

Book 4 of the Wilderness Time Travel Series

Warriors of the Wilderness

Pamela Ackerson

THE first sign of freezing rain tapped on the trees, Gentle Raccoon Standing Deer covered his bundled body with another layer of protection. Securing the boots on the horses, he listened to the eerie call of the freezing, dangerous winds. Pulling the hood of his rain gear over his face, he concentrated on the path ahead. Gentle Raccoon traveled on foot toward the reservation, keeping the horses' safety and welfare in mind. There Matthew would be known as Gentle Raccoon, leaving his white man's name where it belonged, in the white man's world.

Holding the reins of the lead horse, he looked up to the sky and prayed that he'd make it to Standing Rock before the storm blew.

The temperature had dropped below freezing. Scanning the crushed snow left from the last storm, he watched for a dangerous coating of ice forming beneath their feet. Just a small amount was enough of a hazard for him and the two horses.

His fingers were stiff with the cold, his face numb from the rain splattering off his hood. Flurries started dancing in the air and he once again scanned the area for a place to shelter. There was no way he would make it to Standing Rock, not with this storm blasting in the way it was. Gentle Raccoon recalled a small cave, an old dugout from a long-ago miner, about a mile up the way. If necessary, he'd make his own shelter, but he preferred the cave. It'd be a better haven for the horses.

Slowing his steps, he realized that he was perspiring. He needed to be careful. Hypothermia was not on his list of priorities. Everything he was wearing was lightweight and loose, the layers of clothing trapping air to insulate his body. If it were crucial, he'd remove his flannel shirt underneath his coat.

Gentle Raccoon yawned and his teeth started chattering. *Not good.* He needed the shelter of the cave. The wind was whipping about; gushes of cold snow swirled around them, temporarily blinding him.

"Mushroom, we have to get to the cave." The horse whinnied in agreement.

He was shivering. The danger signs of hypothermia rang in his mind. Disorientation, uncontrollable shivering, slurred speech, drowsiness, and exhaustion. He clenched his jaw; there were more symptoms, but he couldn't recall what they were.

Snow was falling fast, and a roiling whoosh pushed them forward. Gentle Raccoon lost his balance on the coating of ice and dropped to his knees. Blinding snow cut slashes in his face, his raised collar, and hood useless against the thrashing gusts of wind.

He could see the path to the cave opening. Focusing on the goal before him, he repeated, *just a little bit more.* Limping, Gentle Raccoon brought the horses into the cave. Relief settled the tension he hadn't realized had been building in his muscles. Stretching, he rubbed his face with his wet mittens. Groaning, he realized his mistake immediately. He took his mittens off and put on another dry pair. Pulling out a towel, he dried his face, carefully, as he felt the bite of the snow on his skin.

After the second attempt, the fire flamed bright from the aged wood he had found in a corner, heating the small cave as he wiped down the horses. Part of the dugout had collapsed but it was still large enough to house the horses and him. Two mice watched his movements from a corner, unsure of the uninvited guests who had laid claim to their home.

He wouldn't be arriving at Standing Rock today. The temperature had dropped quickly, warning of the coming blizzard. The blinding wind-driven snow, severe drifting, and dangerous wind chill were life-threatening. Always prepared for the worst, he had four more days of food and water. Would it be enough?

Tying a rope around his waist and attaching it to the chair near the makeshift door, Gentle Raccoon headed toward the side of the dugout. About ten feet from the opening he found a woodpile left by a generous soul. Carrying as much as he could, he added more wood to the small stack.

The storm was raging, thrashing winds were coming from the southwest, howling like coyotes at the moon. With the combined winds and the extreme drop in temperature, the wind chill would most likely drop below -15 degrees. He shivered again, wishing for electric heaters and the warmth of the Florida sun. His stomach muscles ached from constantly clenching them against the cold.

Quickly, he stripped off his clothing and put on some long johns, drew up a pair of skins, and added layers of shirts until he was comfortable. Putting water on the fire, he prepared a sparse meal.

"My favorite," he mumbled. "Lukewarm soup."

He needed to slowly raise his body temperature. Wiggling his numb fingers, he wished for the warm companionship of Captain Morgan. Gentle Raccoon grabbed the blanket he'd placed near the fire and wrapped its warmth over his head and around his shoulders. The heat from the blanket and the warm soup was comforting, relaxing. He yawned again and forced pleasant memories to occupy his mind.

Gentle Raccoon grunted as the biting pains exploded through his bones, crippling the movements of his fingers and arms. His legs felt heavy, weighed down as if steel bolts held them to the dirt floor.

He edged his way, like a decrepit man, to retrieve his medicine bag. As he prepared a decoction, he thought of his friends at the reservation.

He looked forward to seeing Gall again. Gall had fought against the invasion of their land with the fierceness of any true Lakota warrior. He'd originally been part of Red Cloud's band until he had joined forces with Sitting Bull. Over time, he'd become Sitting Bull's war chief and fought against the United States. Gall had led the Hunkpapa warriors against Major Reno at the Little Big Horn campsite, and then joined Crazy Horse in the battle against Custer and the Seventh Cavalry.

The familiar lump formed in his throat. The battle at Little Big Horn, his father's death, his life changed forever. It was a long road all of them have travelled, but here he was again, travelling to the past, and facing a dangerous time for the Indian. Only this time, Gentle Raccoon wasn't a child. He was a grown man.

He looked forward to seeing his old friends.

So much had changed. "And it was only going to get worse."

Gall had fled to Canada with Sitting Bull but had returned to the Lakota Territory after a disagreement between the two men. Gentle Raccoon's mother had discussed the rift with Sitting Bull. When he attempted to talk about his speculations with his mother, she'd shake her head and say her conversations with Sitting Bull were in confidence, and their private discussions wouldn't pass her lips.

