

Feather and the Mountain Man

By Elle Marlow

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First Chapter Sample

Chapter One

The newly appointed Pawnee war chief sat tall on his horse, but inside his gut recoiled with repulsion. The stench of burning flesh filled the air, seared his nose and turned his vision to water.

The bodies of two men smoldered amongst the wreckage of an overturned wagon and he had only himself to blame. Amongst the many items lost were the barrels of whiskey his war party had attempted to steal. Unfortunately, the barrels had tipped on their sides, catching the whiskey on fire before the liquid spilled into flaming rivulets that eventually seeped into the earth.

There was nothing to salvage. As he and his war party rode amongst the debris, he realized that there must have been more than just whiskey carried on this wagon. Once the wagon tipped over, the entire rig blew from an explosion that shook the earth. But the real explosion will come from Chief Blue Crow's temper when his war party returns to the village without a coop. Looks Mad's failure and wasted effort curled his fingers into fist as more black smoke bellowed across his face.

"All of it is gone. We've captured nothing but smoke," Hunting Fox grumbled beside him. Looks Mad briefly glanced over at the warrior astride the pretty yellow horse. His spine crawled with contempt for the man. Hunting Fox was dangerous with his hatred, and so was forced to surrender his position as war chief to him. He did not act like a man who had lost such an honor. His eyes still shone with an arrogance and a callous disregard for the living that knew no horizon. A fact proven when Hunting Fox then pushed his horse forward to step over the charred earth. The blackened bones of human remains snapped under the horse's hooves. The sound made Looks Mad skin crawl, but Hunting Fox only smiled at his reaction and pushed on.

Looks Mad swallowed hard. He will not be taunted. He did not have Hunting Fox's ability to detach himself from death. A fact that Hunting Fox took advantage of at every breath of the wind—but not today.

Looks Mad ignored Hunting Fox and raised his chin. He then pointed his finger at the broken wagon wheel that still smoldered. "It broke," he said to the line of young warriors who gazed at the wheel with some confusion. For these young men, this was their first contact with the whites and their contraptions. They had no knowledge of the use of the wheel or of its importance. The wheel has destroyed their nation, he told them. As the young men pondered his words, the wheel turned to charcoal and eventually fell into ash.

"It broke because we chased this wagon for too long," Hunting Fox interjected. "We should have pushed ourselves ahead of this wagon where we could have hidden and then ambushed the drivers. The surprise attack would have resulted in a coop that would have made Chief Blue Crow proud." The war party all looked at one another and then thoughtfully nodded in agreement.

Heat crawled up Looks Mad spine. It was not Hunting Fox's place to correct him. "Those decisions are no longer yours to make, Hunting Fox. To get ahead of this wagon over this rough country would have risked injury or death to our horses."

Hunting Fox turned his horse into a circle, allowing the sun to cast magnificent golden ripples over the muscles of his horse. "Does my horse look weak to you?" he asked with a laugh.

"I see only a weak rider. You would still be war chief if it were not for your desire to bring death to every and anything not of Pawnee blood. And you forget that our riders are young and not experienced enough to carry out such an attack. Would you have them die over their ignorance and your foolishness?"

Hunting Fox still grinned. "Worry about your own death Looks Mad. You are good at that. Your mistake has given us nothing to show for this trail. You have nothing to take back to our village. We have nothing to show for our troubles."

Before Looks Mad could respond, Hunting Fox turned his attention toward a pair of heavy horses that had pulled the wagon. They had broken free before the explosion and were now laid in a tangled heap a few yards away. Hunting Fox kicked his horse and sped off toward them.

Looks Mad squeezed his horse to follow. Maybe the animals could be saved. A pair of heavy horses would be better than nothing to present to the chief. But even then, Looks Mad knew the horses would not be enough. Their village already had plenty of horses. The chief wanted the firewater, having grown addicted to the strong drink after trading for it with the neighboring Kiowa. Now the chief's thirst knew no end.

A grey dappled mare attempted to lift her head as they approached. The leather harnesses had somehow wrapped around her nose and her neck trapping her to herself. Her low bellow reflected both her fear and her hope of rescue. Hunting Fox and Looks Mad silhouettes could easily be seen mirrored in her big dark eyes that watered. Hope surged in Looks Mad that the pretty mare could be salvaged, but before he could dismount to examine her, Hunting Fox threw a hatchet, impaling the weapon deep into the animal's skull and killing her instantly.

