

GDA #2285706

DAKOTA 1862: AN UNCIVIL WAR

by Darlene Mulligan
Based on true events

During the Dakota War of 1862, Sarah Wakefield survives captivity under the protection of Chaska, a Dakota man whose mercy defies both sides of the conflict. When their bond is later twisted into evidence during rushed military tribunals preceding the largest mass execution in U.S. history, Sarah risks becoming a traitor to her own people by telling a truth powerful enough to expose a system designed to suppress it.

JANUARY 2025

This script was inspired by true events surrounding the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. While many characters and incidents are based on historical records, some individuals, locations, and timelines have been altered or dramatized for narrative purposes. Some characters are fictional composites.

FADE IN:

BLACK.

A low, haunting DAKOTA DEATH SONG rises — steady, unbroken.

CUT TO:

1 EXT. MANKATO, MINNESOTA — DAWN — WINTER

Snow drifts across a silent town square. A MASSIVE GALLOWS stands against a pale sky. THIRTY-EIGHT HOODED DAKOTA MEN stand shoulder to shoulder. Hands bound. Nooses fixed. Still. Dignified.

No crowd. No cheers. Just breath fogging in the cold. An AX is raised. The DEATH SONG continues.

THE AX SWINGS

CUT TO BLACK.

The song stops. A single ROPE CREAKS.

SMASH CUT TO:

2 EXT. MINNESOTA PRAIRIE — AFTERNOON

High above, a HAWK circles as covered wagons crawl across the golden prairie, canvas tops like pale sails in the tall grass.

SARAH V.O.

I thought the prairie would be a lonely sweep of earth and sky. But it opened itself before me - a great, breathing quilt of blossoms and tall grass swaying like a hymn in the wind. Such beauty could not belong to nature alone; it belonged to the spirit that lives in all things. And there, in that wide hush of wonder, I felt more free than I had ever been.

GRAPHIC: MINNESOTA RIVER VALLEY — 1857

3 EXT. MINNESOTA PRAIRIE — AFTERNOON

A wagon lurches in deep mud. TWO MEN strain at the wheel while FOUR YOUNG WOMEN, dressed in finery, look on helplessly.

BISHOP HENRY WHIPPLE, 40s, collar crisp despite the dust, steps toward SARAH BROWN, 25, poised, observant, journal balanced on her knee, writing.

He offers her a dipper of water.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Thirsty?

Sarah looks up, reaches for the ladle.

BISHOP WHIPPLE (CONT'D)

Henry Whipple. Bishop.

SARAH

Sarah Brown. Soon to be Mrs.
Wakefield.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Ah — your match is the doctor.

SARAH

(dry)

My father arranged it — thought
marriage would cure my opinions.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

And those are?

SARAH

That a woman may do more with a pen
than a pie tin.

(small smile)

I fear the illness is chronic.

Whipple chuckles — THUNDER OF HOOVES rolls across the prairie
— Whipple looks up.

4 EXT. MINNESOTA PRAIRIE — CONTINUOUS

DAKOTA RIDERS adorned with ribbons and feathers approach.
Sarah rises beside Whipple, journal in hand.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Don't say anything.

HAPA, 25 — beadwork, feathers, scarred, eyes sharp with
judgment — reins in at the front.

BISHOP WHIPPLE (CONT'D)

Good to see you, Hapa. If you'd be
so kind..

A tense beat.

HAPA

(scowls)

What would a white man know of
kindness?

One of the riders dismounts. CHASKA, 25, short hair, work-worn clothes, cowboy hat. Quiet. Steady. He wades into the mud beside the men.

Hapa watches – irritated, unreadable, then turns his horse around, rides off with the others following.

Chaska plants his shoulder, heaves. The wagon breaks free. Whipple clasps Chaska's hand.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Thank you, my friend.

Chaska nods then glances at Sarah. Their eyes meet. He tips his hat, she lowers her gaze. He mounts, turns to leave.

BISHOP WHIPPLE (CONT'D)

Chaska. See you at Sunday's service?

CHASKA

(shrugs)

I'll try. My pa might need me.

5 EXT. MINNESOTA PRAIRIE – LATER

Sarah sketches Hapa – the sharp jaw, the hard stare, the prairie gathering like a storm cloud beneath him.

SARAH

That man didn't seem very friendly.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Hapa? His anger is his amour. He believes the treaties took more than land. He wants it back.

Whipple glances at her sketch.

BISHOP WHIPPLE (CONT'D)

But one man's anger doesn't speak for a whole nation. Careful what you write home.

SARAH

This isn't a letter. It's for stories.

Whipple regards her – impressed, concerned.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

A writer?

SARAH

Trying to be.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Marriage?

SARAH

I was hoping it didn't mean the end
of all other things.

Whipple softens with half concern, half admiration.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Nothing wrong in wanting more.

(beat)

But be warned. Most here think a
woman's place is in the home, not in
the conversation.

SARAH

And I can't even boil water.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

(chuckles)

Then God help the doctor.

6 EXT. RIDGE POINT — LONE COTTONWOOD — DUSK

A stillness settles over the prairie as the last light bleeds out. They ride toward a LONE COTTONWOOD. Massive, solitary, an old sentinel on the edge of a bluff. As they pass under it Sarah reaches out, brushes her palm across the bark. The wind shifts. She looks up through the canopy at the heart-shaped leaves in a whispering sway through the sunlight.

SARAH V.O.

*It was like a thousand small voices
rising at once, a soft chorus stitched
into the leaves.*

She closes her eyes, drawing in the sweetness of the air.

SARAH V.O. (CONT'D)

*Like the heartbeat of something
ancient and alive.*

They ride on. Sarah looks back at the tree. A final gust shivers through its branches.

SARAH V.O. (CONT'D)

*As if the tree remembered every soul
who ever stood beneath its shelter,
and cradled their stories in its
branches.*

7 EXT. RIDGE POINT — OVERLOOK — CONTINUOUS

They crest the ridge, an expansive valley unfolds below. The winding Minnesota River separates New Ulm from seven Dakota villages, scattered homesteads between.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Mní Sota Makhóhe — land where the
waters reflect the sky.

Sarah opens her journal, sketching. New Ulm. Planks, smoke, motion. Across the river the Dakota villages, orderly and quiet, fires burning. The wagon jolts. Her pencil jerks. A dark line slashes across the river, splitting one world from the other. She stares at the ruined sketch.

SARAH V.O.

*I thought I was stepping into a life
worth telling. One wrapped in beauty
and grace.*

(beat)

*But the prairie wasn't a page. It
was a fault line and it split long
before I knew I was standing on the
edge.*

8 INT. COL. SIBLEY'S OFFICE — DAY

A stark room. Military tidy. No decoration, just authority.

COL. HENRY SIBLEY, 50s, commands without raising his voice. Across from him stands DR. JOHN WAKEFIELD, 35 — polished boots, crisp coat, clenched jaw.

JOHN

Ridge Point Valley. What's holding
it?

COL. SIBLEY

Family there claims it's sacred
ground.

JOHN

Then why is Lott out staking?

COL. SIBLEY

He is? Damn fool's courting trouble.
If the Dakota see settlers marking
they'll walk from those treaty
negotiations and we'll all lose.

(quietly)

Leave it with me.

John sinks into a chair, the edge of frustration giving way to weariness.

JOHN

What makes him think he's entitled to it anyhow? You know that land's been my dream since I first laid eyes on it.

(beat)

I even wrote to Sarah about it.

He opens a locket, Sarah's portrait.

JOHN (CONT'D)

When I described it to her, she said it sounded like it was waiting for me. I wrote her back. Said it was waiting for us.

(beat, softer)

Between you and me, Henry... I think that land did more courting than I did. I gave her my word. She's building her hopes on that ground.

COL. SIBLEY

(weary)

If the valley clears, you'll hear it from me first.

(brisk again)

Until then, patience will serve you better than anger. With thousands expected here there'll be no shortage of bones to mend.

A SOLDIER appears in the doorway.

SOLDIER

The ladies have arrived.

John straightens, checks his reflection in a wall mirror

JOHN

How do I look?

COL. SIBLEY

(dry)

Dashing.

(offering a half-smile)

Now go meet your bride.

9 EXT. RIDGE POINT VALLEY — ATÉ'S CORNFIELD — DAY

ATÉ works the cornfield, steady and weathered. His wife and children laugh nearby. Chaska shoulders a basket, bumps WINONA (18) with an ear of corn. She playfully swats him.

CHASKA

Your warrior has only one thing on
his mind sister.

ATÉ

(sharp)

Chaska. Horses. Pasture.

Hapa rides in with rabbits slung over his saddle. Drops the
rabbits at Até's feet.

HAPA

Wóu^spe wówa^hí^ kte he mínína
wíyuk^a.

CHASKA

(wry mutter)

Generous with my heart.

ATÉ

Chaska!

Chaska throws up his hands, moves off. Hapa and Winona
exchange a warm glance.

HAPA

Cante waste nape ciyuzapo.

WINONA

And I too greet you with a good heart.

(beat)

Going for water, Até

She heads toward the river with her bucket, Hapa follows.

10 EXT. RIDGE POINT VALLEY — TREE LINE — CONTINUOUS

From the brush, HENRY LOTT and his SON watch the family.

LOTT

Cut those horses loose, drive 'em
across the river. They chase, I
shoot, we say they fired first.

The boy hesitates. Lott stares him down. The boy rides off.
Lott swigs from his flask.

LOTT (CONT'D)

I'm getting that land one way or
another.

11 EXT. RIDGE POINT VALLEY — MINNESOTA RIVERBANK — DAY

The herd pounds through mud and sunlight, the boy driving
them too fast.

The river flashes ahead – the boy's horse slips. He tumbles into the current. A splash. A scream.

Lott arrives as the boy's hat spins downstream. His face breaks, grief turning hard. His trembling hand finds his rifle.

12 EXT. RIDGE POINT VALLEY – ATÉ'S RANCH – MOMENTS LATER

Até looks up as Lott rides hard toward him.

LOTT
(shouting)
YOU KILLED MY SON!

Até steps forward, baffled. A flash – a shot. Até drops. His wife's scream – another shot, she falls. LITTLE EAGLE bolts for the trees. Rifle flash – miss – stillness. Lott stands over Até's body, unreadable. He spits, wheels his horse, rides into the dust.

13 EXT. RIDGE POINT VALLEY – ATÉ'S RANCH – MOMENTS LATER

Chaska, Hapa, and Winona rush in. Winona collapses into Hapa's arms. Chaska drops beside Até, pressing fabric to the wound – useless. He doesn't cry, just stares.

Above, a HAWK circles. Hapa kneels, grief hardening into something sharp.

HAPA
The wind will carry your name, Lott...
and one day, the storm will follow.

The HAWK takes off, its cry splitting the air.

GRAPHIC: FIVE YEARS LATER – 1862

The once vibrant field, now dust, stubble, broken fences. The HAWK lands on a battered sign creaking in prairie wind. A. MYRICK & CO. TRADING POST

14 INT. MYRICK'S STORE – NEW ULM – DAY

Crowded. Claustrophobic. Barrels, sacks, a locked rifle cage.

ANDREW MYRICK (40s), pinched and brittle scribbles in a ledger.

MYRICK
More stock than I know what to do
with and not a damn coin to be seen.

Across the room, Sarah studies a flyer: AUGUST 17TH – NEW ULM UNCLE TOM'S CABIN LECTURE.

SARAH
Harriet Beecher Stowe, in New Ulm?

NORA DECAMP (21) lifts a pair of shoes, calls to Sarah.

NORA
Think these match my wedding dress?

SARAH
(not looking)
Lovely.

The bell jingles. Whipple enters.

BISHOP WHIPPLE
Ah, I see you found my notice.

SARAH
How did you...

BISHOP WHIPPLE
I have connections.

He lowers his voice.

BISHOP WHIPPLE (CONT'D)
The article?

Sarah slips him a folded page, discreet.

SARAH
(whispers)
It's about the annuity delays.

BISHOP WHIPPLE
(shakes his head)
A mind like yours should be
celebrated, not hidden.

Sarah rotates her wedding band.

SARAH
Not in my house.

Sarah catches Nora listening, pivots as Nora approaches.

SARAH (CONT'D)
John! Dinner. I'm late, I'll bring
a pie.

BISHOP WHIPPLE
(to Nora)
You joining us?

NORA

(eyes widen)

If my intended found me in her company, he'd think twice on the match.

Nora turns, exits, Whipple follows. Sarah rushes gathering cigars, sugar, and a Harper's Weekly – hides it under a Household Hints magazine. She turns, collides into Chaska. Her parcels spill. They kneel. Hands brush. Their eyes meet, recognition. Sarah flustered, rushes out. Chaska picks up the Harper's Weekly, holds it out to her.

CHASKA

Ma'am – you dropped... this.

But the door has already shut behind her. Chaska brings it to the counter.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

That women dropped this.

MYRICK

Doctor's wife. I'll see it returned.

Chaska sets his jaw.

CHASKA

Here for corn.

MYRICK

Again? You were just here a few days ago.

CHASKA

This drought. It's the only thing keeping my horses going.

MYRICK

Horses... or friends downriver?

Chaska rolls his eyes.

MYRICK (CONT'D)

'Bout your credit.

CHASKA

Me too?

MYRICK

Fine. Last one until your debt's paid.

Myrick snaps the ledger shut, dust rises. The bell rings. Winona, painfully thin, saunters in.

Little Eagle trails behind her. Chaska tenses.

CHASKA

Winona.

She brushes past him. Little Eagle glances up, unsure. Chaska leaves.

15 EXT. MYRICK'S STORE — MOMENTS LATER

Chaska slams the corn sack onto his wagon, harsh breath, fists tight on the edge.

16 INT. MYRICK'S STORE — SAME TIME

Winona sets lard on the counter.

WINONA

Flour too.

MYRICK

Got money?

WINONA

Credit.

MYRICK

Not until Washington pays up.

WINONA

Please. The boy, he needs to eat.

MYRICK

Starving don't pay my ledger.

Winona grabs the lard. Myrick cocks a rifle.

MYRICK (CONT'D)

Put it down, unless you've got another way to pay.

LITTLE EAGLE

You leave my sister alone.

WINONA

(sharp)

Outside. Now.

