

Chapter One

The area known today as Phoenix, Arizona, at the dawn of the sixteenth century.

The land of my people was surrounded on three sides by mountains as dark as my skin. To the north loomed a mountain shaped like a sleeping mule deer; to the west, a ridge high enough to shield our fields from the relentless sun; and to the east, boulders as jagged as Grandfather Eyota's front teeth. Only the south stretched open as far as we could see, and it was from the south that my ancestors first appeared in the desert generations ago.

We were forbidden to travel anywhere but south. The mountains, our elders warned, protected us like broad shoulders. And the valley surrounded by these mountains, once brown and brittle, flourished with cotton, squash, beans, pumpkins and corn as high as our fathers. The land provided everything we needed, our elders said. More than we'd ever want.

Maybe so, I often thought, but I could never escape the feeling that those mountains kept us captive as much as they kept us safe.

"You daydream too much, Aiyana," Chenoa said. She proceeded to poke me in the arm with the tip of a palo verde stick, masterfully sharpened by our younger brother, Onawa. "And you can't expect me to do everything, can you?"

Chenoa was my older sister and like most sisters, I either loved or hated her. We were supposed to be gathering

saguaro berries for the Rain Ceremony. Everybody wanted rain when the air grew heavy as deerskin; I simply wanted a peek at the other side of those mountains. And the older I became, the deeper my curiosity grew. I had already seen my sixteenth harvest, and sometimes the desire to discover the World Beyond took up so much space inside my head that it frightened me.

“Don’t you ever wonder what’s over there?” I asked, stopping again underneath a wispy canopy of palo verde branches. An endless mountain range stretched before us. The rocky ridge had three humps, a middle one as round as a half-moon with smaller ones flanking each side. The elders believed a giant animal slept beneath the mountain; we called it Sleeping Mule Deer. “Aren’t you ever curious?” I wiped the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand, watching the mountain’s colors shimmer red and orange from the merciless heat.

Chenoa pivoted long enough to grace me with one of her signature eye rolls. It wasn’t the first time I asked her about the World Beyond during one of our fruit gathering journeys. It was a luxury for a girl to leave the circle of pit houses in our village, and no doubt Chenoa thought I was wasting time again with silly questions. And we were allowed to travel only so far as we could see the tops of our brush-covered roofs. I supposed Chenoa would rather talk about her upcoming wedding ceremony to Sinopa, but our walks were my only opportunity to say those things that I dared not say inside the pit house. To do so meant I ignored the wisdom of our elders and, ultimately, our Creator, Hunab Ku.

“How many times must we speak of this?” Chenoa scolded, always the good daughter, the wise daughter. The sensible daughter. The daughter I could never be. “The other side is probably just more of the same.”

“But you don’t know, do you.” I said it more like a statement than a question. A challenge.

“Then why keep asking?” She snatched the clay jar from my hand and then started to run toward a small forest of saguaros. I shook my head and smiled at the back of her head as her laughter filled the air. Black as night like mine, her hair hung shiny and loose and reached the small of her back over her deerskin dress. I began to race after her. Chenoa’s short legs were no match for my longer ones and she knew it. Even with her sandals. Even with a head-start. But at least she tried to outrun me. She always tried. But I always won.

Chenoa’s giggles got garbled deep inside her throat when my fingertips brushed the back of her head. I caught up easily but missed her shoulder. “If we hurry,” she panted, still running, “we can swim in the river. Mother won’t mind.” When my hand finally grabbed her shoulder, she stopped abruptly in front of a giant saguaro. Eyota, we named it, because we thought it had seen as many harvests as our grandfather. Its six arms curled up to hug the sun and always provided more fruit than we needed and more spines in our fingertips than we could pluck.

Still breathing heavy, Chenoa dropped the jar into the soft dirt along with her pointy white stick. She reached for her knees.

I grabbed the stick while she caught her breath. “I’ll poke. You catch,” I said. Since I was taller, I could pierce the red berries without destroying the skin, and the better the berry, the sweeter the ceremonial wine for the Rain Ceremony.

Chenoa nodded as she gulped back a final breath. Then she stood and lifted the clay jar, squinted against the sun, and waited for the plump berries to drop.