"I do not feel for these people or their slow, fat and stupid horses. They do not belong here," Hunting Fox said to the others, who had caught up. The young men looked upon the scene confused. Looks Mad clenched his reins. The young warriors amongst them should not be taught such a reckless disregard for life. They should not agree to such a senseless killing. There was no honor to be found in it. Besides,

Hunting Fox should have asked for his permission to kill the animal and he did not. Another blatant show of disrespect.

Before Looks Mad could think of something to counter what Hunting Fox had done, Hunting Fox began to speak.

"Father Sun is high above our heads. If we do not travel to the village now, we will not see our people before dark. My belly rumbles from hunger and my body aches for the body of a woman. Looks Mad worries too much. Our horses are strong, and we should race the sun before he falls."

Looks Mad bit back his tongue. It was clear the horses and men were tired. No man looked happy about Hunting Fox's suggestion. When the other warriors ignored Hunting Fox and instead rightfully looked to him for direction, he quietly exhaled in relief. He would deal with Hunting Fox and his childish behavior another time.

"There is nothing here. We will water the horses at the creek and then leave this place at a pace that suits our tired animals." Looks Mad ignored Hunting Fox's mumbled response and then pointed his red horse toward the village.

They had only ridden a short distance before they came upon a bright woman's scarf swaying from the branch of a tree. His horse jumped at the sight of a woman's scarf, green of color and speckled with blood and covered in soot.

Looks Mad jerked his gaze away, pretending not to notice. The garment had likely been carried so far by the wind. If a woman was wandering, she would not live long anyway. He did not want to see any more death today. He shook his head at his thoughts. His bones ached; his mind felt heavy and weary. Maybe his advancing years had stolen the fight from him. Even so, he could not understand why the whites would come to this land when they were too weak to survive in it.

"There are footprints that run from this place!" Light Horse, his youngest warrior shouted from behind. The warriors rode over to inspect the ground. From where he sat, he could easily see the tracks. They were not very old. Suddenly, the men broke out in war cries and turned their mounts to follow the trail.

Looks Mad shook his head. Reluctantly, he pushed his horse hard to get ahead of the other riders. He abruptly stopped right into their path forcing them to a sudden halt.

"Those are the tracks of a dying woman. Look at how they stagger. She could be very far from here. By the time we find her she will have already taken her spirit walk. We will not want to waste any more effort on this trail."

"She dies now or dies later. Makes no difference," Hunting Fox grunted. "But no white man or woman is free to walk over Pawnee land. Her death song will be long and victorious in my ears."

"You will not go, Hunting Fox! The horses already drip with sweat. We will ride to the creek and water them," Looks Mad insisted.

Hunting Fox sat up straight and Looks Mad sensed the dispute coming. Hunting Fox sneered. "Send the others to the creek to baby their horses. I am not tired. I want the woman."

"That is a tree, that is the sky, and that is a cloud."

Ally named everything above her as it materialized out of the fog. She looked at these things as though she was viewing through a long tunnel. But the loud squawking of a bird pulled her further into the light until her vision returned clearly.

"And that is a bird. A raven, I think," she whispered confused. She squeezed her eyes shut and then opened them again thinking she was dreaming. Why would she on the ground next to a raven? When she turned to look, the bird was still there. It was a the blackest of birds, whose feathers reflected like opals under the sunlight. The way the bird held its head at an odd angle, it looked to be in shock, as if it too was trying to make sense of their surroundings.

"What is happening?" she moaned. Her ears rang and buzzed with a vibration that reached clear to her stomach. And the ground waved like water beneath her. She swallowed down the nausea and tried once more to make sense of things.

The raven blinked obsidian eyes at her and then cawed. Then the raven frantically flapped her wings against the ground, brushing dust across Ally's face. Despite the raven's effort it was not enough to lift her body for flight. Ally could only wonder at how she shared such a strange and awful predicament with the creature.

She batted her fingers at the pebbles that pressed against her cheeks. She couldn't recall anything about herself. Not her name, not her family, absolutely nothing. There was an echo though, an echo of a continuous eruption that repeated itself over and over. Had she been in an explosion? Where was everyone else?

"If I calm my mind, maybe I'll remember."

The bird made another desperate sound. A high and repetitive cry for help. Ally held her hands over her ears to stop the stabbing pain that ensued with every outburst.

The raven struggled on the ground and then managed straighten both her head and her body. Once the bird was upright, she ceased her crying.

Ally exhaled and dropped her hands. She tried to do the same. But moving her body made the sky ripple as if someone had tossed a stone across it. Breathing hard from the effort, she couldn't suppress the fear that trickled across her skin rendering her cold and breathless.

"Help!" she yelled, the act of it jolting her head with pain. "Somebody please help."

