

CHAPTER

1

JUNE 1862

THE SOUND OF FRETFUL CRYING SEEPS THROUGH COTTONY LAYERS OF sleep and tickles my mind into wakefulness. I open heavy eyes. Next to me, my husband mutters, "Shut her up, will you?"

John is a doctor who spent all day yesterday attending a woman going through a prolonged and dangerous labor. When he came home after ten, he refused supper, downed several shots of whiskey, and fell into bed.

I rise and go to our children, who lie in the eastern half of our sleeping loft. The two "bedrooms" are separated by only a curtain, which does little to block noise. As a mother, I take comfort in knowing that I will hear if my children are in distress, but John resents any disruptions to his sleep.

First, I determine that our four-year-old son slumbers soundly. Then I reach into the cradle and feel my seventeen-month-old daughter's forehead. It is warm but not alarmingly so. I put a finger into her mouth to rub her lower back gums and detect hard bumps beneath the surface. *At last.* Her first set of molars is coming in. For days, Nellie has been drooling more than usual, so I've been expecting this.

I put a towel over my shoulder, lean my girl against it, and proceed to pace up and down the room, rubbing her back. Her sobs subside to whimpers.

The attic is stifling. Heat rises during summer days and lingers into

the night. The curtain that John insists upon drawing for marital privacy blocks any cross breeze that might flow between the windows on the gable ends of the house.

I walk to the eastern window, hoping for fresh air and a glimpse of sky. When I went out to the privy before retiring, the moon was rising above the treetops—large and full, a glowing ivory orb that resembled a lustrous pearl nestled in black velvet. Its beauty made me glad to be living out here on the Minnesota prairie where we have such a fine view of the heavens.

Now, however, when I glance outside, only a thin crescent moon rides in the sky. My chest squeezes with dismay. How is this possible? Leaning out the open window, I notice that the interior curve of the crescent is blurry. Then I see the faint circular outline of a shadowy full moon against the black sky. *An eclipse.* I exhale in relief. I've read about lunar eclipses but never seen one. How wonderful to witness such an unusual event.

The shadow creeps so slowly across the face of the moon that its movement is impossible to discern, yet as the minutes pass, the area of darkness grows and the crescent shrinks to a glowing sliver. When Nellie falls back to sleep, I put her in her cradle but do not return to my own bed.

The heavens declare God's glory, I think and wonder what our neighbors make of this celestial event. John is one of two government-appointed physicians on the Sioux reservation in southern Minnesota, and Indian villages surround the Upper Sioux Agency where we live. I doubt that the Indians have enough scientific learning to account for this phenomenon. No doubt their medicine men have an explanation, most likely one that will increase their hold over the poor, superstitious people.

The still-changing satellite mesmerizes me. At the very instant the last threadlike arc of light disappears, the moon turns the color of rust. The entire orb becomes visible once again, so that a red-orange disk dominates the sky. I clasp my hand over my mouth to keep from crying out. Shadowy areas pulsate across the surface. Sometimes the moon grows darker, but then the angry color reappears.

Is it the end of the world? Some warning phrase pokes at my memory, but I cannot call it to mind.

Thoroughly frightened, I retreat to our bedroom and shake John by the shoulder. He grunts and rolls away from me. I jostle him again.

"Wha...? Is...there emergency?"

"Come look out the window," I whisper. "The moon has turned to blood."

"Oh, Sarah!" John groans. He rubs his face, dragging his hands from his eyes down to his chin and back up again.

"Please," I beseech him.

He rises, looking like a specter in his loose white nightshirt, and follows me through the curtain and across the children's room. When he reaches the window, he observes the moon for a few seconds and then says in a dangerously tight voice, "Was it like this when you got up?"

"No, there was an eclipse, but as soon as all the light disappeared, the moon turned red just as you see."

"Stupid cow." John wheels away from the window, grabs my earlobe, and twists it. I gasp. He speaks in a low tone. "There's a perfectly logical scientific explanation that has to do with earth's atmosphere and refracted light, but you wouldn't know about that, would you?" He leans in closer. "Don't ever wake me up for such a foolish reason."

Squeezing my eyes shut so I won't see his scorn, I whisper, "I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

John jerks away and lumbers back to bed.