He hesitates. Winona scowls. He runs out.

17 EXT. MYRICK'S STORE — CONTINUOUS

Chaska sees Little Eagle exit the store with his fists clenched. He looks through the window, sees Winona's hands untying the strings of her tunic, Myrick leering.

18 INT. MYRICK'S STORE — MOMENTS LATER

CHASKA bursts in.

CHASKA

WINONA!

Winona looks at Chaska, snatches the lard. Myrick grabs her.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

Damn it, Myrick. Give it to her.
She's the warrior chief's wife.

MYRICK

Then double.

WINONA

THIEF!

MYRICK

Them's my terms. You don't like it?
EAT GRASS. Or your own shit for all
I care.

Winona spits at him. Myrick goes for her. Chaska lunges,
SLAMMING him against the counter knife to his throat.

CHASKA

Don't make me turn into you.

Myrick gasps, terrified.

MYRICK

T-Take it! Take it!

Sarah appears in the doorway. Freezes. Chaska freezes.
Sarah flees. Chaska releases Myrick.

CHASKA

(to Winona)

Let's get out of here.

Chaska and Winona leave. Myrick's hands shake.

MYRICK

(shouts out)

IT'S STILL DOUBLE!

19 INT. MYRICK'S STORE — CONTINUOUS

Winona briskly walks away pulling Little Eagle with her.
Chaska follows, breath ragged, knife now hidden.

CHASKA

Winona wait.

Winona turns, stops. Chaska's hand trembling, he forces it still. Winona sees.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

What were you thinking?

WINONA

If a glance feeds the boy, what's the price of pride?

CHASKA

You're fanning flames.

WINONA

Then let them burn.

CHASKA

I'm hauling what I can.

WINONA

Three hundred mouths don't fill on mercy.

CHASKA

Father said mercy's all that keeps us human.

WINONA

It's Até, brother. Or have you forgotten our language too?

CHASKA

Okay, Até. Please. Come back to the ranch. If for no other reason, Little Eagle.

WINONA

So he can grow up thinking he's less than he is?

Chaska turns away, hurt.

WINONA (CONT'D)

No. I'll do many things, but I will never step back on that land again.

20 EXT. WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD - EVENING

A warm frontier home. Canaries chirp. On the table, untouched vegetables and a burnt pie. Sarah cradles baby NELLIE, eyes haunted from the incident in Myrick's store.

LJ crawls a toy soldier across the rug, mimicking gunfire. Pow. Pow. Pow. Sarah startles.

At the dining table, John drops a newspaper before Sibley.
 Headline: BATTLE OF ANTIETAM IMMINENT – UNION TROOPS STRIPPED
 FROM FRONTIER.

COL. SIBLEY
 There'll be blood before frost.

SARAH
 That where you're bound?

COL. SIBLEY
 (nods)
 Washington's calling up every man
 they can. Lee's pushing north,
 they're running scared.

John taps a smaller article **ANNUITY NOT COMING.**

JOHN
 This is the story keeping me up.

SARAH
 It says delayed. Not canceled.

JOHN
 Half this county can't read beyond a
 headline let alone the print beneath.
 (beat)
 And Whipple? Slipping sermons into
 the press now?

Sarah stiffens.

SARAH
 Colonel, you said the funds were
 released weeks ago. Why aren't the
 payments here?

COL. SIBLEY
 They want gold, not paper. Hauling
 thirty thousand in gold in wartime
 isn't that simple.

SARAH
 If I'd been cheated, I'd want gold
 too.

John flashes her a tight, warning smile. Sibley clears his
 throat.

COL. SIBLEY
 Congress has approved it. Half
 anyhow.
 (beat)
 Should be here by dawn.

He raises his glass.

COL. SIBLEY (CONT'D)
So for now — a kind of peace.

SARAH
For whom, Colonel?
(quiet, pointed)
Not the ones still waiting to be
paid.

Sibley freezes mid-sip. LJ thrusts his toy soldier toward him.

LJ
My daddy made me this!

COL. SIBLEY
A man of many talents.
(to John)
Speaking of talents —

Sarah catches the look between them. She rises.

SARAH
That's my cue.
(soft to LJ)
Come, soldier. Bedtime.

She carries the children off, smile fading once she turns.

The house stills, the clock ticks, the men get down to business.

COL. SIBLEY
We still need a surgeon.

JOHN
I didn't claw through Harvard to saw
bones in a cornfield.

COL. SIBLEY
No one asked for this war. But we
can't let the Union tear itself apart
to keep men in chains.

John moves to the window. COBALT his white stallion paces outside, restless as his master.

JOHN
Germany fell out from under me.
Ridge Point Valley slipped away next.
(beat)
I won't let this be the third home I
lose being away at some damn war.

John looks back at Sibley.

JOHN (CONT'D)
I got a wife, kids. What would they
do without me?

Sibley nods with understanding. Stands, picks up his hat.

COL. SIBLEY
Well... if you change your mind, you
know where to find us.
(turns to leave, looks
back)
And thank Sarah - for the dinner.

He leaves. John's jaw tightens. The both know it wasn't
good.

21 INT. WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD - NIGHT

LJ sleeps curled against his frayed blue wool blanket. Sarah
tucks it around him like a ritual. She strokes his cheek.
Nellie whimpers, Sarah soothes her. She looks out the window
at John crossing the yard with a lantern. He pauses to stroke
Cobalt's nose.

SARAH V.O.
*John thought strength was the grip
you never loosened. I found mine in
the hand I kept offering back. He
felt miles from me... until I'd see
him checking the barn again, touching
Cobalt like he needed reassurance,
and suddenly there he was - the man
I once chose, the one I promised
myself to.*

22 EXT. JONES' FARM YARD - DAWN

Mist lifts off the prairie grass. Little Eagle and THREE
DAKOTA BOYS move along the fence line.

LITTLE EAGLE
Eggs!

He sets his rifle down, climbs the fence.

BOY #1
Step on Jones' side of that fence,
he'll shoot.

LITTLE EAGLE
I'm not going home empty-handed.

Hands trembling, he lifts two warm eggs.

BOY #2

That man beat my mother.

The door slams open. Jones bursts out, rifle raised. Boy #2's face hardens. He fires. Jones drops. Mrs. Jones runs out - another shot. A TEENAGE GIRL appears. Third shot.

The eggs slip from Little Eagle's shaking hands, yolk mixing with dirt. He runs away, sobbing.

23 EXT. WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD - CORRAL - MORNING

LJ marches his toy soldier along the fence mimicking gunfire. Sarah adjusts John's collar, loving, careful.

SARAH

Why did she have to go into labor today?

John cinches the saddle on Cobalt

JOHN

Babies don't keep schedules.

SARAH

Birch Coulee's half a day's ride. You won't be back before midnight.
(beat)

Mr. Gleason goes to New Ulm every morning. I could ride with him.

John stiffens.

JOHN

After yesterday? A knife at Myrick's throat and you want to sit in a church full of strangers and read books?

He pulls the stirrups too tight.

JOHN (CONT'D)

With the gold coming in, every mile out there's a fuse waiting to catch.

SARAH

You worry too much.

JOHN

I don't worry enough.

Sarah folds her arms.

SARAH

This will be my only chance to meet a legend.

JOHN

Humph. A troublemaker with a printing press.

SARAH

You mean a woman who dares to speak her mind.

JOHN

Like last night? Poor Henry couldn't decide which choked him more — your onions or your opinions.

Hurt flashes across her face. He instantly regrets it.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Sarah... I didn't mean that. It came out wrong.

LJ trots up with the IVORY-STOCK RIFLE.

LJ

Here's your rifle Pa.

John kneels. A hand on the carved stock.

JOHN

My father gave me this. When you're grown, it'll be yours.

LJ

I'm going to be just like you.

John tousles his hair.

JOHN

I pray you never see the things I have son.

Sarah's expression warms. John mounts Cobalt. Touches Sarah's cheek, protective.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Just stay put until I return.

He nudges Cobalt. She calls after him, holding up his WALTHAM WATCH.

SARAH

John. You forgot this.

JOHN

(smiles)
What would I do without you?

He takes the watch, rides off. Sarah watches him go – not the direction, but whether he looks back. He doesn't. Her gaze shifts to the pantry window – her journal. She hardens, steps to the window, snatches up the journal.

SARAH

His rules for everything. Not today.

24 EXT. WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD – LATER

Sarah stands at the gate in her finest dress. Nellie on her hip. LJ with his blue blanket. The burnt pie and her RED VELVET SATCHEL in hand. Gleason's lumber wagon approaches. His dog JACK, a rangy mutt, rides in back. Sarah flags him down. Gleason reins in, bleary-eyed.

GLEASON

Where yew goin'?

SARAH

New Ulm.

GLEASON

Hop on.

25 EXT. MDEWAKANTON DAKOTA VILLAGE LITTLE CROW'S HOUSE – DAY

A crowd gathers before a weathered shack – tension humming.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW, 52, leans on his staff, a stovepipe hat shading sharp, watchful eyes. Hapa stands forward, fury taut, Winona beside him.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW

Why come to me? You elected a speaker. Why not go to him?

HAPA

He hasn't been to Washington. You know their ways better than any of us.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW

And what good is that knowledge if no one listens?

HAPA

MYRICK TOLD MY WIFE TO EAT GRASS!

Anger ripples through the crowd.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW

Be patient. That man's words are like wind through dung – you smell them, but they mean nothing.

HAPA

Sixty million acres gone. Twelve treaties shrinking us to a ribbon of land along the river.

(beat)

When do we say enough?

CHIEF LITTLE CROW

Careful, Hapa. A man can start a fire with one spark – but he can't choose what the wind will burn.

A tense stillness.

HAPA

(scoffing)

The Great Dakota Nation – conquered by a writing stick.

Murmurs build. Heads nod. Winona's eyes harden.

HAPA (CONT'D)

Winona. Tell him what you saw in New Ulm.

WINONA

People cheering soldiers marching off to fight in the great father's war. They say they're being paid with our gold.

HAPA

See? The fort's empty. Now's the time.

A wagon rumbles in. Chaska. He drops a sack of corn down.

HAPA (CONT'D)

Cut Hairs don't belong at warrior councils.

CHASKA

Is that what this is? Last I remembered, councils were for all.

HAPA

If you're Dakota.

CHASKA

I assure you Hapa my blood still runs Dakota.

HAPA

Was it red? I thought it would have turned white by now.

LITTLE EAGLE BURSTS IN, breathless. Two boys behind him.

LITTLE EAGLE
JONES IS DEAD.

BOY #2
He was going to shoot him.

Little Eagle spins.

LITTLE EAGLE
He never even fired.

Chaska drags a hand down his face, dread setting in.

CHASKA
Where's your rifle?

LITTLE EAGLE
On the road, by the fence.

CHASKA
My neighbor. They'll know it was
you.
(to Little Crow)
We need to bring them in. Explain.

HAPA
NO!
(beat)
They'll hang them on the spot.

He turns on Little Crow.

HAPA (CONT'D)
Why are you so afraid?

Little Crow closes his eyes — a long, pained breath.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW
You howl like a wolf under a hard
moon. I've seen the white man's
strength. Burn their fields today
and they will return with a thousand
more to burn ours.

A YOUNG WARRIOR steps forward, shaking.

YOUNG WARRIOR
Let them come. We'll fight with or
without you.

It hits Little Crow like a blow.

HAPA

A thousand Brave Hearts will meet
their lines along every river and
hill. They are weak. They march in
rows. We move like wind.

DAKOTA CROWD

Okichize! Okichize!

Little Crow raises his hand – the chant fades, fury underneath.
He studies their faces. Hunger, fear, resolve – a tide too
strong to turn.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW

I have seen what war does. I buried
brothers for it. I swore never again.

He removes his stovepipe hat. Washington's gift. He stares
at it, fondles it.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW (CONT'D)

Maybe it no longer matters who is
right. Maybe the wind has chosen
for us.

He drops the hat to the dirt – stomps it, grief, heavy.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW (CONT'D)

Little Crow is not a coward. I will
ride with you, lead you –
(quiet)
Die with you, if it comes to that.

He lifts his gaze skyward.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW (CONT'D)

May Wakan Tanka guide us.

26 EXT. ROAD TO NEW ULM – DAY

Sarah sits stiffly beside Gleason on the wagon bench. Her
hand clutches her red satchel like a shield.

SARAH

This road, it feels... empty.

GLEASON

(half-laughs)
Ain't nothin' out here but dust... an'
Injuns too drunk t' aim.

She flinches. He notices – grins.

GLEASON (CONT'D)

Don't fret.

(MORE)

GLEASON (CONT'D)
 (pats his coat)
 I keep insurance.

Sarah's gaze drops to the bulge in his pocket.

GLEASON (CONT'D)
 Mind you. They get ahold of a fine
 lady like you -
 (smirk darkens)
 Folks say it's worse'n death.

SARAH
 That's enough! Stop the wagon!

GLEASON
 No stoppin'.

SARAH
 Oh for heaven's sakes. I need to
 make water.

GLEASON
 Why didn't you just say so?

He snorts, yanks the reins. The wagon jerks to a halt.

Sarah slips into the brush - skirts rustling. She crouches.
 The prairie wind dies. Silence presses in.

27 EXT. MDEWAKANTON DAKOTA VILLAGE LITTLE CROW'S HOUSE -
 CONTINUOUS

Hapa and CUT NOSE watch as Little Crow marks paths and targets
 with a stick in the dirt.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW
 The Seven Council Fires must rise
 with us. If one refuses, we fight
 weakened.
 (beat)
 I'll ride to the Wahpekutes.
 (points to Hapa)
 You carry word north.

HAPA
 We'll need guns, horses, food.

He taps the river settlements in the dirt.

HAPA (CONT'D)
 (to Cut Nose)
 Lead the Brave Hearts through the
 settlements. Take what you can.
 I'll meet you at New Ulm.

Cut Nose's hand trembles near his knife hilt.

HAPA (CONT'D)
 If they stand in your way, cut them
 down. War spares no one. Not after
 what they took from us.

The air tightens. Chaska turns to Winona alarm beneath his stoicism.

CHASKA
 We're leaving. Now. Before this
 turns worse.

She takes a small step toward Hapa aligning herself.

