

# Prologue

JUNE 1779



AFTER MANY DAYS on the trail, it was good to return to the village. There was meat to share and there were skins for the women to clean and make soft. Broken Trail had killed a deer, not just rabbits and grouse like the other boys in the hunting party.

His uncle, Carries a Quiver, stood in the centre of the dancing circle, with everyone watching, and made the boast, “It was Broken Trail’s arrow that brought down this deer. He is a hunter who brings meat for the people.”

Broken Trail had trouble keeping a straight face when he saw the scowl on Walks Crooked’s face. Let him scowl! He was angry because it was not his clumsy son Spotted Dog

who had killed the deer. Walks Crooked's anger made the triumph sweeter still, for his voice was the loudest among those denying Broken Trail's fitness to be a warrior. Now Broken Trail had proved him wrong, for everyone knew that a boy who killed his first deer at eleven years old was destined to become a mighty hunter.

The women were dragging away the deer to butcher when Black Elk approached.

"We have been waiting for your return," Black Elk said. "We have taken a captive. A white girl. She speaks only English. We want to question her."

This news dulled the edge of Broken Trail's joy. Although his command of English made him valued as an interpreter, he hated any reminder of where he came from.

"Where is she?"

"You will find her in Wolf Woman's lodge."

"Wolf Woman is old and weak. How can she guard a captive?"

"The girl needs a healer, not a guard. Our warriors found her lying injured on the side of a steep ravine. She appeared to have fallen over the edge, and a tree stopped her from tumbling all the way. We want you to speak with her before we question her. Win her trust."

Broken Trail looked down and shuffled his feet. He didn't want to talk to the white girl.

Black Elk continued. "Tell her that we shall not harm her. Say nothing more. The elders will decide what to do with her. I will take you to her now."

The girl was sitting on a log just outside the entrance of Wolf Woman's lodge. She wore a fringed, beaded doeskin poncho over a short leather skirt. Her dark hair hung in two braids, with a red stripe painted along the centre part. In every respect except the colour of her skin, she looked like an Oneida maiden. Yet Broken Trail recognized her at once. This was Charlotte Hooper, the girl who had befriended him two years ago when he and his first mother and his brother and baby sister had camped by Oneida Lake during their journey north to the safety of a British fort. That was before he ran away.

The girl did not notice their approach. She was staring off into the woods, toward a clump of alder bushes, as if her thoughts were miles away. Black Elk and Broken Trail were standing right in front of her before she turned her head to face them. Her eyes widened as she stared at Broken Trail.

"I remember you." Her voice was barely audible under her breath. "You are Moses Cobman."

The name hurt, like an insult or a taunt. "No longer. My name is Broken Trail."

He kept his face rigid, as a warrior should. After they had stared at each other for a few moments, she stated firmly, "But you're Moses Cobman all the same."

She had no right to speak to him like that. He turned his back on her and stalked away.

# Chapter 1

SEPTEMBER 1780



FOR TEN DAYS BROKEN TRAIL had fasted in the wilderness. Only water had entered his mouth. He had chanted. He had prayed with all his soul to see his totem animal, his *oki*, who would be his protector throughout life. He had opened his heart to the whisperings of the unseen spirits and his eyes to the vision he would behold.

Broken Trail had completed all the rites of purification, bathed in cleansing water into which boiled leaves and ferns had been mixed, swallowed bitter emetics to remove every bit of waste. Body and soul, he was clean. His uncle, Carries a Quiver, had assured him that he would be acceptable to the Great Spirit, even though white by birth. And his uncle was the wisest man he knew.

Then why had no vision come to him? The only whispering he heard was the wind in the tall trees. The closest thing to a vision was a shower of falling stars. But that often happened in late summer, when the stars shook loose in the sky.

His friend Young Bear had fasted nine days before his vision came. His *oki* was an osprey. After the osprey had spoken to him, the spirits revealed a glimpse of Young Bear's former life, when he had been a chief among faraway people who hollowed their boats from logs. His vision had also foretold his heroic death in battle. It was good to know these things. At thirteen, Young Bear had already made up his death song, to be ready in case his first war party should be his last.