As soon as he passes through the curtain, I lean against the windowsill, panting from pain and humiliation. Tears ooze from my eyes as I recall the words *stupid cow.* This isn't the first time that John has disparaged my ignorance. Coming from a farm family, I have fewer years of formal schooling than his sisters, but I've always been an avid reader, and when we first married he told me he was proud of my attempts to improve myself. *He doesn't really think you're stupid. He's tired and irritable. You shouldn't disturb him after such a difficult day.*

I still find the ruddy moon unnerving despite John's insistence that there is a scientific explanation. Suddenly, I remember the prophecy that nagged at me earlier: When the Bible describes the end times, it says, "The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood."

But if it's a sign, what does it mean? Can it be that the red nation surrounding us is about to go on the warpath?

No, I tell myself. I conjure up the image of the women I visit in nearby villages—their friendly faces, their warm greetings. The Sioux have lived at peace with white settlers here in Minnesota for more than 200 years. The blood moon is just as John said, a natural phenomenon and nothing more.

Repeating that over to myself, I make my way back to bed.

CHAPTER

2

JULY 1862

"MAMA, MAMA, COME LOOK!"

The voice of my son breaks into the conversation I am having with my hired girl. Jimmy races into the kitchen and stops so abruptly that he nearly topples over. He gazes up at me, his blue eyes as wide as I have ever seen them. "Mama, a b-big war party is riding past."

My heart lurches as I remember last month's ominous sign, but mindful of my son, I place a hand on my chest to calm the palpitations. Although I am by nature a fearful woman, I must appear calm for the child's sake. "Past the agency?" I ask. "They are not stopping here?"

"No. They are riding to the ford. Very fast."

I expel my breath, yet my nerves remain as taut as freshly tuned piano wires. The Sioux have been restive this summer, so I dare not dismiss the possibility of danger. Jimmy grasps my hand and pulls me toward the parlor. I resist, saying, "Wait, let me think."

My servant speaks up, "Mrs. Wakefield, I think I know what is happening."

I glance back at the raven-haired girl, and for a moment, God help me, I wonder if I can believe her. Because Mary is Sioux. The name she was given at birth was Makawee, but the Reverend Mr. Williamson renamed her when she enrolled in his mission school. For a second, I stare at her. Although she is clad in a blouse and skirt like a settler, all I can see is the bronze skin and high cheekbones that mark

her as a different race from me. Then I remember how tenderly this girl has helped nurse my children through their illnesses, and I tell myself I can trust her.

“Go on.”

“I heard that the Chippewa killed two of my people on the 22nd. This party must be going to take revenge.”

So they are not going after whites. My knees go so weak with relief that I brace my hand upon the table. During my years in Minnesota, I have learned a thing or two about the enmity between the Chippewa and the Sioux. In 1858, when John and I were living in Shakopee, the two tribes fought a battle so near the community that many townspeople went out to watch as though it were a wrestling match at a county fair. After the fight ended, John treated the wounded Sioux, and I assisted him as much as I was able, given my lack of medical training.

Now Jimmy leads me out the front door. We leave our fenced-in yard, cross the path that bisects the cluster of agency buildings, and climb the slight rise of land on which the warehouse stands. Once we reach that building, we halt and gaze at the government road that runs past the agency and curves toward the ford just west of the place where the Yellow Medicine River empties into the Minnesota.

The war party that gallops before us is large indeed. Even though I delayed coming outside for at least a minute, a steady stream of riders still passes our settlement. They travel so quickly that clouds of dust rise as high as the horses' flanks. Judging from the direction they are headed, I conclude that Mary must be right. The party seems to be heading toward the Big Woods to fight the Chippewa.

Most of the warriors are bare-chested above their breechcloths and leggings, and despite the dust and the speed with which they travel, I see streaks of red and yellow war paint on their faces and chests. Some wear eagle feathers in their hair. Their yells of rage send shivers down my spine.

As the last rider disappears from sight, I put a hand on my son's shoulder and gently turn him around. “Let's go back in the house.”

“But I want to see Father.” Jimmy gestures toward the brick warehouse beside us where my husband has his office. “I want to tell him about the war party.”

“Don't be silly. He is probably closeted with a patient. Besides, you know the building looks out on the road. I am certain he must be as aware of it as we are.”

Jimmy pushes out his lip mutinously, but I laugh and tousle his white-blond hair. Now that I know my family is safe, I want to dance across the prairie with my little boy in my arms. The position of the sun tells me that it is nearly noon. “Let's get something to eat. How about a nice glass of milk and a jam sandwich?”