CHASKA (CONT'D)
 (looks to Hapa)
 Tell her she has to leave.

HAPA
 My wife makes her own decisions.

WINONA
 I stay with those who fight.

Chaska swallows voice steady, breaking beneath.

CHASKA
 You'll die for this... and I can't
 watch that.
 (eyes to Cut Nose)
 He won't guard your back.

Cut Nose smirks, small, knowing, ugly. Winona sees it and still chooses.

WINONA
 We vanish anyway. Piece by piece.
 They've taken our land... our worth.
 (fierce)
 I will not bow anymore. Not after
 Lott.

CHASKA
 (erupts)
 DON'T SPEAK HIS NAME!

WINONA
 (anger, hurt)
 He walked free. You let him.

CHASKA
 What was I to do?

HAPA
FIGHT, damn you!

Chaska wheels toward him grief, shame, fury all barely contained.

CHASKA
I do fight. Every day I hold my
tongue before it kills someone.
That's restraint, not cowardice.

He turns back to Winona. Realization hitting him hard.

CHASKA (CONT'D)
You've chosen your path but you don't
see what waits on it.
(beat)
I will not lose you.

A breath. A choice. Chaska draws his knife, slices his forearm. Blood wells. He holds it between Winona and Hapa.

CHASKA (CONT'D)
Same blood. Same people.

Chaska meets Winona's eyes.

CHASKA (CONT'D)
If this burns, I burn with you.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW
Prove it. Go with Hapa to the
Sissetons. Let them hear it directly
that the Cut Hairs stand with us.

CHASKA
I will. But when war comes, I'm not
fighting. Someone has to move the
village to safety.

He steps into the circle, not away from it.

28 EXT. ROAD TO NEW ULM - DAY

Sarah pulls up her skirt in the brush as Gleason cranes his neck, trying to catch a glimpse.

Behind the wagon, two riders drift out of the heat-haze silent as ghosts. A rifle hammer clicks. Gleason stiffens. Hand diving for his pocket. BANG. He falls to the ground.

IN THE BRUSH. Sarah snaps up at the sound of the shot. Through a veil of leaves she sees Chaska astride his horse. Jack circles the body, barking. Gleason's hand nears his "weapon" - nothing but a battered flask.

CRACK. Hapa fires again. Jack yelps, collapses. Silence. A CHILD'S SCREAM splits the stillness. LJ, reaches out toward the bushes where Sarah is watching. Hapa raises his rifle at LJ. Sarah bursts from the brush.

SARAH
(shaking, fierce)
No!

Hapa whirls, aims his gun toward Sarah. Chaska slams the barrel down. The shot kicks dirt at Sarah's feet.

Hapa cracks Chaska with the rifle butt. Chaska staggers, blood streaking his cheek. Chaska looks to the wagon at the terrified child, then to Sarah – unyielding despite her fear – then back to Hapa. A beat. He steps between them.

CHASKA
There's no honor in killing a woman.

Sarah's hands rise, palms open.

SARAH
I saw nothing but a fool drunk on
his own bottle.
(desperate but sharp)
I have bread, tinctures. My husband's
a doctor.

HAPA
She lies.

CHASKA
I've seen her in town. She is who
she says.

Hapa's gaze slides past her, toward LJ still sobbing.

HAPA
No children.

Sarah freezes. For one terrifying heartbeat, she can't move. Then she forces herself forward – lunges, seizing the rifle barrel, pressing it to her chest.

SARAH
Then kill me first. But kill me, no
medicines.

The metal sears her bodice. She doesn't move. Silence. The air tightens. Chaska looks at the terrified child in the wagon then at Hapa's raised rifle. A muscle in his cheek twitches. He steps forward, gently prying Sarah's hands from the barrel eyes locked on Hapa.

CHASKA

I'll take responsibility for her.

Hapa's finger hovers on the trigger then he jerks the muzzle aside, disgusted.

HAPA

(snaps)
Your burden.

Chaska retrieves his gun, levels it at her.

CHASKA

Get in the wagon.

Sarah meets his eyes, steady — eases the barrel aside.

SARAH

Put that down. I'm not going anywhere without my children.

29 EXT. ROAD TO NEW ULM — DAY — MOMENTS LATER

Chaska ties his horse alongside the wagon, climbs onto the bench. In back, Sarah gathers LJ and NELLIE close as they roll past Gleason's body, her hand trembling. She presses it to her lap, forces it still.

The wagon wheel crushes LJ's toy soldier. CRACK. A haunting face toward the sky.

30 EXT. ROAD TO NEW ULM — PRAIRIE STRETCH — DAY

Wind tears across the tall grass. In the distance, a thin coil of smoke rises drifting in the shifting wind.

31 EXT. MDEWAKANTON ENCAMPMENT — DAY

Buffalo-skin tipis ring Little Crow's Mdwakanton village, ghostlike in the morning haze. Women lash poles; dogs weave through rushing feet.

At the edge, Winona's tipi stands half-stripped for travel. Chaska, bruise darkening from Hapa's rifle butt follows Winona as she ties a bundle with brisk angry hands.

WINONA

No. I've got a woman in labor and a lodge to move.

CHASKA

I just need a place to keep her for a few days — no longer.

Winona keeps her eyes on the rope, pulling it so tight the fibers creak.

WINONA
You're putting me in the middle.

CHASKA
You were in the middle the moment
Myrick drew that rifle.

She glances up, sees the bruise, the fatigue, the fear he's trying not to show. Something shifts behind her eyes. Not softness, recognition.

WINONA
You're too damn stubborn.

CHASKA
(faint smile)
You'd know.

Winona keeps tying, jaw working. Her resistance wavers, then firms.

WINONA
All right. A few days. But don't
expect kindness.
(mutters under her
breath)
If anyone sees a white woman in my
lodge.

Chaska slings his rifle across his back.

WINONA (CONT'D)
Where are you going?

CHASKA
Back to the Sissetons. They refused
war but I'm going to ask for shelter.

WINONA
For a thousand people?

CHASKA
No choice. The warriors push, the
soldiers close, and the ones in the
middle pay the price.

Winona watches him go. She turns back toward her tipi, where a VERY PREGNANT DAKOTA WOMAN grips a support pole as another contraction hits.

32 INT. WINONA'S TIPI - DAY

Sarah sits against the hide wall, clutching her children tight.

OLD BETS, 80, frail in body but not in gaze, smokes in the corner - jaw set, eyes like flint. Watching.

Winona drops to her knees by the red velvet satchel, spills its contents onto the floor - cloth, toys - Sarah's journal.

Winona flips the journal open. Sketches; landscapes, trees, then Hapa's face. Her eyes cut toward Sarah. Sarah's breath catches with fear.

WINONA

You showed his strength. White mouths
will still say "savage."

She snaps the book shut, steps toward the fire. Sarah tenses. Winona stops. A beat. Winona tosses the journal aside, not in the flames. Her gaze settles on the children.

SARAH

Please... not them.

Winona holds her gaze a beat too long.

WINONA

We don't strike children.
(quieter)
That lesson came from your people,
not mine.

Little Eagle takes a bite of Sarah's pie, grimaces.

LITTLE EAGLE

Lay WEE-yah-kah shnee.
(Subtitle: This does
not taste good.)

Winona tastes it. She looks at Sarah.

WINONA

Your oven must hate you.

She digs deeper, finds bread, tosses it to Little Eagle. He eats. Nods. Winona almost smiles.

WINONA (CONT'D)

At least your bread knows its work.

Little Eagle breaks the bread, sets a piece on Old Bets's lap. Bets doesn't look down, just exhales smoke.

33 INT. WINONA'S TIPI - NIGHT

Firelight flickers across the hide walls. The camp outside has gone still. Sarah sits exhausted, LJ curled beneath her arm, quietly sobbing. Old Bets smokes in the corner, watching. She rises with effort, shuffles forward, offers LJ the small piece of bread.

OLD BETS
 Híha·ta·ya, hí·ka.
 (Subtitle: Here, little
 one.)

LJ looks to Sarah, she nods. He takes the bread, devours it. Old Bets chuckles, bones creaking as she returns to her place.

SARAH
 LJ... slower.

He chews obediently. Sarah looks toward Old Bets, gratitude held in silence. Firelight warms both their faces. Two worlds lit by the same flame.

34 EXT. JONES' FARM YARD - DAY

The drone of flies swells as John guides Cobalt through the gate. Mr. Jones lies in the dirt, shirt soaked red. John swings off, drops to his knees, checks for a pulse. Nothing. A faint GROAN. Behind the house, Mrs. Jones slumps against the wall, hands braced on her swollen belly. John rushes to her, catching her as she slips.

JOHN
 (soft)
 Who?

MRS. JONES
 (barely audible)
 Dakota... Her breath rattles - stops.

John keeps his fingers on her throat. Nothing. He pulls his hand back, it's soaked red. Something hardens in him. He rises. Mounts. Drives Cobalt hard out the gate.

As he rides, a GUNSHOT cracks far off. He looks toward the horizon. A thin spire of SMOKE rising in the wind. He spurs Cobalt faster.

35 EXT. SMITH FARM YARD - DAY

SMITH hammers iron at his forge. John thunders in, breath ragged with urgency.

JOHN
 Smith! Where's your family?

Smith looks up startled by John's tone.

SMITH
At the next farm. Why?

JOHN
Jones is dead.
(beat; rapid, shaken)
Mrs. Jones too. The Dakota hit the
place and there's smoke east. Farms
are burning.

Smith freezes. Disbelief cracks into terror.

SMITH
The Dakota? They've never -

JOHN
Get your family. Get them to New
Ulm. The town can defend itself
farms can't.

Smith's disbelief snaps into fear, then action. He bolts for
the wagon harness. John swings Cobalt around, drives him
toward home.

36 EXT. WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD - DAY

John storms out the front door, panic boiling. He rips his
hat off, throws it to the ground.

JOHN
Damn you, Sarah!

A wagon skids in. The DRIVER jumps down, his wife moans in
back.

MAN
Dr. Wakefield! Please. She's in
trouble!

John's rage hardens into purpose.

JOHN
Inside. Quickly.

37 INT. WINONA'S TIPI - SAME TIME

The pregnant Dakota woman labors on a buffalo robe, sweat on
her temple. Conjurers circle her, rattles rising like a storm
building. Winona stands in the doorway alert, coiled. Sarah
holds her children close.

The woman cries out. Her HUSBAND steps forward with tiny
hide charms cupped in both hands.

HUSBAND

Taku wóksape ki.
(Subtitle: For
strength.)

He casts the charms toward her belly. The rattles swell, sharp, urgent. Sarah recoils – her heel hovering over a medicine pouch. Winona SNATCHES her arm.

WINONA

(low, sharp)
Do not step there. Some things do
not forgive, not even the innocent.

Sarah freezes, breath shaking.

SARAH

(whispers)
I—I didn't see...

The conjurers' rattles falter. One murmurs a quick warding phrase. The air tightens. A final rattle. A moan. Then silence. Even the fire seems to hold its breath. Winona's jaw tightens bracing for whatever comes next.

MOMENTS LATER

A thin newborn cry. The conjurer wraps the infant in softened hide and passes it to her. She rocks the child in quiet rhythm, steady, instinctive.

Sarah watches. Not fear, something like wonder. LJ leans forward, curious. Winona notices Sarah watching. Their eyes meet, a brief, cautious understanding. The baby settles. Silence returns.

38 INT. WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD – CONTINUOUS

A scream of labor. John rolls up his sleeves, sets his Waltham watch on the table – its ticking the only steady thing.

Thunder rolls outside. He glances toward the window, fear underneath, then forces himself back to the woman in labor.

A newborn's cry pierces the air. A second later, another gunshot. This one closer.

39 EXT. WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD – DAY

John rides hard. A gunshot cracks the air, closer. John spurs Cobalt faster.

40 EXT. ROAD TO NEW ULM - DAY

John crouches by LJ's broken toy soldier in the dirt, its wooden arm snapped off. Behind him, Smith stands over Gleason's stripped body.

In the wagon Smith arrived in, his WIFE and CHILDREN huddle together, faces pale. Smith kneels beside John.

SMITH
You saved my family.
(quiet, steady)
A man doesn't forget that.

John doesn't look up, eyes locked on the toy.

SMITH (CONT'D)
We'll find them, Doctor. I swear
it.

Smith rises. John closes his hand around the broken toy soldier. He mounts Cobalt. Drives him toward New Ulm.

41 EXT. NEW ULM - DAY

Cobalt pounds through smoke and shouting. John reins hard, swings down. Smith right behind him. John grabs a townsman.

JOHN
Who's in charge?

The man only stares, vacant. John pushes past him toward the barricade. Nearby, Nora and MRS. DECAMP drag a trunk, panic in their eyes. John approaches Whipple arguing with Myrick.

JOHN (CONT'D)
Have you seen Sarah?

BISHOP WHIPPLE
Some headed for the fort. She's
probably there.

John exhales. One beat of hope. A RUNNER stumbles up, breathless.

RUNNER
Hundred Dakota on the bluff!

JOHN
My God.

He scans the barricade. No one leading. John yanks a boy aside, grabs a hammer, starts shoring up the planks. Men stare, uncertain, then they follow his lead.

MYRICK
To hell with this. I'm going where
there's cannon.

JOHN
Myrick. Get back here!

MYRICK
Who made you general?

He storms off. Mrs. DeCamp grabs her flask, trembling.

MRS. DECAMP
MR. MYRICK! WAIT!

She staggers after him. Nora calls out, desperate.

NORA
MOTHER!

BISHOP WHIPPLE
GET BEHIND THE BARRICADE!

But they are already gone.

42 EXT. NEW ULM — BLUFF — SAME TIME

Hapa and the BRAVE HEARTS, nearly naked but for breech cloths, wait on the ridge, silent, grim. Cut Nose rides up beside him.

HAPA
No prisoners.

He touches the medicine pouch at his neck.

HAPA (CONT'D)
Storm's here, Lott.

His arm drops. A WAR CRY explodes. The bluff erupts in motion, hooves thundering downhill.

43 EXT. NEW ULM — MOMENTS LATER

Mrs. DeCamp SCREAMS. Hapa's noose whips around Myrick's neck, yanking him off his feet. MYRICK'S BOOTS KICK DIRT as he's dragged down the road, his mouth open in a silent scream.