Gentle Raccoon wondered if Gall had been unhappy in Canada. It wasn't their land. Perhaps Sitting Bull was tired of fighting and Gall wasn't willing to surrender yet, nor was he willing to stay in a land that wasn't their own.

Gentle Raccoon understood Gall's innate desire for survival. Once he had surrendered to the government, he accepted the defeat and attempted to encourage the Lakotas to accept and embrace their new way of life. Gall had become a prominent member on the reservation. He actively campaigned for the farming programs and education of the children. The previous year, his influence among the Lakota's and the federal government had increased tremendously when he'd become a judge on the reservation's Court of Indian Offenses.

The rift between Gall and Sitting Bull increased when he had agreed to reducing reservation land. Gall had become good friends with Indian Agent James McLaughlin, seemingly siding up with the enemy, and then, consented to sign away their land.

Sitting Bull had been furious.

Sitting Bull did agree with Gall on many issues. Neither of the men participated in the Ghost Dance, both allowed it to continue. Though the Lakotas had never been an agricultural tribe, he approved their farming programs, understanding the necessity. Sitting Bull also sent his children to the schools and encouraged the Lakota to learn the white man's ways, knowing that education was a gift for their future welfare, for the generations to come. They could take everything else from the Indian, but no one could take their education from them.

Sitting Bull had also consented to allow his children to learn the Christian faith. Through Gentle Raccoon's mother and her friend Sings to the Wind, Sitting Bull had learned the Christian beliefs but stayed strong with the old ways. He listened to the priest's words of wisdom and understood the teachings. Although there was a great difference between the ways of the Lakota and the Christians, he believed some of the Christian ways coincided with his own spiritual beliefs. Respecting their choice of religion, he never embraced the Christian faith as his own.

He found many of their ways confusing, couldn't comprehend how they only worshiped their god once a week. Every breath he took, every bite of food he received, and every aspect of life he experienced was accompanied with prayer. The Lakota didn't designate just one day a week to honor the Creator, but every day, every moment.

Catholic priests were the only Christians that Sitting Bull observed worshiping and praying every day. Like him, they had laid their souls in the palms of God. Wakan Tanka was the same Supreme Being, the Creator, with a different name.

When Gentle Raccoon was younger, Sitting Bull had taught him many spiritual beliefs. During his absence from the Lakota people, his parents had taught him the Lakota ways, in addition to teaching him about the Christian faith. The combination was empowering and humbling.

Together they taught him to live life with a passion, to never let go of hope or faith. He'd watched with the insight of a child while his mother had been emotionally knocked to the ground. He was impressed with her strength, as she picked herself up, never giving in, never giving up. How liberating it was not to hang on to sadness or bitterness, to know that tomorrow was another day, another choice, and another chance.

He recalled a time when he'd struck out in a baseball game. Every time he went up to bat that day, he struck out. He was frustrated and angry, mad at the world. He was ready to quit, to never play ball again. She'd told him, it wasn't a bad day, just a bad moment. Her words rang in his ears.

Life is an adventure. Know that there will be days when you strike out, but remember to live life with every intention of sliding into home base, knowing that you will have added one more score to the game.

It had taken him years to understand what she'd been saying.

There were times when Gentle Raccoon felt like he was a useless speck of dust. After the last set of wildfires he'd fought, he'd felt weary. Tears of frustration had filled his eyes at the loss of the burned acreage, the death of the helpless animals. Darkness and pain had smothered him. Like the flames that had destroyed Mother, he had succumbed to the sorrow, his strength drained.

The freezing cold made it difficult to concentrate. Jumbled random thoughts skittered through his memories. His father's image waded through the throng, halting the passage of confusion.

When Gentle Raccoon had lost his father, he had hated the white man, the government. His heart had knotted into a ball of bitterness and hatred. Ironically, it'd been Crazy Horse who eased his heart, telling him that there were white people and then there were *wasichu*.

Learn the difference, know the difference, and live the difference.

He stared at the bouncing shadows. His thoughts converged on a new notion, a sudden intuitive realization from the gathered wisdom of those closest to him.

Gentle Raccoon spoke to the flames snapping before his eyes. "We the People build a nation, a nation does not build the people."

The cave was warm as Gentle Raccoon stood to check on the horses. Air escaped through holes in the dugout and he hung an extra blanket to block the flow.

The storm howled vigorously. The cave walls managed to block the wind as it moaned a threatening song of warning.

"Is that better, Shadow?" She whinnied and nodded her head in thanks when he swapped her blanket for the warm one that had been around his shoulders. Gentle Raccoon quickly replaced Mushroom's blanket with the one he'd laid near the fire.

Gentle Raccoon squatted near the flames and made broth with dried venison, then drank some of the decoction he'd made earlier. The pain was finally gone from his limbs.

Satisfied with his meal, Gentle Raccoon crossed his legs and relished the moment of solitude.

After his visit with Gall and Sitting Bull at the Standing Rock reservation, he'd ride over to Pine Ridge and visit Black Elk and his Lakota friends. Two Feathers would be there, and Sings to the Wind, his mother's friend Bonnie, who had chosen to stay with the Lakota Indians. Most of all, he looked forward to seeing Black Elk.

Black Elk, only a few years older than Gentle Raccoon, had been thirteen when he had fought at Little Big Horn. He smiled. Black Elk had joined the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show, and he was looking forward to those particular tales of adventure. Mostly, though, he was excited that he'd be visiting a childhood friend that he missed dearly.

Thank you for taking the time to read the excerpt from Warriors of the Wilderness.



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