About nine o'clock that night, I retire to the second floor. First, I check on my children, tucked in their beds under the eaves. Eighteen-month-old Lucy Ellen, nicknamed Nellie, lies on her back with her arms spread as wide as the cradle will allow. In contrast to her tow-headed brother, she has her father's dark brown hair and my mother's swarthy skin. In the crib next to her, Jimmy lies curled on his side, clutching his favorite carved horse. As I gaze at them, I say a silent prayer of thanksgiving that the terror I felt earlier today was naught but a false alarm.

Then I draw the curtain that separates their section of the sleeping area from ours. I sit at my dressing table, pull out my hairpins, and begin my brushing ritual. Because I have always wished for more beautiful hair—mine is a dull, medium brown—I brush it every night to give it more gloss.

John enters the room carrying a cut glass tumbler filled with whiskey. I bend at the waist to brush the underside of my hair so I can pretend not to notice. Although I dislike it when he drinks heavily, I know from experience that his mood will only worsen if I protest.

After a minute, I sit up and resume brushing the normal way. “I don't think I have ever seen as bloodcurdling a sight as the war party this morning,” I remark, relieved that I no longer have to maintain a calm demeanor for the children.

“You don't say.” He sets the half-full tumbler on the marble-topped bureau and removes his frock coat. “Did you faint or merely wail in terror?”

Tears sting my eyes. I lay down my hairbrush and gaze at his reflection in the mirror on my dressing table. “On the contrary, I main-

tained my composure quite well. You can ask Jimmy if you will not believe me.”

John shakes his head, rubs his eyes with the heels of his hands, and after swallowing the last of his drink, sits on the side of our bed. He rubs at a scratch in the heavily carved footboard. “No need, Sarah,” he mutters. “You would hardly be the first woman to quail at the sight of Indians on the warpath.”

That comment is likely to be as close to an apology as I will receive. My husband is swift to ridicule and loath to admit that his wit can be hurtful. Turning on my backless stool, I face him. “Mary said the warriors went to fight the Chippewa.”

Pensively, he scratches his bushy side-whiskers. “That is what I heard too. But it could just as easily have been us. The Sioux have been grumbling a great deal about the late annuity payment.”

Icy fear grips my stomach, but I want to prove that I can be rational even in the face of danger, so I say, “I would grumble too if my children were starving. Why don’t the traders extend credit so the Sioux can buy some food? The gold shipment will get here eventually.”

“Yes, but Myrick and the others have heard the annuity is going to be paid in greenbacks this year, and you know how their value is falling. Besides, the traders don’t trust Galbraith to renew their licenses after this season, and if they extend too much credit, they may not see those debts paid before their tenure expires.” John rests his right foot on the opposite knee, pulls off his boot, and drops it on the carpeted floor. He groans and rubs his toes. “Sarah, I wonder if I made a mistake bringing you and the children out here.”

So that explains his gloom. John obtained the post of agency doctor a year ago through the influence of his younger brother James, a lawyer and former state legislator. As soon as President Lincoln took office, all of Buchanan’s Democratic appointees were turned out of their patronage jobs and replaced with people who had contacts in the Republican Party. “You only wanted to gain a post with a steady salary instead of a practice where the patients could not pay half the time.”

John pulls off his remaining boot and rises to stand before me. Lifting my chin, he asks, “And will you say the same if the Sioux go on the warpath?”

I swallow hard and nod. He bends down to kiss me. His lips are wet, and the alcohol fumes on his breath are overpowering. His fingers fumble at the buttons on the front of my dress. Grasping his arms, I pull myself up and embrace him. My husband is a man with a voracious appetite for physical pleasures: beer and oysters, whiskey and cigars, and the comforts of our marriage bed. It does not surprise me that this is how he chooses to assuage whatever anxiety remains from the day.

Days pass, and my sense of alarm subsides into a dull uneasiness, like the faint sensitivity that sometimes lingers after a toothache. I tend my children, harvest crops from our garden, and make pickled onions to spice up John’s meals during the long, dull winter. As July comes to a close, I eagerly await the first ears of corn and check every day to see if silk has started to show. Last year we had a drought, and my vegetable patch did not bear well. This summer has also been dry, but John set up a crude wooden gutter and a rain barrel at the back of our house, which has collected enough water to keep our garden going.

Early in the morning on the first day of August, I knock on Mary’s door to make sure she’s awake and then go out to gather eggs. The Upper Sioux Agency is built on a bluff overlooking the Minnesota River. As I cross our backyard, consisting of prairie grasses that John must scythe every week, heavy dew soaks the hem of my dress. To the north, where the bluff drops away to the valley, a few tendrils of mist rise from the river like fingers waving a greeting to the morn. The breeze carries a faint scent of mint, and a nearby meadowlark calls: three piercing whistles followed by a warble.