HAPA
LET'S SEE WHO EATS GRASS NOW!

For one brutal instant, Myrick's body skids through the dust, face grinding across gravel, eyes bulging.

Bullets tear the air. John yanks Whipple down behind the barricade as Cut Nose charges through the smoke. His blade flashes. Mrs. Decamp falls. Nora screams, turns to run back. Cut Nose snatches her hair, hauls her onto his horse. For an instant Nora's eyes lock with John's through the smoke. John grabs his Ivory carved rifle, vaults the barricade.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Where are you going?

JOHN

I have to find Sarah.

44 EXT. NEW ULM — THREE HOURS LATER

Smoke rises in pillars. Flames devour rooftops. The town is a skeleton, burning, broken, abandoned. Civilians flee, some carrying wounded.

On the bluff, Hapa sits atop his war pony. The animal snorts, hooves stamping at the scorched earth. Hapa surveys the destruction below. Behind him, Dakota warriors regroup in loose clusters. Some shout in triumph. He signals retreat.

45 EXT. NEW ULM — EVENING

A UNION CARAVAN crests the hill, wagons loaded with barrels of gold. They pull their horses to a halt, staring in stunned silence. Smoldering ruins.

A YOUNG SOLDIER leans out, eyes wide. His face goes pale. Myrick dangles from charred rafters, hands bound behind his back, mouth stuffed with grass. The wind stirs his body, a grotesque marionette. The soldier retches over the side.

46 EXT. MDEWAKANTON ENCAMPMENT — SAME TIME

Hoofbeats thunder as Brave Hearts pour into camp.

47 INT. WINONA'S TIPI — CONTINUOUS

Sarah jolts awake. Outside — shouts, laughter. Winona pulls back the flap.

SARAH

What — what's happening?

Sarah sees Cut Nose riding in on Cobalt, foaming, wild-eyed. Women cheer, tossing hoop skirts and bonnets into the air. Victory and mockery all at once. Sarah stares. John's horse.

48 EXT. MDEWAKANTON ENCAMPMENT — MOMENTS LATER

Chaska moves through the chaos, face set, hands trembling before he stills them.

A warrior passes, draped in a bloodstained coat. Laughter ripples around him. Chaska doesn't smile.

49 INT. WINONA'S TIPI - LATER

Hapa bursts in, arms full, John's ivory rifle slung across his back. Winona runs to him. He throws the rifle toward Little Eagle who catches it, mesmerized. Sarah's breath catches. Chaska enters, tense, unreadable.

HAPA

New Ulm burned. Myrick's dead.

Sarah gasps. Hapa's head snaps toward her. He yanks her up, points to her shoes.

HAPA (CONT'D)

Shoes. Off!

She fumbles the shoes off. He tosses them to Winona, who holds them up in admiration.

HAPA (CONT'D)

Try running now.

He gestures to Little Eagle, nods toward LJ, Little Eagle nods back. Little Eagle boy grabs LJ, pushes him toward the flap.

LJ

No! Momma!

Sarah lunges, Chaska stops her, firm.

CHASKA

Don't make this worse.

LJ's blue blanket slips to the dirt. Sarah grabs it, thrusts it toward him.

SARAH

Take it!

Little Eagle leads LJ out.

SARAH (CONT'D)

(calling out)

LJ. Say my name.

LJ

Momma.

SARAH

No. Sarah Wakefield. Remember it so you can find me.

Hapa looks to Chaska.

HAPA
Her turn. Medicines.

Chaska grabs Sarah's arm. Winona reaches for the baby.

SARAH
No!

CHASKA
An infant won't survive the trail
and you know it.

Hapa yanks Nellie from Sarah's arms, thrusts her toward Winona. Winona freezes. Jaw tight then she takes the child – settles her in her arms. Her breath catches. A lullaby slips out before she can stop it. For a heartbeat, something breaks in her, not kindness, but an old hurt.

CHASKA (CONT'D)
(to Sarah)
Come.

The lullaby follows Sarah out, gentle, unnerving.

50 EXT. MDEWAKANTON ENCAMPMENT – CORRAL – MOMENTS LATER

Mud and noise. Sarah stumbles, barefoot.

SARAH
My feet... I can't –

CHASKA
Move.

He stops, eyes her dress.

CHASKA (CONT'D)
Lose the skirts.

He tears out the crinoline, fast, no ceremony – then drags mud across her cheeks.

CHASKA (CONT'D)
Hold still.

Their eyes lock. Hers defiant, his hard with conflict.

SARAH
Do not touch me.

Something hard in Chaska's expression – not anger, something closer to shame.

CHASKA

If you wish to live, then look it.

She trembles, jaw tight, but doesn't move.

Chaska leads two horses from the corral. Sarah points at Cobalt.

SARAH

No. That one. He's mine.

CHASKA

Fine.

She gathers what's left of her skirts, anger overtaking fear.

SARAH

My husband will find me and when he does, he will kill you.

Chaska stops. Turns just enough to see her.

CHASKA

If he were coming...
(beat)
You would not be here.

SARAH

(soft, broken)
You don't know him.

51 EXT. FORT RIDGELY — DAY

WAR CRIES tear across the plain. Four hundred Brave Hearts crest the rise. Painted faces, rifles, lances — horses pounding like thunder.

Inside the fort: chaos. Trainees barely old enough to shave scramble to the walls. Settlers, farmers, blacksmiths, mothers clutching pistols take cover behind barrels. Two six-pounder cannons rattle into place. A young trainee sights the charge, lips moving in prayer.

COMMANDING TRAINEE

(under his breath)
Wait—wait—

BOOM. A cannon roars. One rider drops, the rest keep coming. They split. Some circling wide, others driving for the gate. Arrows thud into posts. Torches sail overhead. A roof catches fire. Cut Nose bursts through smoke, firing from horseback.

Another blast. A shell lands dead center, erupting dirt, bodies — silence. Smoke thins. The Dakota pull back in ragged clusters.

Inside, the living stare at one another, stunned. A woman lowers her pistol, trembling.

WOMAN 1
(barely a whisper)
We're still here.

52 EXT. ROAD TO WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD - DAY

The prairie lies scorched. A thin column of smoke rises from the trees - exactly where the Wakefield home should be. Sarah slows, her face draining, breath catching.

53 INT. WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD - DAY

Sarah moves through wreckage. Slashed furniture, shattered china, the tang of blood at the door. Chaska follows, scanning. He pauses at an overturned canary cage.

CHASKA
This isn't living.

He opens the latch. Yellow wings vanish into gray. He rights a fallen cabinet, rummaging fast.

CHASKA (CONT'D)
Which one's the laudanum?

No answer. He turns, she's disappeared into another room.

54 INT. WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD - BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Sarah stands in the doorway. The bed is a ruin of blood and torn sheets. On the floor, John's smashed Waltham watch. She kneels, trembling, lifts it. Her reflection wavers in the cracked glass, half of her face broken. A sob rips out of her.

55 INT. WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD - CONTINUOUS

Chaska hears it, freezes. For a moment, he doesn't move. Something pulls him to her.

56 INT. WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD - BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Sarah's crumpled, hands around the watch. Chaska reaches for her. She slaps it away.

SARAH
You killed him! You murderer.

Chaska's jaw tightens. She bolts, he catches her, pinning her arms as she thrashes.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Let me go!

CHASKA

Quiet. They'll hear us.

A gunshot cracks outside. Both freeze. After a beat, Chaska releases her, checks the window.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

We must move — now.

Sarah clutches the watch, breath ragged, shifting from rage toward the terrible, dawning comprehension that John is dead. She nods.

57 EXT. ROAD TO MDEWAKANTON ENCAMPMENT — DAY

Wind low. Gray clouds rolling. Sarah rides Cobalt, Chaska beside her.

CHASKA

I'm not what you believe me to be.

SARAH

It appears otherwise.

Sarah keeps her eyes forward. Chaska reins up.

CHASKA

You ever been so hungry you chewed bark? Dug through frozen ground for something, anything?

SARAH

And that makes killing right?

Chaska's jaw tightens, a small, involuntary flinch.

CHASKA

Hunger unravels a man. You have no idea what you would do in the same situation.

SARAH

So it's my fault?

CHASKA

And it's mine because another man took your husband?

Sarah swallows hard, denial stiffening her spine.

SARAH

My husband is alive.

Thunder rolls. The sky darkens. Lightening in the distance.

CHASKA
We better find shelter.

58 EXT. HOLLOW TREE — NIGHT

Rain lashes down. Chaska tethers the horses, crawls inside after her. The hollow barely holds them. He drapes his coat over her shoulders.

A flash. A tree explodes nearby. Sarah screams. He pulls her close. She doesn't resist. They stay that way, trembling in the storm.

59 INT. HOLLOW TREE — MORNING

Soft morning light seeps through wet bark. Sarah sleeps against Chaska, John's cracked watch in her hand. Chaska stirs, registers the closeness, unsure, conflicted.

The watch ticks. Once. Twice. Sarah eyes open.

SARAH
John...?

She sees Chaska, jerks away, scrambles out of the hollow. Chaska exhales, follows her out.

CHASKA
I'll get the horses.

60 EXT. ROAD TO MDEWAKANTON ENCAMPMENT — DAY

Wind low. Gray clouds rolling. Sarah rides beside Chaska silent except for hooves in the damp earth.

SARAH
Now that you have your medicines
what happens to us?

CHASKA
You stay with me.

SARAH
You can't hold us.

CHASKA
No?

SARAH
I can take care of myself.

CHASKA

You wouldn't last a day. No shoes.
No food. Two children. This land
does not care what you believe you
can bear, Mrs. Wakefield.

Sarah glares ahead, refusing to look at him.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

I'm moving the Mdewakanton north,
Sisseton territory. They're going
to shelter us. You're coming. And
when we get there... you're free to
go.

SARAH

You expect me to believe that?

CHASKA

Believe what you want.

(quiet)

With me. You'll still be alive to
find out.

He reaches into his saddlebag, pulls out her journal.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

Yours, is it not?

She reaches. He draws it back.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

If I give it to you, write what you
see. Record how you're treated.

SARAH

And how *will* I be treated?

CHASKA

Like someone I can't afford to lose.

SARAH

Why does it matter to you?

CHASKA

Because the wrong story survives too
easily. And I don't intend to let
that happen again.

She hesitates, then reaches for the journal.

SARAH

Then you'd better make sure there's
nothing in here you'll regret me
writing.

CHASKA

Fair enough.

He nudges his horse forward.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

Come on. Long ride yet.

Sarah follows. The cracked watch ticks faintly in her hand, soft, uneven, but still alive.

61 EXT. MDEWAKANTON ENCAMPMENT — DAY

They ride into silence. The storm that spared them has not spared the village. Crumpled tipis. Blankets sunk into mud. Clothing scattered across the trampled earth. Women move through the wreckage, stunned.

Sarah's breath catches. The ruin a mirror of her own shattered home.

A few yards away, Winona sits on a broken stump, Nellie held close against her chest. She looks up as they approach. A sigh of relief, then it drains away. Her gaze drifts to the splintered remains of her own lodge.

Sarah dismounts, reaching for Nellie. Winona hesitates. Her fingers tighten a beat too long, then she reluctantly releases her.

WINONA

(to Chaska)

We're all safe.

SARAH

My son?

Winona nods toward a wagon. Little Eagle chases LJ through the rubble, his blue blanket dragging in the dust. Sarah steps toward him. Chaska catches her arm, gentle but unyielding.

CHASKA

No. Not yet.

He tilts her chin, makes her look.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

Look at him. He is safe. Happy where he is.

Sarah trembles, torn, shaking before giving the smallest nod. Chaska releases her. LJ disappears behind a wagon. Sarah forces herself still.

62 INT. WINONA'S TIPI — NIGHT

Firelight flickers. Sarah writes by the dim glow, Nellie asleep beside her.

SARAH V.O.

*I thought I understood suffering. I
thought I knew what loss was.*

She pauses. Distant singing, a baby's cry, laughter of children, the hiss of the fire.

SARAH V.O. (CONT'D)

*But I heard laughter rise out of the
ruin. It had no right to live in
such a place... and yet it did.*

Sarah glances toward Old Bets — gray hair loose, pipe glowing as she stirs the pot, a low chant rising with the smoke.

SARAH V.O. (CONT'D)

*Once I would have called them savages.
But that night I saw only people
trying to live.*

63 EXT. MDEWAKANTON ENCAMPMENT — NIGHT

Chaska tosses a log onto the fire. Winona stirs the embers slow measured.

WINONA

You mean to take her all the way to
the Sissetons?

Chaska nods. Winona watches him a long moment, something tight in her jaw.

WINONA (CONT'D)

You said a few days.

CHASKA

A few days ended when the storm broke
this place.

Winona takes this in. Not arguing. Not agreeing.

WINONA

She has no shoes. No strength. No
luck.

CHASKA

Then her suffering will be short.

Winona huffs a humorless breath, not quite a laugh.

WINONA

(quiet)
It never is.

Chaska stares into the fire, the truth too heavy to hide.

CHASKA

She's the one thing they won't let
burn... unless someone needs a fire.
(beat)
Just treat her well. It might spare
us later.

Winona's gaze lifts, sharp, tired.

WINONA

Since when do you bargain with hope?

CHASKA

Since I ran out of choices.

Wind shifts the smoke between them, unresolved, unspoken, but understood.

64 INT. WINONA'S TIPI - MORNING

Pale light filters through the flap. Winona digs through garments, pulls out a worn, beaded tunic, tosses it to Sarah.

WINONA

This will last longer than silk.

SARAH

You want me to wear *this*?

Sarah pulls it on. Winona streaks ochre across her cheeks, braids ribbons into her hair, tosses leggings to her.

WINONA

Put those on.

In the kettle's reflection, a stranger.

SARAH

I don't even recognize myself.

WINONA

Good. No one else will either.

65 EXT. MDEWAKANTON ENCAMPMENT - DAY

Winona rolls a buffalo hide, nods for Sarah to grab the other end. They heave it onto a travois behind Cobalt.

Little Eagle tightens his pack, the rifle on his shoulder.
Winona hoists a heavy pack, thrusts it at Sarah.

WINONA

Turn around.

Winona drops the pack onto her, Sarah staggers under the weight.

