

CHAPTER FOUR

## *The First Night*

The night sky was filled with a million lights, as though the eyes of the ancestors were watching. I sat in the middle of my stone circle and waited. Tonight, I was sure I would have the vision that would show me my life's path. I was also confident my Spirit Helper would come. Despite the Elder's scolding, I was expecting an important totem animal which would prove Creator favoured me.

The Worthless One lay outside the circle. It smelled as if it had run into a skunk and then rolled in rotten fish!

"Don't bother me. I am waiting for my Spirit Helper."

The old dog raised its head, peered at me with bleary eyes, and belched loudly, adding to the foul smells surrounding it.

I wrinkled my nose.

As the hours dragged by, I sat impatiently waiting, but there was no vision and no helper. The night seemed particularly long and the ground incredibly hard. I wished I'd remembered to bring my water skin with me. Water might ease the emptiness growing in my belly. It was in the lean-to, but I could not leave the circle to get it.

It was nearly dawn when I saw something in the grass near my circle. Peering more closely, I recoiled.



*A snake!*

I recognised the brown markings on its back and heard the faint rustle from its tail. It was a venomous rattlesnake! This one was not to be trusted.

As I watched, the snake lifted its triangular head and watched me with lidless eyes. It flicked its tongue, testing the air, and then with deliberate slowness, slithered towards the opening of my circle!



If I ran, I would fail the test. But if I stayed, I would be bitten by the snake.

I saw that the old dog was between me and the rattlesnake.

The snake drew closer to the sleeping dog. The mutt must have sensed something, because it yawned lazily, as though coming out of a deep slumber. Then the dog curled its tail around its bony body and went back to sleep. Why didn't the Worthless One run?

I stared in disbelief, certain the snake would bite the dog and then come for me. The rattler glided soundlessly up to the dog and I waited for the killing strike, but then something strange happened. The snake hit the dog's curled tail and stopped. It was as though the thick tail was too hard to climb over. Instead, the snake followed the curve of the furry obstacle until it was past the dog.

The rattlesnake continued towards me. It hissed and the rattles shook as it moved in for the kill.

Why had the snake bypassed the dog?

In an instant, the answer came to me. The curve of the tail had forced the snake to change direction!

Quickly, I took off my horsehair belt and laid it outside my stone circle.

The snake approached and followed the line of the belt, searching for a way in. It went past the opening, now blocked, and continued on outside the rocks. Unable to get at me, the serpent silently disappeared back into the night.

I exhaled loudly. That had been close. This far up the mountain, I couldn't have made it back to the Medicine Man in time to cut out the venom. I would surely have died.

As the sun rose, I left my sacred circle and immediately made a smudge to thank the snake for not biting me.

Then I smiled. My first night's vigil was over. Only two more to go.