I duck my six-foot frame to enter the chicken coop and search for eggs. We have forty-odd Plymouth Rock hens, so I usually gather enough to sell to other agency employees. John allows me to use my egg money to buy clothing patterns and fabric. Today is a good day: thirty eggs.

When I exit the coop, I notice two middle-aged Sioux men talking behind the warehouse on the ridge. They are not farmer Indians; that much is obvious from their long hair and traditional dress. I suspect they might be chiefs waiting to ask the agent, Thomas Galbraith, if the gold is here. For the past several weeks, various bands have been

setting up camp in the valleys along the banks of the Minnesota and Yellow Medicine rivers even though Galbraith instructed them not to come in to the agency until he sent word. He has told John that the Sioux's annuity—their annual gold payment for the lands they ceded—is late this year on account of the War of the Rebellion. However, by mid-summer, many of the Sioux were starving, so they disregarded Galbraith's instructions and began to arrive.

One of the men glances my way, and instinctively, I lower my egg basket to hide the bounty I have gathered. I know such a reaction is foolish since neither man shows a trace of hostility. In fact, I think I recognize one of them as someone who attends Dr. Williamson's Dakota church. I nod in greeting.

John calls me too sentimental, but I cannot help but feel guilty that we have so much food stored up for the coming winter when I know how desperate the Sioux are. They are no longer allowed to go hunting off the reservation, and the growing numbers of settlers in southern Minnesota have so stripped the region of game that hardly any animals wander onto the ten-mile-wide ribbon of land where the Sioux are supposed to stay. Although it is their custom to share their food with any of their people in need, the few Indians who have become farmers cannot grow enough to feed the multitude that have so far refused to take up the plow.

Recent conditions have worsened matters. The last two summers drought shriveled the corn, and last year, a plague of cutworms mowed down much of what did grow. Then, we had a brutally long winter, which delayed the spring hunting. The Sioux have had barely enough food for months. I have seen them desperately forage for wild turnips and the tuberous roots of marsh grasses.

Yet I know that John is right. Even if we were to turn over the almost 300 pounds of ham, salt pork, dried beef, and salted cod in our larder, how far would that go toward feeding 5,000 famished people? I am not Christ, able to perform a miracle with a few loaves and fishes. All our carefully gathered provisions would provide less than a single meal for the Sioux masses, and in the end, my own family would starve this winter because of my misdirected generosity. Still, it grieves me to see the Indians' hunger. Reentering my house, I pray

that the gold arrives soon so they can obtain supplies and return to their winter camps.

After Mary comes in with a full pail from milking our cow, she and I make a large breakfast of eggs, bacon, and biscuits, and by the time everything is ready, John and the children have gathered at the table. My canaries—five birds divided between two cages in the dining room—are trilling cheerfully at the shaft of light that streams through our eastern window. I pour John's coffee, then sit opposite him, and feed bites of egg to Nellie. She has already nursed upstairs, but I am trying to coax her into eating more solid food. As I smile into her bright-eyed face, I remind myself that I have many blessings to be grateful for.

Among them is the beauty of this sun-filled room with its potted ferns, sheer curtains, tulip-patterned wallpaper, and substantial mahogany sideboard. In the year we have lived here, I have turned our little frame house into an elegant abode. A few months ago, John hired a traveling photographer to take pictures of the interior of our home, which he mailed to his older sister Lucy in Connecticut. The letter of astonished praise we received in return was gratifying to my chafed pride. Lucy's correspondence with me has always been cool, as though she doubts that any woman bold enough to travel to Minnesota on her own could be refined enough to make a proper doctor's wife, whereas the Wakefields are a fine old New England family. John's father was a doctor and state legislator, while his grandfather fought in the Revolutionary War.

John spreads wild strawberry jam thickly upon a biscuit and asks, "What are you going to do this morning?"

"The usual chores. And probably mend that shirt you tore last week."

"I have some socks that need darning too."

I nod and decide to ask Mary to search through the dirty laundry for them.

"You also need to finish the household accounts for July so I can look over them tonight, and you still haven't answered Julia's last letter. And I want you to make a complete inventory of everything we have in the larder."

"Yes, John," I say, digging my nails into my palms to keep from betraying my resentment. Talking to John feels like knocking at a door,