SARAH

We're walking?

WINONA

Unless you're having a baby today,
sister, only children and elders
ride.

SARAH

(bitter)

I'm not your sister.

WINONA

You might be by the end. If you
last that long.

Sarah steps. Stops. Looks at her feet.

SARAH

My shoes?

Winona snorts, glances toward several Dakota women walking barefoot, steady and unbothered. That's answer enough. Winona reaches for Nellie. Sarah tightens, protective.

SARAH (CONT'D)

No.

WINONA

You can't catch yourself with a child
in your arms. The women in the wagon
will watch her with their babies.

Sarah clutches Nellie tighter, fierce, shaking.

WINONA (CONT'D)

Have it your way.

Sarah shifts her grip, steadies the pack. She takes a step, stumbles, another, stronger.

WINONA (CONT'D)

Let the lesson begin.

66 EXT. MDEWAKANTON ENCAMPMENT — DAWN (BREAKING CAMP)

Chaska rides tall at the front, staff raised.

CHASKA
PUCHACHEE! PUCHACHEE!

The camp erupts. Oxen groan, dogs weave between hooves. Dust rises in sheets. Carts and wagons lurch into motion. Children cling to wagon rails — dolls and kittens clutched tight. Old Bets rides with the elders, pipe glowing.

SARAH V.O.
*A nation on foot — five miles long,
a mile wide, a rolling sea of wagons
and noise.*

Young Dakota men swagger past in white women's bonnets and silk gowns, wristwatches around their ankles.

SARAH V.O. (CONT'D)
*It was heartbreaking and ludicrous
all at once. And sometimes I laughed
until I could scarcely stand.*

A rider tips a bonnet at her. She laughs despite herself.

67 EXT. MDEWAKANTON MIGRATION — AFTERNOON

Heat shimmers. Dust clings. Sarah tips her canteen. Only two drops fall. Her knees buckle, she collapses. Winona appears, arms crossed.

WINONA
Get up.

SARAH
I can't.

Winona hauls her upright.

SARAH (CONT'D)
It feels like we've walked twenty
miles.

WINONA
Try five. And we're doing five more
before nightfall.

Chaska rides up.

WINONA (CONT'D)
She's slowing us down.

CHASKA

You're tired because you're carrying
extra weight.

(beat)

Put the baby in the wagon.

WINONA

You can have her back when we stop.

CHASKA

Mrs. Wakefield. Out here, no one
survives alone.

Tears well. Sarah kisses Nellie's forehead. She lays Nellie
beside the newborn she'd watched come into the world, the
young mother shielding them both as the wagon creaks away.

Sarah steadies herself, falls in behind the wagon. From ahead
— PUCHACHEE — slower, heavier. Sarah's lips echo it, half
resisting, half yielding.

68 EXT. MDEWAKANTON MIGRATION — BY THE STREAM — DUSK

Sarah dips her blistered feet into the cool current. Winona
approaches with strips of milkweed.

WINONA

Let me see.

Sarah hesitates, then lifts her foot. Winona kneels, dabs it
dry, wraps it gently.

WINONA (CONT'D)

Milkweed. It helps.

SARAH

Thank you.

COMOSKA, an older woman, rushes forward, frightened.

COMOSKA

Mniáni kte ^ni.

(Subtitle: *My heart
is bad.*)

SARAH

(pointing to her foot)
It'll be fine. Winona's taken care
of me.

Comoska shakes her head, hands trembling at her throat.

COMOSKA

Doc... tor.

SARAH
 (freezes)
 You've seen my husband?

COMOSKA
 (eyes lower)
 Pa Baksa.

SARAH
 (to Winona)
 What did she say?

The silence stretches.

SARAH (CONT'D)
 Winona. What did she say?

WINONA
 She says... they cut off his head.

Sarah hand flies to her mouth, she gasps. The stream keeps moving, carrying the sound away.

SARAH V.O.
*If hope ended here, waiting would
 drown me. I had to live by walking,
 not by prayer alone.*

Sarah stares at the water, something closing, something hardening.

69 EXT. MDEWAKANTON MIGRATION – MORNING

Camp stirs awake. Cook fires smoke low. Sarah struggles with her pack, determined, not defeated. Winona approaches, tosses Sarah's shoes at her feet.

WINONA
 You can have these back.

SARAH
 You don't want them?

WINONA
 Those? That's not footwear.
 It's punishment in leather.

Sarah forces them on, wincing as the leather bites. She tightens the laces, looks up at Winona.

SARAH
 Thank you but, you've no cause to
 look after me.
 (beat)
 Least of all with any kindness.

Winona steps forward, reaching for her pack.

SARAH (CONT'D)

No. I can carry it.

WINONA

Oh, you're carry it. I only meant to set it straight, sister.

SARAH

(rolling her eyes)

You're not my sister.

WINONA

Come on. We've got a long day ahead.

Sarah stands, steadier than yesterday. A new resolve in the way she shoulders the weight.

70 EXT. MDEWAKANTON MIGRATION – DUSK – FOUR WEEKS LATER

The camp hums under a bleeding dusk. Fires burn low, smoke curling through the valley. Autumn has come – the leaves blaze red and gold where summer was green.

Sarah kneels by a fire, steady now. Her braid neat, her clothes plain but cared for. She pours tea, journal open on her knees. Nearby, LJ darts between lodges, his blue blanket trailing behind him.

SARAH V.O.

The moon had waxed and vanished by then. Time was now measured in dust and silence – in miles walked and fires rekindled.

Sarah's gaze drifts to Old Bets with other ELDERS, crouched around low fires. Pipe glow flickers across lined faces as they murmur soft songs into the smoke.

SARAH V.O. (CONT'D)

The old ones keep their watch – sending their thoughts upward on the smoke.

A sudden SHOUT breaks across the camp. Children chasing a dog between lodges. She exhales as the noise fades.

She turns toward Winona. Little Eagle bursts in, two rabbits swinging from his hands. Winona's face cracks into light. She pulls him close, laughing.

SARAH V.O. (CONT'D)

*Each day they laugh, sing, pray to
the sun – hope still lived among
them, even as each day pressed heavier
than the last.*

A few yards off, Chaska sits beneath a tree, carving. He glances up. Sees Sarah writing. Their eyes meet. A beat. Recognition, quiet and dangerous. Chaska's jaw tightens. The carving disappears into his pocket. The knife glints once and vanishes as the fire dims. Sarah looks down sharply, unsettled.

SARAH V.O. (CONT'D)

*For the space of a breath, I felt
myself belong here and the belonging
frightened me.*

71 EXT. RIDGE POINT – LONE COTTONWOOD – CONTINUOUS

Wind stirs the cottonwood leaves. Winona stands beneath the tree, a tiny dress hanging from a low branch – faded, motionless. She lifts a small bundle of dried sage, tucks it inside the little dress.

Below, Chaska's ranch lies in ruin. Splintered fences, brittle grass, wind-torn emptiness.

Sarah climbs partway up the rise, slowing as she spots Winona kneeling, a thread of sage smoke curling from a shallow bowl beside her. Her palms pressed to the earth, murmuring prayers, her hand drifts to her belly. Her shoulders shake.

The cottonwood stirs. A low whisper as Sarah quietly steps back leaving Winona in peace.

SARAH V.O.

*The smoke carried her sorrow to the
sky, and in that moment I understood
that the world had broken her.
Nothing had prepared me for that.*

A long, aching breath of silence.

SARAH V.O. (CONT'D)

*But the world beyond their fires did
not sleep. And with the dawn... the
war found its voice again –*

72 INT. WARRIOR SOCIETY LODGE – NIGHT

CHIEF LITTLE CROW

Our families are far from here –
safe for a little while.

(MORE)

CHIEF LITTLE CROW (CONT'D)
 But upriver... the Council Fires drift.
 The Wahpeton hesitate. The Upper
 Mdewakanton quarrel among themselves.
 Already some speak of turning back.

The fire crackles – dread.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW (CONT'D)
 If we lose them now... we stand alone.

The tipi flap stirs. A SCOUT slips inside, breathless.

SCOUT
 Sibley's men left Fort Ridgely.
 Wagons... shovels. They're searching
 for their dead.

A ripple moves through the circle.

HAPA
 In the open? With teams and wagons?
 Like sitting ducks in that valley.

Little Crow's gaze rises, slow, deliberate.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW
 Did they make camp?

SCOUT
 Birch Coulee. Low ground. Wagons
 in a ring.

A long breath inside the tipi.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW
 If the Upper Bands need proof... dawn
 will give it. Send runners. Two
 hundred fifty at the coulee before
 first light, no fewer.

Hapa nods grim, certain.

HAPA
 In that ravine, the sun will finish
 what we began.

Cut Nose's eager nod snaps in the firelight, sharp, hungry.
 The flames gutter. The decision made.

73 EXT. BIRCH COULEE – PRE-DAWN

Mist clings to the tall grass. A line of DAKOTA WARRIORS
 move through the reeds, low and fluid. Faces streaked in
 ash. Breath held. Hapa signals – two fingers down.

Cut Nose slips ahead like a shadow.

Below them, in the coulee: A ring of CANVAS TENTS. WAGONS drawn into a crude fort. Fresh graves. A dying fire. Soldiers asleep or shaving in the half-light. Horses stamp, uneasy. A SENTINEL rubs his eyes – his pipe falls to the dirt.

A CRACK from the ridge – the soldier drops.

THE RIDGE ERUPTS. War whoops slice the fog. Muzzle flashes strobe the hills. Bullets hammer the camp. Horses scream, collapsing into heaps – instant barricades. Men dive behind them. Cut Nose charges, rifle smoking. Hapa flings a torch into a wagon – WHUMP – flames blossom.

The burial party scatters. An arrow drops one. Another falls into the grave he'd been digging. Soldiers claw at the dirt with bayonets and tin plates – scraping shallow rifle pits into the hard earth. Gunfire pours down from the tall grass. The ravine becomes a bowl of fire.

HOURS LATER – the assault thins to single, patient shots. A soldier lifts his head. CRACK. Dirt spits beside him.

A distant RUMBLE rolls up the valley. The men freeze, listening. Gunfire. Fort Ridgely has heard them. Then another sound: HORSES. LOTS OF THEM. Through the haze, a RELIEF COLUMN emerges.

Dakota fire snaps once... twice... then dies away. The warriors melt back into the grass, not a single body left. Silence. Only the moans of the wounded.

74 EXT. BIRCH COULEE – AFTERNOON

The smoke has thinned. The ground is still – too still. Sibley rides in with his column. Men cover their mouths with sleeves; the stench of death hangs thick in the heat.

Scorched wagons. Collapsed tents. Survivors sit in small clusters bandaged, hollow, staring at nothing.

LIEUTENANT MARSHALL steps forward, limping, hat in his hands.

LIEUTENANT MARSHALL

Thirteen dead. Forty-seven wounded.
We held till the relief column reached
us.

Sibley takes this quietly. Shame and grief pool beneath his calm.

COL. SIBLEY

I knew some of these men.

Marshall nods, his voice low.

LIEUTENANT MARSHALL

Dawn hit... and so did they. Went straight for the horses. Left us blind. We never saw a single one of them.

Sibley's eyes travel the field looking at dead horses everywhere.

COL. SIBLEY

My God... how many?

LIEUTENANT MARSHALL

All ninety, sir.

He looks over the ruined camp, the wounded, the blown-out wagons, the bare horizon. A long, hollow beat.

COL. SIBLEY

Half our guns won't fire... the horses are gone... and winter at our heels.

Sibley dismounts, boots sinking into the damp earth.

COL. SIBLEY (CONT'D)

I won't lose another man digging graves. Not after this. The next time we ride... we ride to break them.

75 EXT. MDEWAKANTON MIGRATION — RIVERBANK — DAY

Sarah fills a pail at the river's edge. Smoke curls on the horizon. A FIGURE crashes from the brush — mud-streaked, trembling.

SARAH

Nora?

NORA

Sarah? Is that you?

They collide clinging.

SARAH

I didn't know you were here.

Nora pulls back, her face hollow, haunted.

NORA

Cut Nose took me. He says I'm his wife.

(MORE)

NORA (CONT'D)

(whispers)

Every night. Sarah... what if he put
a child in me?

Sarah cups her face gentle, fierce.

SARAH

(softly)

Then you keep breathing. That's how
we survive this.

A distant BOOM rolls across the hills. Nora stiffens.

NORA

They're saying Sibley's going to
burn the villages for Birch Coulee.
And if the men have to run... they
aren't taking captives.

(quiet)

They're going to kill us.

Another BLAST, closer. Two DAKOTA TEENAGERS crest the ridge
with rifles slung, searching, predatory. Nora yanks Sarah
into the grass.

NORA (CONT'D)

We have to run. Now.

Sarah looks toward the camp. LJ's blue blanket flutters on
the line.

SARAH

I... I can't.

The teenagers draw nearer. Sarah rises, steadying the bucket.

SARAH (CONT'D)

You run. I'll draw them off.

Sarah walks toward camp, slow, deliberate. The boys follow
Sarah. Nora hesitates before bolting for the trees.

76 EXT. MDEWAKANTON MIGRATION — NIGHT

The camp lies tense, smoke drifting low. Sarah crouches under
a wagon, Nellie tight to her chest — her eyes on LJ sleeping
the wagon a few yards away. Distant cannon fire thunders,
fading, ominous.

SARAH V.O.

*All day the guns thundered. Then
night came... and silence. No songs.
No victory. Just dread.*

Hoofbeats. The BRAVE HEARTS ride in dust-coated, blood streaked, drunk or hollow. Whiskey circulates. Men mutter, "Pa Baksa... Pa Baksa." A warrior stumbles too close. Sarah freezes. He sways, then veers off. She exhales.

77 EXT. MDEWAKANTON MIGRATION - LATER

Fires crackle low. Most men passed out. Cut Nose drains the last of his whiskey, snarls at the flames then staggers toward Sarah's wagon.

CUT NOSE

Where's my wife?

He lunges under the wagon, grabs Sarah by the wrist, rips her out into the open. Nellie tumbles in the dirt beside her, wailing from the shock.

CUT NOSE (CONT'D)

WHERE IS SHE?!

SARAH

I- I don't know... she saw the boys coming and fled.