Her pleas died as she worked to maneuver her knees underneath her. There were no sounds to be heard other than the breeze that ruffled the grass and the feathers of the raven next to her. "Help," she tried again, too tired to make it more than a whisper.

Sitting on the back of her ankles, she found some relief. The world calmed. It felt better to be upright. The ringing in her ears had softened and the rolling of her stomach stopped, but there was still a dull pain above her eye.

Ally reached up to find the source. Her fingers landed in a wet and sticky mass above her temple. She didn't remember being hit, but when she dropped her fingers into view, she gazed at the blood that stained her fingertips.

"Oh, I can't-can't look at blood," she choked, squeezing her eyes against the sight. "I have to get on my feet. I can't stay down. Nobody is going to find me if I stay down," she reasoned.

Getting control of her breathing she realized she could smell smoke. In fact, the rancid odor blanketed all around her and brought with it the memory of being chased by Indians on horseback. After that, nothing again made sense, but there was a black grime that coated her hands and up her arms. Ally gazed at the soot, confused. Next to her the bird flopped over to one side before trying to beat her wings.

"We have to find help. Surely, we can't be that far from people."

Carefully, she scooped the bird up into her arms and then she managed to get to her feet.

Ally cradled the raven and then turned in a circle expecting to see people, or buildings or wagons. But there was absolutely nothing between her and a never-ending landscape. A sea of an endless prairie dotted with yellow dandelions and bordered by purple mountains far off on the horizon.

"Woman!" a man's voice yelled from beyond her view. Ally looked around her trying to pinpoint where the shouting was coming from. She understood the word, but it was spoken with a deep single beat tone that reminded her of a drum.

She wasn't sure why her heart started to pound, or why a new and crippling fear rolled over her with so much savagery, but on pure instinct, she ran for the safety of a lone tree. She clutched the raven closer to her chest, but the bird wiggled within her arms trying to break itself free. That's when two Indians rode into her view astride horses.

The slightest of recognition incited a scream. The raven in her arms pinched the skin exposed on her wrist between the sharp tips of its beak. The men did not move but their expressions seemed surprised by the bird's actions. Ally struggled to contain the raven, afraid that if she let it go, they would kill it. But the raven pecked her arm a second time, forcing her to release her hold of it. Thankfully, it found the strength to fly and it flew right between the two riders towards freedom.

She tried to steady her breathing as she forced herself to look at the riders. She remembered the horses and the bright colors of paint that depicted symbols throughout their bodies. Although she couldn't make sense of it, she remembered being chased and terrified. The Indian's cold and unwavering glares dug like claws down her spine and reinforced and justified the fear that she could not control. They wore nothing but breechcloths, their chest and thighs painted in bright reds and yellows. Nothing moved except the horse's manes and tails and the feathers that hung from the lances the Indians held at their sides.

"Come forward!" the man on a small black horse ordered. Ally's knees shook so badly, she didn't think she could take a step.

"I told you to come forward!" he repeated much louder.

She clenched her jaw as his image blurred. Ally took a small step toward them as she struggled to do as she was told.

“Now leave from this place!” he yelled, pushing his horse a few steps toward her while thrusting a lance over his head. “You are not welcome on Pawnee land,” he shouted again. “We do not want you here!”

The shouted threats made her snap out of her haze. Adrenalin mixed with cold sweat tingled across her upper lip. The feathers and what looked to be long blonde human hair dangled from the top of the lance lifting with the breeze and warning her that her red hair would be next if she didn’t manage to run from them as he ordered.

Ally took a step and her ankle rolled. But the movement tensed the horses and two Indians suddenly poised themselves. The larger man smiled, and it became horrifyingly clear that this was a game to them. They wanted her to run so they could chase her down like an animal.

“Run!” the smiling man yelled, throwing a hatchet to land at her feet. Ally yelped in surprise and jumped sideways to avoid being hit. Another object flew toward her. Only this one arrived with a piercing caw. The raven appeared from the sky and landed herself on the wooden handle of the hatchet. The large black bird turned to face the man who threw it, flapping her wings in warning and squawking at what could only be interpreted as rage.

In one synchronized movement, the horses spun on their haunches and nearly unseated the two riders. The men hollered as they struggled to get their horses under control. Ally took several steps away from the black bird just before it took flight once more. This time taking a circular path over the heads of the riders reminding her of a spoon stirring a pot. The two horses bolted in opposite directions, kicking up enough dust to momentarily obscure everything from view. The distraction gave her a chance. Before she could second guess herself, she ran towards the mountains.