What if Broken Trail's vision should fail? He tried not to think about that. Ten days was a long time, yet he knew that some waited even longer before their vision finally came to them. It was rare for no *oki* to appear, but it did happen. The man who dug the village garbage holes had failed to receive a vision, so of course he could not be a warrior.

Broken Trail stood up and stretched. He had spent the entire morning sitting under an ash tree beside a creek, doing nothing but waiting and praying. His body was weak with hunger, but he must not eat until his *oki* appeared to him. Maybe he would not feel quite so famished if he filled his stomach with water. A few steps away, there was a quiet pool at a bend in the creek.

As Broken Trail leaned over the edge of the pool, a water

spider swam through his reflection. He studied the face that looked up at him. Brown hair, blue eyes, skin bronzed by the sun yet paler than the skin of his friends. I look like Elijah, he thought, before immediately trying to drive the thought from his mind.

Broken Trail imagined that he could hear Elijah's voice and feel his hand upon his shoulder. "I'll take you hunting," Elijah had said. But he never did. All white men were liars.

I must not think about him, Broken Trail told himself. He plunged his hands into the water, and the reflection vanished. Lifting his cupped hands to his mouth, he drank the cool, fresh water. Then he stood up, raised his face to the sky and chanted the prayer that Carries a Quiver had taught him:

O Great Spirit, my heart is open.  
Let my *oki* come to me.  
Let me see his visible form.  
Let him promise me his protection.  
My heart is open, O Great Spirit.  
Show me a vision of my future.  
Show me the path that lies ahead.

As he finished the prayer, his heart felt suddenly light, and his head as well. A dizzy sensation came over him, but he forced himself to stay on his feet.

"I'm ready," he said. "Let my vision come to me."

As if summoned, a wolverine walked out of the bushes

and stood looking at him—the biggest wolverine he had ever seen. It had the shape of a bear and the size of a wolf. Its shaggy fur was dark brown, with two broad yellowish bands, one on each side, reaching backward from the shoulder to meet at the base of its tail. Broken Trail smelled its pungent musk. The wolverine looked at him sideways. Opening its mouth, it showed Broken Trail its sharp yellow teeth.

Broken Trail waited, afraid to speak lest he offend it.

It spoke to him in thoughts, not words, so that he heard its message not with his ears but with his mind. “Broken Trail, I am your *oki*, come to protect you from all harm. Hear what I say, and remember well.”

“I will,” the boy whispered.

At that instant, a rifle cracked. Within the rush of noise, Broken Trail felt a sharp pain in his right thigh. He grabbed at his leg, but his eyes were still on the wolverine as it raised its head, turned aside, and loped into the forest.

As he watched it disappear into the undergrowth, Broken Trail tried to call out, to summon it back. No sound came from his lips. His mind was numb with disbelief. At the very moment of revelation, he had been shot, and his *oki* had run away.

Broken Trail felt his knees give way. For a moment his eyes were still directed toward the spot where the wolverine had slipped away. Then the pain of his wound forced him to look down at the red stain spreading around the hole in his legging where the bullet had entered. He felt wetness run down his leg.

Should he go back to the village? He took one step, and then another. Despite the pain, he could walk. But he was not sure what he wanted to do. If he returned home, he would have to tell his uncle that his *oki* had gone away before revealing his destiny. Had such a thing ever happened before? It might be a terrible omen. Yet the wolverine had appeared to him, and it had spoken. His vision had not completely failed. If the elders believed more was needed, maybe they would let him try again.

Through the turmoil of his mind came the crashing sound of men's boots. White men.

Someone shouted, "You got him, Frank. We'll find the brute and finish him off."

Broken Trail flinched. Better slide into a thicket where they would not see him. But before he could hide, two men burst through the undergrowth. Redcoats. Each carried a rifle. Both looked ready to fire.

When they saw Broken Trail, they lowered their guns. They stared at him. He drove the pain from his expression to return their stares. They were young men. One was tall and thin, with fair hair pulled back in a queue. The other was short and sturdily built, with black hair.

The short soldier laughed. "Frank, that's not a wolverine."

"No. God forgive me. I aimed at a wolverine, but I shot a boy. He's hurt. Sam, what are we going to do?"

"We'd better see how bad he's hurt."

Broken Trail felt his body swaying. In a moment, he would faint like a girl.