He twists her hair, knife flashing to her throat.

CUT NOSE

Then I'll take you.

SARAH

No. Please.

CHASKA HITS HIM FROM BEHIND, slamming him to the ground. Cut Nose thrashes, slashing upward - the blade nicks Chaska's cheek, blood streaking. Chaska twists the knife free, pins him with a knee to the chest, blade at his throat.

CHASKA

Want to lose the rest of that nose?

CUT NOSE

(grunting)

Enough. Let me up!

Winona rushes in, scooping up Nellie, holding her close. Hapa arrives taking in the scene.

HAPA

What's this?

CHASKA

He's drunk.

HAPA
 (to Cut Nose)
 You are a disgrace. Away with you.

Cut Nose stumbles away. Hapa's gaze flicks to Sarah, uneasy.

HAPA (CONT'D)
 (to Chaska)
 Trouble! Tie her with the others.

Chaska steels.

CHASKA
 No.

HAPA
 You dare defy me?

CHASKA
 (beat, steadies himself)
 She's... my wife.

HAPA
 Your wife?

CHASKA
 Winona. Tell him.

A long, brittle moment. Winona looks down at Nellie in her arms.

WINONA
 It's true.

HAPA
 (staring between them)
 Pah! Fine. Keep her in hand or she'll answer to me.

Winona hands Nellie to Sarah. Winona looks back at Sarah as she leaves with Hapa.

CHASKA
 (to Sarah)
 From now on... you stay at my side.

Sarah terrified, nods without hesitation.

SARAH
 You're bleeding.

He goes to wipe it on his sleeve, but she's quicker. She presses her EMBROIDERED HANDKERCHIEF (S.W.) against it, holds the cloth firmly in place.

SARAH (CONT'D)
It'll open again. Keep it.

Chaska closes his fingers around the handkerchief touched, moved. A beat. He looks into her eyes, then turns away.

78 EXT. MDEWAKANTON MIGRATION - LATER

The two teenage guards march Nora past the wagon. She sees Chaska settling in beside Sarah. Sarah's faint, exhausted smile, her hand brushing his arm. Nora eyes widen, then hardening.

NORA
(quiet, to herself)
So this is breathing.

SARAH V.O.
From that night on, I was counted as his wife, and I dared not deny it - I even encouraged it. I would have named myself the evil spirit's bride if it meant saving my life. So I accepted the lie, and with it, the safety it gave.

79 EXT. MDEWAKANTON MIGRATION - MORNING

Nora, wrists bound to a wagon wheel, watches Chaska settle Nellie into a woven basket. Her stare cuts in with jealousy, disbelief.

A shout. LJ barrels in. Sarah turns. Joy cracks through exhaustion.

SARAH
LJ! My baby!

LJ
I'm *not* a baby!

She swoops him up.

SARAH
Yes. I see. You have grown.

He wiggles free, holding up a small carved horse.

LJ
Look, Momma. It's Cobalt!

Chaska shrugs, almost sheepish.

CHASKA

He missed his soldier. Carving horses
comes easier to me.

LJ

Can I go back now?

SARAH

No. You're staying with me.

LJ

(pouts)

I don't want to. I want Mitten.

Winona steps forward with a tiny black kitten.

WINONA

Mitten.

LJ clutches it. Sarah shoots Winona a look.

SARAH

A kitten, Winona? Truly?

WINONA

A sister does what she can.

SARAH

(smiles, faint)

I told you. You're not my sister.

Chaska helps Sarah into the wagon. He climbs in beside her
as it rolls forward, prairie wind rushing past. A long, quiet
moment.

IN THE WAGON — CONTINUOUS

SARAH (CONT'D)

I saw Winona under the cottonwood on
the ridge. She tucked sage into a
little dress.

Chaska's expression shifts, reverent, private.

CHASKA

That tree is a bridge between worlds
where prayers rise and the ancestors
listen.

(beat)

That dress... those are prayers made
visible.

A faint stir of wind moves the branches in distant cottonwoods
— though the air around them stays still.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

When the wind rises in a still place...
the spirits are near.

A HAWK settles in a high limb.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

And when a bird takes the high limb
— that's a messenger.

Sarah absorbs this with awe and something like ache.

SARAH

That tree. It felt alive. Like
someone was keeping it, watching
over it.

Chaska's eyes lift toward the trees as the wagon creaks on.

CHASKA

Our ancestors. The ones who walked
before us. They carry what the living
can not.

SARAH

I've never heard anything said so
plainly... and still feel the truth of
it.

Chaska glances at her something unguarded.

CHASKA

You turn a fine phrase yourself,
Mrs. Wakefield.

She startles. Heat rising, a crack in her composure.

SARAH

You... you've been reading my journal?

CHASKA

I needed to know your mind.

Sarah flushes, embarrassed, drawn, conflicted.

SARAH

It's only notes.

CHASKA

It's much more. You write with heart,
beneath a thing. You could set your
writing to a book. Like that Stowe
woman did.

SARAH
You've read Uncle Tom's Cabin?

CHASKA
*"The power of truth is greater than
all things."*

Sarah touches her journal, quietly struck, troubled.

SARAH
It was my desire once, to write
stories. John said it was
impractical. He would say that the
world had troubles enough without me
giving voice to them.

Chaska studies her closely.

CHASKA
Men call things impractical when
they fear what it can stir.

Something in Sarah breaks open. Fear, longing, recognition.
She meets his gaze, shaken.

CHASKA (CONT'D)
If the words come... don't silence
them for another's comfort.

She inhales. Her hand grazes his forearm, a mistake she
doesn't withdraw from.

SARAH
If... you wish it... you may call me
Sarah.

CHASKA
(hesitates, then)
Sarah.

She turns her face into the wind, breath tight, shaken by
what she's allowed.

SARAH V.O.
*He had saved me once more, and
something in me leaned toward him –
not out of fear, and not yet desire,
but from a place I had never allowed
to wake. And when he spoke my name,
I felt myself change.*

The wagon rolls on. Something new, unspoken, irreversible
between them.

80 EXT. MDEWAKANTON MIGRATION — EVENING

Chaska watches Sarah stir a pot over the fire. She tastes it, winces.

SARAH
Not... terrible.

She hands him a bowl, he chews, grimaces.

CHASKA
Mmm. Boot stew.

SARAH
Boot?

He whistles; a dog comes, sniffs the bowl, then walks off. Sarah and Chaska crack up. A few yards away, Nora gathers firewood, each burst of their laughter catching her like a thorn.

NORA
(under her breath)
Shameless.

Sarah returns to the pot, Chaska leans back, bowl in hand.

CHASKA
Don't take offense.
(smiles)
You're talent's in the ink pot, not
the cook pot.

She swats his arm, light, playful... then grows quieter.

SARAH
I once sent a story to the Gazette.
They printed it. I never felt so
alive.

She stirs the pot slower.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Then the editor wrote back. Said no
more stories. Folks wanted comfort
from women, not the storms I'd stirred
up.

CHASKA
What kind of storms?

SARAH
Henry Lott.

Chaska stills. Jaw tightens.

SARAH (CONT'D)

He claimed that old Dakota man drowned his son. I found out that it was a lie. The boy stole the man's horses. And when he tried to flee he fell into the river.

(beat)

Lott killed the man for vengeance. The wife too. Everyone knew it but the court let him go free.

She swallows.

SARAH (CONT'D)

When John learned I'd written it... he was furious. Said I had no business stirring men's quarrels - that the only place my voice belonged was our home.

(soft)

It didn't matter. So I stopped writing. At least under my own name.

The fires cracks between them. A long silence.

CHASKA

That old man? He was my father.

Sarah freezes. Chaska stares into the flames.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

He was the keeper of the Cottonwood on Ridge Point, above our ranch in the valley.

(heavy breath)

Lott killed him but he also cut the root that held my people to that place. When a keeper falls... we lose more than a man. We lose the stories he carried.

Chaska bows his head in sorrow.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

That day... Winona lost a child she was carrying.

SARAH

(whispers)

Winona...

CHASKA

She stitched that tiny dress, tied it to the Cottonwood so her little

(MORE)

CHASKA (CONT'D)
 one would not wander alone... for the
 old ones to see her spirit and take
 her in.

The wind stirs the grass. Chaska looks up.

CHASKA (CONT'D)
 Your story did matter, Sarah.
 (beat, measured)
 When the land agent read it, he rode
 out. Put the deed in my hand. Said
 he couldn't bring my father back but
 he could set one thing right.

A slow breath.

CHASKA (CONT'D)
 He gave me more than he ever realized
 — my father's duty to protect the
 Cottonwood, the place where the
 spirits of our ancestors reside.

SARAH
 I am at a loss for words.

Sarah glances around, unsettled. A slow realization taking hold.

SARAH (CONT'D)
 John. It wasn't about stirring up
 men's quarrels... it was Ridge Point
 Valley. He wanted that land.
 (trembling swallow.)
 If Lott had been convicted... your
 father would have stood as the wronged
 man. And the valley would have been
 passed to you.
 (voice breaks.)
 John sat on that jury.

A long, shattering silence as she pieces it together in real time.

SARAH (CONT'D)
 If Lott walked free... then blame stayed
 on your father. And once blame
 settled there... the valley would be
 open for taking. John knew that.
 He also knew that Lott would owe him
 if he made it happen.

She can barely look at Chaska.

SARAH (CONT'D)

With everyone gone, the land would
be his.

CHASKA

Winona was right. I should've fought.
If I had... maybe she'd have been with
me at the ranch. Maybe I wouldn't
have been on the road that day.

Firelight flickers over the grief in his face.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

God's going to punish me.

SARAH

For what?

In the shadows, Nora crouches, closer, listening.

CHASKA

(swallows hard)
Gleason.

SARAH

Gleason?

CHASKA

He was only offering us whiskey.
And because of me... he's dead.
(voice breaking)
I... I killed Mr. Gleason.

Sarah grips his sleeve, urgent.

SARAH

Don't say that. Never. Not to
anyone.

A twig snaps. Nora slips back into the dark, shaken.

SARAH (CONT'D)

We both know who did it.

CHASKA

He died because I didn't stop it.

SARAH

Oh Chaska. You know better than I
that no one stops Hapa.

EXT. WOOD LAKE — PREDAWN

A thin mist clings to the valley — gray, breathless.

Sibley stands alone on a low ridge, coat drawn tight, eyes on the vacant horizon. Below him tents sagging, men stirring from a hungry sleep, cannons half-shrouded beneath wet canvas.

Whipple approaches, his breath white in the cold.

A lone RIDER picks his way up the slope, hands Sibley a folded dispatch. Sibley opens it. Reads. His jaw tightens.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Bad news?

COL. SIBLEY

Scouts spotted a white flag yesterday.
Do you believe it?

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Men don't raise a white cloth lightly.

COL. SIBLEY

A parley would be a mercy... if it's honest.

(beat)

The papers are calling me a coward.
Say I should go after them.

Sibley studies the fog, the emptiness that feels anything but.

COL. SIBLEY (CONT'D)

If I march blind into that valley,
they'll praise my bravery and curse
my judgment at the graves.

A distant horse whinnies. Whipple follows Sibley's gaze.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Seems peaceful enough.

COL. SIBLEY

Peaceful's the word they use before
the trap closes.

He steps forward, eyes narrowing into the mist.

COL. SIBLEY (CONT'D)

One way or another... this ends soon.

The wind lifts. Canvas flaps.

81 INT. WARRIOR SOCIETY LODGE — NIGHT

Firelight dances on hide walls. Little Crow sits at the center, eyes hollow in the flame's glow. Hapa paces like a caged animal. Cut Nose sharpens a blade, slow and deliberate.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW
 Our scouts watched Sibley's line.
 The big guns are with him.
 (beat)
 He's close.

HAPA
 Seven hundred stand ready.
 Mdewakanton, Wahpekute, Wahpeton.
 All who can lift a rifle.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW
 Against iron mouths that bite before
 a man hears the blast?

Hapa stops pacing, fierce, decisive.

HAPA
 We don't face them head on. We send
 a runner with a white cloth. Say
 we'll trade the captives at Wood
 Lake for clemency.
 (beat)
 Sibley's scouts will see it. And
 while he weighs our honesty, we'll
 already be in the grasses.

Cut Nose pauses sharpening, lifts his head.

CUT NOSE
 He'll smell a trick.

HAPA
 Good. While he stalls for witnesses
 and paper. Eight hundred of us will
 have them surrounded.

A charged silence.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW
 And if we fail? Then what? Run?

Cut Nose drags a finger across his throat.

CUT NOSE
 Not before the captives die.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW
 No. If it comes to that we lay down
 our rifles. Give them the captives.
 Beg for whatever scraps they offer.
 Live to see another winter.

CUT NOSE

(snarl)
I don't beg.

HAPA

And I don't run.

The fire pops. Little Crow stares into it, a long, defeated breath.

CHIEF LITTLE CROW

Then I will lead. May Wakan Tanka
guide us... and forgive us if he cannot.

82 EXT. WOOD LAKE BATTLEFIELD — PREDAWN

Mist hangs low, muffling the prairie. PRIVATE MCGRAW and PRIVATE HARRIS push through tall, wet grass, ration sacks slung over their shoulders, empty and limp.

PRIVATE HARRIS

We shouldn't be out here. Col.
Sibley said no foraging.

PRIVATE MCGRAW

Then he should feed us. I'm tired
of waiting. A man can't live on an
empty belly.

TWIG SNAP. Both men freeze. A shape rises ahead — slow, silent, uncanny. Cut Nose, prairie grass braided into his headband, face streaked with ash, erupts from the earth as if the land itself has come alive.

His war club swings. WHACK. Harris drops instantly. McGraw stumbles back. THWIP. An arrow punches into his chest. He collapses.

All along the ravine, Brave Hearts rise from the grass. A hidden army revealing itself in a single breath.

HAPA

NOT YET! We're not in position.
STAND DOWN!

But it's too late. A war cry rips through the mist. Musket fire explodes from the grasses. The ambush ignites.

83 EXT. WOOD LAKE BATTLEFIELD — CONTINUOUS

A THUNDER of gunfire rolls across the valley. The encampment erupts. TENTS burst open as SIXTEEN HUNDRED SOLDIERS spill out — half-dressed, grabbing rifles, stumbling into lines.