I smiled at the saguaro. “Eyota has been good to us this year.” With the stick, I poked six ripe berries the size of my

fist. Some stuck to the end of my stick; others dropped to the ground for Chenoa to catch in the jar.

“I can already taste the wine,” she said.

“Should be perfect. Just like the sun.”

“Yes, the sun,” Chenoa sighed. The wispy hairs around her face stuck to her forehead. “I can’t wait for that swim. Your sun is smothering me today.”

I didn’t answer. I was too busy poking at the berries and avoiding cactus needles, but what Chenoa said was true. It was much warmer this season than the last. The rains had not been as plentiful. Some of our canals had turned bone-dry and the elders believed that we offended Hunab Ku by not appreciating his generosity. I doubted their wisdom, although I would never dare admit that to Chenoa. There was a sky of difference between daydreaming about the World Beyond and questioning the elders. Had I so much as uttered a word, she would have told our mother and father, Gaho and Ituha, no matter how much I begged.

Chenoa and I worked among the saguaros until our jar overflowed with red berries. A swim in the cool river would be our reward.

“Race you there!” I said. With the pointy stick still clutched in my clammy hand, I ran straight for a sandy path that led to a deep circle of calm water hidden alongside cottonwoods and palo verde trees.

“Wait, Aiyana!” Chenoa called from behind me. Her voice wavered from the weight of the jar. “Wait for me!”

But I didn’t wait. Couldn’t. As soon as I reached the end of the path, I kicked off the ties from my sandals and stripped out of a deerskin dress that stretched to my knees. It clung to my sweaty skin like heavy fingers and would not release me easily. I barely took the time to toss it over a palo verde branch. Quickly, I waded into the cool waters and crouched down till my shoulders were covered. My hair floated loose around my naked body like a cloud.

Surprisingly, Chenoa was not far behind. She tossed her clothes and the jar underneath a branch next to mine and dove in, hands first.

We floated on our backs, letting the gentle current massage our sore muscles. Suddenly the sun didn't seem so hot or the air as thick. I squinted at the cloudless sky and wondered again what I wouldn't give to walk past the other side of our mountains. If I could, I'd walk as far as my legs would carry me. I wondered how many suns that would be. Would it take only one? Or a handful?

"Do you suppose the World ends at some point?" I asked Chenoa as she floated alongside me. "Would we reach an edge and then stare straight into an open sky with no bottom?"

Chenoa sighed heavily, refusing to answer. Clearly my questions had begun to irritate her, especially since I hadn't asked one single question about her wedding preparations. Sadly, rabbit skin marriage blankets and finely woven sleeping mats were not the kinds of things that interested me.

And Chenoa's wedding was all everyone could talk about inside our pit house, besides the Rain Ceremony. Everyone but me. Usually I would nod and smile, mostly for show, as my mind wondered dangerously beyond the walls and mountains of our village.

My eyes popped open when the feathery branch from a cottonwood rustled like a snake above the water. "What's that?" I said, wrapping my arms across my breasts.

Chenoa still floated, eyes closed. "What's what?" she replied groggily.

"That," I hissed.

"The wind," Chenoa said, disinterested.

"But there isn't any," I whispered, crouching lower. My eyes scanned the riverbank's sandy edges. Our deerskins and sandals still hung on the branches; the white stick and

jar hadn't moved. We'd had raids from the south before but not many, especially since men from our village were supposed to be on watch at all times, even during ceremonies. "I know what I heard. And I heard something."

"Just enjoy the water, will you—" Chenoa said but then her teeth snapped shut. She bolted upright and crouched lower in the water. Our shoulders brushed. "Wait," she whispered. "Someone is here. Someone *is* watching us."

I nodded once, saying nothing, still scanning the river's edges. "But where?" I whispered through gritted teeth. My heart began to beat faster as my eyes moved beyond the trees to the top of a boulder with red and orange jagged ridges.

We were cornered, trapped.

I wondered whether anyone would hear our screams. And I cursed myself for leaving our only weapon on the riverbank. At least I could have brought it with us to spear a silver fish.

"There." Chenoa's lips barely moved. Her chin rose toward a clump of trees alongside the boulder.

