indian lost one of her newborn babies—who cares?

I knew that there must be dark, shadowy things, bad things that Grandmother and my uncles talked about when I was supposed to be asleep, but I didn't know what they were. Even though I was curious, I wasn't sure I really wanted to know everything that went on around the reservation.

I was about ten years old when one of the dark facts burst into my life and left its shadow on me for years to come.

Grandmother and I had been asleep for hours when suddenly there was a wild, frantic pounding on our door. Grandmother got up to open it while I snuggled farther down into the blankets, too sleepy to care what was happening. When I heard loud, excited talking, I could tell by the way Grandmother spoke that she was upset. I got out

of bed, sneaked over, hid behind her, and I peeked around her long flowing nightgown. I was shocked at what I saw.

There in the darkness stood a young man, naked except for a loincloth of coyote skin. He was covered with mud and so terrified, he was shaking from head to foot.

He was begging grandmother for help. He said he had just gotten married and moved into the far end of the valley. He had been married only one month when his new bride died of pneumonia. He was grief-stricken and went to the medicine man for help. The medicine man had told him he could raise the young girl from her grave and make her live again. The young man had followed the medicine man's instructions to the last detail. He had stripped and covered himself with mud, and the full moon had risen, he had gone to his wife's grave and covered it with the skin of a coyote. He had sat there for an hour, for two hours, and nothing happened. In the third hour the grave began to shake, the ground began to tremble, and he knew something evil was happening. This thing that was coming from the grave couldn't be his beautiful, sweet wife; it had to be something so terrifying that his mind couldn't grasp it. He jumped up from the grave, and clutching the coyote skin around his naked loins, started running screaming through the night.

He was afraid to stop, afraid to look back. I don't know how many houses he stopped at before he reached ours that

night. He had been running a long way, because his body was streaked with sweat, and he was gasping for every breath. Suddenly he started screaming and turned around and ran off into the darkness.

"What's happening, Shima Sani?" I whispered as I watched the man disappear.

"He shouldn't have done that," she said quietly and shut and bolted the door.

I wasn't sure what she meant and what he shouldn't have done, but I didn't think I wanted to know any more about it, so I followed her back to bed without saying anymore.

I felt cold and I started to put my arm around her to keep warmer but as soon as I barely touched her she jerked away quickly and asked "What's that?"

"It's me, Grandmother. I am cold."

She tucked the blankets around me.

"What did you think it was?" I asked.

She waited a long time before she answered. "Maybe I thought it was a bug."

I laughed, knowing she couldn't have thought it was a bug. I was too young to understand the depths of her fear.

The next day the story was all over the countryside. The young man had gone to my uncle's house.

"he said he felt something coming out of the grave—he said he didn't know what it was, but he felt something and the ground was moving." The story was repeated over and

over. Could it have been his wife? Maybe it had been evil spirits? Could the medicine man really raise people from the dead? What had happened to the young man? No one knew. Many people had seen him running through the night with the coyote skin flapping behind him, but no one knew where he had gone.

We never saw him again; he never returned to our valley. No one ever moved into his house, and no one ever quite forgot the story. Maybe a year or more would go by without hearing it. Then a group of people would discuss something they didn't understand or something they feared, and someone would begin, "I remember this one time—"and the story would be told again. The people would nod their heads. Some of the women would shiver and some would say it wasn't the earth he had felt tremble, it was himself, because he was so afraid. Others would say that maybe the medicine man really could raise a person from the dead.

Nothing was ever solved. No one ever knew what happened to the young man, and after discussing it awhile, everyone would shrug his shoulders and shake his head, and it would be forgotten again. For a while.