Sibley strides through the chaos, coat whipping in the wind – the only still point in the storm.

COL. SIBLEY

To your lines! Hold steady. Hold steady!

Men rally, pulling the 12-pound Napoleon cannon into position. Boots slip in mud. Hands fumble. The fuse is lit. BOOM.

The cannon ROARS. Earth and Brave Hearts erupt into the air beyond the perimeter, bodies and dirt scattering in a violent plume.

On a distant ridge, Little Crow arrives with his men. Confusion turning to horror. He raises his rifle overhead. A desperate signal. A CHARGE. In the camp, Sibley spots the movement.

COL. SIBLEY (CONT'D)

(to Marshall)

Flank 'em! Five hundred forward, go!

MARSHALL peels off, rallying men into formation. Drummers pound a frantic beat. Smoke thickens, rolling low over the grass as the battle surges toward open field. Smoke eats the field. Muskets crack. Men vanish into the haze as the lines collide.

84 EXT. WOOD LAKE BATTLEFIELD – LATE DAY

Smoke rolls low across a field of bodies. The prairie burns in slow breaths. Little Crow stands amid the wreckage, hollow-eyed. He lifts his rifle, a silent, beaten signal. Retreat. He turns, vanishing into the trees. Warriors slip after him like fading shadows.

Through the haze, Cut Nose breaks away with a knot of surviving men, angling toward the captive camp.

Hapa does not follow. He stands alone in the grass, blood darkening his side, watching his kinsmen go, breath shallow. Wind rustles the prairie.

HAPA

Let the wind tell them I didn't run.

A distant cannon thunders. BOOM. The blast drops him to one knee. He drives his fist into the torn soil, defiant, then sinks forward, hand buried in the earth he fought to keep.

Ash drifts through the still air.

Hapa's hand stays clenched in the dirt. Even in death refusing to release the land. Beyond him, fallen BRAVE HEARTS lie half-hidden in the grass. Prairie flowers woven in their head bands trembling in the faint breeze... then settling still. Silence.

85 EXT. MDEWAKANTON MIGRATION – DAY

Smoke drifts through the ruined camp. Fires cold. Shelters collapsed. A dead stillness over everything.

From the haze, Cut Nose appears with his rifle raised. A handful of exhausted Brave Hearts following.

Beneath a splintered wagon, Sarah clutches Nellie and LJ. Nora trembles beside them, a small blade shaking in her hand. Nora presses her fist to her mouth. She tries to hold in a sob. FAILS. A tiny gasp escapes.

Cut Nose's head snaps toward the sound. He strides to the wagon. Chaska steps out of the smoke, musket leveled, steady, unshaken.

CHASKA

Don't make this worse.

Cut Nose freezes. A beat. Weight shifting, deciding. His men turn and run. A CLICK behind him. Winona stands, rifle trained on his spine. His eyes harden. One last ember fighting to live. The sound of approaching soldiers grows louder. His fingers tighten on the trigger, then loosen. He throws down his rifle, Winona kicks it aside. Cut Nose raises empty hands, the fire gone from his eyes.

86 EXT. MDEWAKANTON MIGRATION – MOMENTS LATER

The trees erupt with the arrival of SIBLEY'S COLUMN – snare drums, flags snapping, bayonets flashing. Soldiers flood the clearing in a wave of blue and steel. The captives break from hiding. Sobs, laughter, women collapsing into soldiers' arms.

Sarah gathers her children tight, tears streaking her face. Nora lingers apart, scanning the soldiers, no one meets her eyes.

Chaska stands with Winona at the edge of the clearing. Sarah turns to them.

SARAH

This is chaos. You should go.

CHASKA

If I run, I'll look guilty.

WINONA

Chaska. They will arrest first, ask later.

CHASKA

I've done nothing wrong. You go. Get Old Bets and Little Eagle to the Sissetons where they'll be safe. When my name's cleared, I'll meet you there.

The soldiers draw closer. Winona turns to Sarah.

WINONA

Promise me you'll protect him.

SARAH

Always.

They clasp hands, a fierce, brief bond, then Winona runs. Sarah turns to Chaska, hugs him.

SARAH (CONT'D)

I owe you more than I can ever say.

CHASKA

It's me who owes you now.

He pulls back, a breath between them.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

In case I don't see you again...

He kisses her, deep and sudden. Sarah freezes, fingers rising to her lips.

A voice slices through the clearing. Ragged, hollow.

JOHN (O.S.)

Sarah?

Sarah turns to see John standing a few paces away. Mud-smearred, half-starved, trembling. But his eyes... his eyes are awake in a way that is not relief. He looks at his wife. Her tunic, her braid, Nellie wrapped at her back with Mitten peaking out the side. Then at Chaska.

The world around them — soldiers, captives, smoke, noise — seems to fall away. Just the three of them remain. John tries to speak, can't, then hoarse with hurt.

JOHN (CONT'D)

I searched every road... every list of the dead... For six weeks I prayed you were among the living.

(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)

(beat)

And here you stand. With him.

He looks at Chaska. Chaska holds John's gaze. Not challenging, not ashamed, simply present.

Sarah steps toward John, guilt, yes... but also with a dawning clarity. She turns back briefly, just for a breath, toward Chaska. They both know. The truth they shared cannot be explained to this man.

SARAH

(awkward)

John. This is... Chaska.

Chaska steps forward extending his hand. Not submissive, not defiant.

CHASKA

You don't have to worry. She's unharmed.

John hesitates before he takes Chaska's hand. Polite on the surface but his grip tightens, too tight. He pulls Chaska in.

JOHN

(whispers)

Touch her again. I'll end you.

Chaska holds his gaze.

CHASKA

What you think you saw... was a goodbye. Not a betrayal.

John's jaw tightens, the air thick between them.

BISHOP WHIPPLE (O.S.)

Sarah!

Whipple bursts through the soldiers, breathless, face breaking open with relief.

BISHOP WHIPPLE (CONT'D)

Thank the Lord. You're alive.

LJ tugs on John's coat.

LJ

Papa! Look. Chaska made Cobalt!

John looks at the carved horse.

JOHN
 (flat, tight)
 How... thoughtful.

His eyes cut to Chaska, territorial, calculating. Whipple notices Nora standing alone, arms wrapped tight around herself. He releases Sarah gently, moves toward the her. John scoops LJ up, gaze never leaving Chaska.

JOHN (CONT'D)
 Come Sarah. Let's get you home into something proper.

SARAH
 In a minute. I promised to speak to Colonel Sibley on behalf of Chaska.

A tiny crack in John's jaw.

JOHN
 The Colonel's got bloodier business than one man's name.

CHASKA
 Go. You'll keep your promise. When you can.

John turns with LJ. The carved horse falls from LJ's hands in the dirt. Sarah lingers, torn, she looks at Chaska.

SARAH
 Then this is good-bye.

CHASKA
 For now. But the story doesn't end here. You saw what others would not. Promise me you won't quiet your words for them.

SARAH
 I promise.

Sarah steps into the moving crowd swallowed by uniforms, smoke, noise. Her eyes lift with new resolve. Behind her, barely visible in the haze, Chaska watches, silent, steady.

87 EXT. MANKATO DANCE FLOOR — EVENING

Lanterns sway above a crowded wooden dance floor, their light flickering across freshly hung bunting and a long canvas banner stretched between two posts.

CONGRATULATIONS MAYOR WAKEFIELD

At the far end of the square, a half-empty table overflows with pie tins and cider, campaign flyers curled at the edges.

Sarah, radiant in a tailored gown, stands with a small cluster of WOMEN leaned in close. She's slightly trembling as she holds a worn Harper's Weekly Magazine in her grip. Her voice falters as she reads aloud.

SARAH (CONT'D)

(quoting)

I once stepped over a small leather pouch without seeing it. Their anger was sudden – sharp as a whip. Only later did I learn it was medicine – sacred. I begged their pardon and I never forgot how easily ignorance becomes insult.

She lowers the page a fraction. A small swallow she hopes no one notices. The women exchange glances in admiration. A voice slices through – brittle, controlled, wine-softened.

NORA

Sharing our humiliation with the whole world, I see.

The circle tightens. Sarah turns, calm but alert.

SARAH

It's only the story of my captivity, Nora. Nothing more.

NORA

Your version of it.

WOMAN 1

Nora. Please.

Nora gives her a dry, deadpan look, then fixes on Sarah.

NORA

Not all of us came home to applause.

The women fidget. Nora turns away, leaves.

WOMAN 1

Poor thing. Her fiancé broke it off you know.

Sarah watches Nora go. Compassion mixed with guilt.

SARAH

It's not the wound that ruins you.

(beat)

It's how people turn away afterward.

Silence. No one knows where to look. Sarah lifts her eyes across the lantern-lit crowd to where John stands with Sibley and Whipple, deep in conversation.

88 EXT. MANKATO DANCE FLOOR – CONTINUOUS

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Why is Crooks treating participation
in battles as a hanging offense?

COL. SIBLEY

Pope ordered speed. I set the
commission. Crooks drives the docket.

(weary)

People want swift justice. We'll
settle the rulings later.

John stays tight, watching the crowd – lanterns, faces, the murmuring tide of fear.

JOHN

(quiet)

Every survivor I treat talks about
the family they lost. Children.
Wives.

(a beat)

It gets into your bones.

COL. SIBLEY

We're doing this by the book.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

The book. You're charging people
without even establishing if they
were there.

COL. SIBLEY

Pope wants this done before Christmas.

(beat)

The warrants need Lincoln's signature
before winter. We push now so he
has the transcripts by November.

John absorbs this. The scale, the urgency, the pressure. Something inside him hardens.

JOHN

At this point... as far as I'm
concerned, they're all guilty.
Someone points them out... hang them.

Sibley exhales, worn but resolute. Whipple studies him disappointment settling in.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

So I see.
 (pause)
 Not justice — a deadline.

A thick silence settles between them.

89 EXT. MANKATO DANCE FLOOR — CONTINUOUS

A metallic BANG. Smith, on a wooden stage, bangs the back of a pot. The crowd hushes. Sarah threads through the people, arriving near John.

SMITH

Folks! Your attention! Tonight we honor the man who kept Mankato standing. A man who worked through smoke, blood, famine and never gave up on us.

Applause swells. Smith gestures John upward.

SMITH (CONT'D)

Our new mayor. Doctor John Wakefield!

John steps onto the stage. Cheers erupt.

JOHN

Thank you. I became a doctor to save lives, and your mayor to protect them.

The crowd hums approval.

JOHN (CONT'D)

More arrests will be made across the river and through the settlements. Every man who took up arms will be found. As my first act as mayor, we're expanding the holding compound. More guards. More space. We'll see justice served for these atrocities.

The crowd roars. Smith clasps John's arm. Whipple doesn't clap.

90 EXT. MANKATO DANCE FLOOR — LATER

Music drifts softly through the lantern light. John and Sarah move in slow circles among the couples.

JOHN

It's bad enough you went behind my back but reading it here? At my celebration?

SARAH

I didn't go looking to write it,
John... but it wouldn't leave me alone.
It was only a draft. I never thought
they'd actually print it.

JOHN

Eight hundred dead. Families
butchered, torn apart. Did you write
that in your story?

SARAH

I didn't have to. The Gazette prints
the carnage daily.

A tight silence as they dance, smiling stiffly at other
couples.

JOHN

I almost pity Crooks. Listening to
those horrors day after day.

SARAH

Horror doesn't excuse hanging the
wrong man.

JOHN

You think they're all blameless?
Go. Sit in that courtroom. Hear
what I saw. See if you still think
like that.

SARAH

I know they're not all monsters.

A flicker crosses his face, something sharp and unguarded,
gone as fast as it came. His expression darkens. He stops
dancing.

JOHN

Mind what you say. Talk like that,
and they'll say you stand with the
wrong side.

Sarah's composure breaks. She pulls her hand gently from
his. He reaches to take it back. She steps away.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Not now. Not here.

SARAH

Then where, John?

Music, couples swirl around them pretending not to hear.
Across the floor, Whipple watches.

A brief, troubled glance before he looks away.

91 EXT. RIDGE POINT VALLEY - DUSK

Smoke drifts low as soldiers and volunteers drive Dakota families along a narrow wagon road. Women clutch children, elders stumble in the cold. John rides with the column in a military coat, posture rigid. A SOLDIER hauls an old man, a Cut Hair, WAHPE, from the brush.

SOLDIER

Says he was a farmer. Never fought.

JOHN

(flat)

That's what they all say. Bring him in.

The column crests a rise. Below them, CAMP RELEASE sprawls across the river flats. A massive raw stockade holding more than 1,700 Dakota people. Timber walls sag. Thin smoke curls from scattered fires. The yard is packed shoulder-to-shoulder: hunger, cold, exhaustion.

John rides down into the mud churned by soldiers' boots and the bare feet of the imprisoned absorbing the scale of it, jaw tightening as the gates loom ahead.

92 EXT. RIDGE POINT VALLEY - CAMP RELEASE - DAY

Inside the fence, Old Bets huddles beneath a torn blanket, shivering. Outside the fence, Chaska kneels, slides small pieces of bannock through a narrow slat. Old Bets takes the food with trembling hands. A GUARD approaches.

GUARD

Hey you! Step back from that fence.

Chaska steps back. The guard moves on. At the wagon gate, Little Eagle, frightened but trying to stay composed, is pushed inside with new arrivals. SOLDIER points him out:

SOLDIER

That boy. He was spotted near Jones's place.

The SOLDIER's eyes tighten, barks an order.

SOLDIER (CONT'D)

Move him to the Mankato Stockade.

Little Eagle freezes, then bolts, gets lost in the crowd. He spots Chaska outside the fence waving. Chaska drops into a crouch, checking the line of sight. No guards looking.

He hooks his fingers beneath a bowed fence board, pulls it outward just enough. Little Eagle drops, slides under the fence, disappears into the brush. The board settles back. John rides up just as it does.

JOHN

What's your business there?

Chaska rises, turns, steady, respectful.

CHASKA

Uncí is hungry.

John is caught off guard at the sight of Chaska. His gaze sweeps the camp — cold, hunger, crushing misery. A flicker of doubt cuts through him, his hand tightens on the reins, then he forces it down, shoulders squaring, jaw locking, eyes hardening.