My eyes traced hers.

That's when I saw it.

A flash of black and copper swept behind the branches but it was gone just as soon as the branch swayed back in place.

And then Chenoa began to giggle.

"What?" I spun around to face her. My toes sank deeper in the squishy mud.

Chenoa's dark eyes sparkled above the clear water as she crouched lower to blow bubbles underneath the water. She surfaced and then said, "Seems we've got a spy."

My heart began to beat faster but for an entirely different reason. I didn't appreciate spies. My eyes narrowed as I searched through the branches for the culprit. "Who?" I blurted angrily.

“It’s Honovi,” Chenoa said behind her hand. “And I might be wrong but I think I caught him smiling at you.”

“Honovi!” I screamed so that my voice bounced off the rocks. “I am going to kill you!”

Honovi climbed to the top of the boulder behind the trees and began to laugh. His laughter echoed above the river, silencing the doves in the trees. “You’ll have to catch me first, Aiyana!” The doves in the cottonwoods burst into the sky as if soaring over us with one set of wings instead of hundreds. Above his head, he waved my deerskin dress like a trophy.

My jaw dropped. Honovi moved quicker than any boy I knew.

“When I get out of this river, I am going to tell your mother!” I screamed, but my threats only fueled his laughter.

That’s because Honovi was my oldest and dearest friend. Our families shared the same courtyard on the outskirts of the village. Together, we formed part of the White Ant Clan. I was as welcome inside his pit house as he was inside ours. Our mothers raised us practically as brother and sister and we’d been competing against each other ever since we took our first steps.

Until last year, I could run as fast as Honovi but I was still equally as skillful with a spear. Honovi also knew my secrets, especially the one about walking past the mountains to discover the World Beyond. That’s because he wondered the same things, too.

“Keep your head on your neck, Aiyana,” he teased. “Don’t worry, I’ll put it back.” He shook my dress again over his head and I glared at him. My deepening frown only succeeded in widening his grin.

“Stop it! We’re getting cold in here,” I said, still fuming, but also struggling to bite back a smile. It would only be a matter of time before I would do the same to him when he

swam with the other boys from the village. I'd show Honovi. I'd get even. Eventually. I always did.

Honovi jumped down from the top of the boulder and landed in the sand with a heavy *thump*. Slowly, he sauntered back to the tree where Chenoa's dress still hung as if he had nothing else better to do. He bent over to examine the contents of the clay jar, as if suddenly enthralled with cactus berries and mesquite seeds. He even picked one up, turned it over in his hand, and then tossed it back inside the jar.

"Before I become an old woman!" Chenoa yelled but she, too, fought back a smile as we huddled together naked underneath the water watching him warily.

Honovi made a dramatic show of daintily hanging my dress on the branch beside Chenoa's, making sure the deerskin sleeves hung just right.

"Finally!" Chenoa said.

"You old woman!" I yelled at him.

Honovi rolled his eyes but then, like an unexpected dark cloud on a clear day, all of the humor left his voice. "I'll wait for you at the end of the path. You shouldn't have come out this far alone."

My eyes popped open. I wasn't expecting that.

But it was true. We had walked too far and had been away from the village too long. Barely three moon cycles ago, another girl had been walking along the river, unaccompanied, and was attacked by a bobcat perched on a tree branch. The bobcat pounced onto her back and mauled her shoulder before anyone heard her screams. She was lucky to be alive.

Chenoa and I turned to each other, still wide-eyed, before looking back at Honovi.

But then one corner of his mouth turned up in a crooked smile. "But if you don't tell on me, I won't tell on you."

The guilt I felt for traveling so far from the village quickly faded. I smirked at Honovi while Chenoa sliced the

water with her arm and tried to splash him. But he stood too high, his arms crossed over his shoulders like a village chief.

“Okay, okay,” I relented finally. “We won’t tell if you don’t. Now just go, will you? My teeth are chattering.”

Honovi turned and swept down one muscled, bare arm in an exaggerated bow. And then he was gone.

“I thought he’d never leave,” I muttered.

But Chenoa only smiled. “He does seem to pop up at the strangest times,” she said as we waded through the cool water towards our sandals and deerskins and the heaviness of the sky.