JOHN

Next time, I won't be asking.

An iron gate CLANKS shut behind a column of prisoners.

SMITH (O.S.)

Another hundred on the way from Yellow
Medicine.

John looks back at Smith, then back toward Chaska. Chaska is gone.

93 INT. MANKATO COURTHOUSE — DAY

The cramped room hums with tension. Through the lone window, the gallows looms half-finished. Fresh timber rising with each hammer strike, as if the structure is assembling itself.

COLONEL CROOKS and four MILITARY COMMISSIONERS sit like stones.

At a side table, FORBES, the court clerk, scratches hurried notes, flipping blotched pages as he struggles to keep up with MAJOR HEARD, the JUDGE'S ADVOCATE. Ink drips from his quill. He wipes his wrist across his cheek without noticing, smearing a dark stroke across his face as he writes on.

Whipple leans toward Sarah beside him, writing neatly in her journal.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Look at him. Forbes can't keep a
full line straight. Half a name... a
mark... then another case.

SARAH
 (shakes her head)
 One name. One line of notes.
 Then the gavel. Guilty.

A GUARD ushers in ROUND WIND, shackled. Behind him, a column of Dakota prisoners waits, today's docket, a dozen or more. Men tried before him stand slumped, already sentenced, off to the side.

HEARD
 Case one-five-one. Tatamina - Round
 Wind. Charged with fighting at Wood
 Lake by his own admission.

Round Wind blinks, confused.

FORBES
 Sir. His name again? Slower, if
 you please.

Heard ignores him.

HEARD
 (pantomiming a rifle)
 You? You fight?

He points at Round Wind, miming a raised rifle. Round Wind nods gently, polite, unsure, trying to help rather than contradict.

HEARD (CONT'D)
 There. He acknowledged it.

CROOKS
 Guilty. Sentenced to hang.

ROUND WIND
 Wi-yaka-kte-shni! Wi-yakapi-echun
 shni!
 (Subtitle: I didn't
 kill anyone!)

Crooks ignores him.

CROOKS
 Better one too many than one too
 few.

Whipple's jaw tightens. Before the echo dies, Cut Nose is dragged forward - larger, defiant, shackled.

HEARD
 Case one-five-two.
 (MORE)

HEARD (CONT'D)
 Wakanozhan – Cut Nose. Murder of
 thirty-three civilians. Rape.

Sarah goes rigid, breath catching, pencil slipping from her fingers. She doesn't reach for it. Whipple notices her freeze.

The court calls JUSTINA SWARTZ, a pale girl of sixteen.

HEARD (CONT'D)
 Do you swear to tell the truth?

JUSTINA
 Yes, sir.

CROOKS
 Tell us what you saw.

JUSTINA
 We were working in the field. Ten
 of them rode in. My father offered
 water. He reached to shake that
 man's hand.

She points to Cut Nose, finger trembling.

JUSTINA (CONT'D)
 He pulled Poppa into his knife. We
 ran. I carried my baby brother –
 (voice shaking)
 He tore him from my arms. Smashed
 his head against a tree till he
 Stopped crying. Then he just threw
 him aside like nothing.

She covers her mouth, trembling.

JUSTINA (CONT'D)
 He grabbed me. By my hair. Dragged
 me. Pulled my skirt up.

Her voice collapses. Silence. Hammering outside.

CUT NOSE
 SHE LIES!

Crooks slams his gavel. Sarah's hand tightens on her journal, her chair scrapes.

SARAH
 Excuse me.

She stumbles for the door. It thuds shut behind her.

CROOKS

No need to continue Miss Swartz.
You said something about his thumb?

JUSTINA

My older brother bit it off trying
to stop him.

The Guard yanks back Cut Nose's sleeve, the stump gleams.

CROOKS

That's sufficient.
(to the commissioners)
Agreed?

They nod without looking.

CROOKS (CONT'D)

Guilty. Sentenced to hang.

94 EXT. MANKATO COURTHOUSE — LANE — MOMENTS LATER

Sarah leans against a fence, pale, wiping vomit from her mouth.
Whipple approaches quietly.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

You alright?

SARAH

How could anyone be after that.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Cut Nose. Imagine surviving him.

SARAH

I thought I could do this. I was
wrong.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

What he did was wicked beyond telling.
But God help us — punishing him won't
cleanse what's happening to others
in there.

Sarah closes her eyes, still shaking. Whipple glances toward
the courthouse then the gallows.

BISHOP WHIPPLE (CONT'D)

That boy. They condemned him for
nodding.

Whipple begins pacing, controlled fury barely held.

BISHOP WHIPPLE (CONT'D)

They've tried a hundred and fifty men in barely three weeks. Each case, ten minutes. Interpreters? None.

(beat)

And Forbes. He's keeping records by nicknames, half a name, barely a line determining a man's life. This court isn't seeking truth. It's clearing the docket.

Sarah's breath trembles. Something in her hardening.

BISHOP WHIPPLE (CONT'D)

I need you in there.

SARAH

Me? No. Why?

BISHOP WHIPPLE

You know both sides. If you don't write it, injustice will be buried.

The hammering grows louder – relentless, inescapable.

SARAH

If I write about it... they'll call it treason. And John...

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Didn't you promise someone you wouldn't quiet your words just to keep others comfortable?

A long trembling breath. She swallows. Looks toward the courthouse – hammering continues unbroken.

SARAH

(slowly nods, resigned)

I'll begin with their full names.

95 EXT. RIDGE POINT VALLEY – CAMP RELEASE – NIGHT

The fence sags in the dark. Chaska slips to the loosened board, lifts it just enough to open a narrow gap. Inside, Old Bets lies curled beneath a torn blanket.

CHASKA

(whispers)

Uncí...

Her eyes open – dull, but alive.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

Híyáy, ápayá wayáa ye. Lilá ihdó.
*(Subtitle: Come. On
 your belly. Slow.)*

She inches toward him, wincing. He reaches through, pulls her out. She folds into him. Exhausted. He steadies her quickly, careful not to be seen.

OLD BETS

Hatémái, háka. Iyáye waí kté ni héhanu.

*(Subtitle: My heart
 is relieved. I didn't
 think anyone would
 come.)*

CHASKA

Heháкта, uní.
*(Subtitle: It's all
 right now,
 grandmother.)*

A few yards off, Winona and Little Eagle rise from the reeds, tense, waiting. Little Eagle clutches a blanket. Winona wraps it around Old Bets, her hands shaking. She steadies Old Bets, then glances at Chaska fear tightening her jaw. She knows what this risk could cost. Without a word, they slip into the darkness before the guards circle back.

96 INT. MANKATO COURTHOUSE — DAY

Through the lone window, soldiers hoist the gallows CROSSBEAMS into place — now nearly complete.

At the bench, the commissioners slump in their chairs, bored, barely listening. Forbes flips through his blotched notes, pages smeared, torn.

Whipple sits beside Sarah as she flips open her journal, pages thick with dates, names, tally marks. Her pencil moves quickly.

OCTOBER 15 TO DATE: 260 HEARINGS — 200 CONVICTIONS.

Wahpe, weathered, calm, stands before the commissioners, hat in hand.

Sarah jots — CASE NO. 260. WAHPE TANKA.

WAHPE

My relatives came to me starving. I gave them food. That is our way — to honor life.

Sarah shoots a look at Whipple. Crooks doesn't lift his. A commissioner yawns. Forbes' pen scratches impatiently. Sarah writes, faster, urgent.

SARAH V.O.

*Condemned men herded in like cattle.
Verdicts written before a man can
breathe.*

THE GAVEL SLAMS! Crooks doesn't even look up.

CROOKS

Aiding enemy combatants. Condemned
to hang.

HEARD

Next. Case Two hundred sixty-one.
(squinting)
Tah-wa-he-chank... Chaska.

Sarah's head snaps up. She looks back at prisoners. Several men look up. Whipple pats her hand.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

A common Dakota name. It means
"firstborn son."

Crooks leans back irritated.

CROOKS

Chaska again? Is there anyone here
not named Chaska?

A smattering of cruel laughter from the gallery. Sarah writes jaw tight, pencil gouging the page.

SARAH (V.O.)

*Court a mockery. Names repeated.
Faces lost.*

97 EXT. MANKATO COURTHOUSE — DAY

Sarah hurries to the courthouse, journal in hand.

CHASKA

Sarah.

She stops, startled, relief and worry colliding.

SARAH

Chaska... is everything all right?

He steps close enough to speak without being overheard

CHASKA

They've arrested the Sissetons, and
now the Cut Hairs. Taking men for
nothing. I heard my name this
morning.

Voices spill from the courthouse steps. Sarah steps back.

SARAH

You shouldn't be seen talking to me.

She touches his arm, brief, impulsive.

SARAH (CONT'D)

It was someone else named Chaska.
I'm there every day. If they do
arrest you, I'll know. You won't
stand there alone.

He exhales, relief tangled with fear. His eyes move to the
journal tucked under her arm.

CHASKA

You're writing.

SARAH

Trying to keep them honest.

CHASKA

(smiles faintly)
I miss your stories.

SARAH

And I miss being heard.

98 EXT. MANKATO COURTHOUSE — CONTINUOUS

Across the street, John rounds the corner — stops cold. From
his vantage, Sarah and Chaska stand too close. Her fingers
graze his arm, a fleeting, instinctive gesture.

John's fists ball. Nora steps beside him, watching with sharp
eyes. She leans in, a quiet blade of a whisper. She steps
back.

NORA

I'd testify to that.

John's fists loosen. A slow creeping realization settles in.
Nora tilts her head, nodding, her smile cold, triumphant.

99 EXT. RIDGE POINT — DAY

John sits mounted on the ridge, looking down at Chaska's ranch
— thin smoke from the chimney, horses moving lazily in the

corral. A group of SOLDIERS behind him. Smith beside him, smug, gesturing at the land.

SMITH

Fine place. Shame to see it go to such waste.

(beat)

Folks in town are talking. Saying your wife wasn't alone yesterday.

John's eyes stay fixed on Chaska's ranch. His jaw sets like a vise, the muscle ticking once.

SMITH (CONT'D)

You clear this out... people stop talking.

A long, loaded moment. John turns — slow, the way a man turns when he's deciding exactly how dangerous he intends to be. The soldiers behind them stiffen, hands drifting toward rifles.

JOHN

Careful, Smith.

Quiet. Dead-flat. Not a threat, a verdict. John looks back down at the peaceful ranch, the horses moving through the grass as if nothing in the world is about to break.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Move out.

They descend the ridge.

100 EXT. RIDGE POINT VALLEY — CHASKA'S RANCH — DAY

Chaska steps into the yard as the riders approach, cautious but unafraid. John dismounts, posture controlled, official.

JOHN

Chaska. By order of the military commission you're under arrest.

CHASKA

For what?

JOHN

Murder.

CHASKA

Who?

The official charge will be read in the courtroom. Smith watches with quiet satisfaction. Two soldiers move in binding Chaska's wrists. The rope bites deep, but he holds himself steady.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

You have the wrong Chaska.

John's jaw tightens before he turns away.

JOHN

A description was given by a witness.

The soldiers lead Chaska away as John rides on, face hard, eyes fixed forward.

101 INT. WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD - EVENING

Sarah adjusts the ribbon on her dress in the mirror.

SARAH

What matter is so pressing it requires a dinner?

In the other room, John searches for a tie, tense, distracted.

JOHN O.S.

Can't say. But when the Governor calls on a man... it's rarely trivial.

He enters. His eyes travel over her. Admiration settling into a quiet claim. He steps close, brushes her shoulder, kisses the base of her neck, gentle but asserting possession.

JOHN

You look perfect.
(beat, a shift)
And Sarah... let me do the talking tonight.

102 INT. GOVERNOR RAMSEY'S MANSION - NIGHT

Ramsey, his WIFE, John, and Sarah sit at a table set to impress. Ramsey slides an opened letter across to John.

GOVERNOR RAMSEY

It was bound for Washington. I intercepted it. The last thing we need is Lincoln poking his nose into this.

John reads. His eyes narrow, his posture firming.

JOHN

Someone questioning the proceedings.

SARAH

(quiet, tense)
Because there are mistakes.

John cuts her a razor look, the warning unmistakable. Sarah swallows it – the slight, the silencing.

JOHN

Governor, excuse my wife. She observes a handful of trials and imagines it tells the whole story.

Ramsey lifts a napkin, dabs his mouth with precise disdain.

GOVERNOR RAMSEY

Mrs. Wakefield, don't let misplaced sympathy cloud justice.

SARAH

And if a mistake is made?

GOVERNOR RAMSEY

Necessity for swift judgment will be my justification.

Sarah flushes – spoken over, dismissed. Ramsey rises, reaches for a cigar box, opens it, looks at John.

GOVERNOR RAMSEY (CONT'D)

Cigar?

John nods, rises. Ramsey's arm folds around John's shoulder, guiding him toward the smoking room.

GOVERNOR RAMSEY (CONT'D)

And that, my boy, is why some matters stay between men.

The door closes behind them, smoke curling out. Mrs. Ramsey gives Sarah a polite smile.

103 EXT. GOVERNOR RAMSEY'S MANSION – LATER

John climbs onto the buggy composed, but vibrating with fury beneath the surface. Sarah steps up beside him, face angled away, the cold between them palpable.

A long beat.

JOHN

(low, dangerous)

How dare you speak to him like that.

Sarah keeps her gaze forward.

SARAH

You don't know what it's like in that courtroom. It isn't justice. It's vengeance in a judge's coat.

John inhales slow, deliberate, the way he reins in temper rather than admit he has one.

JOHN
Stop defending him.

SARAH
Him?

John's grip tightens on the reins.

JOHN
I saw you with him.

Sarah freezes. John doesn't look at her. The accusation delivered like a verdict.

JOHN (CONT'D)
From now on, you stay home as a proper wife should. And keep your pen where it belongs. Out of public affairs.

A tremor moves through her. Fury, fear, humiliation. Her breath stumbles, a tiny hitch she tries to hide.

SARAH
Are you threatening me?

JOHN
If that's what you want to call it.
(beat)
Test me.

Sarah turns toward him, stunned. John meets her eyes. Calm. Certain. The sort of certainty that ends arguments.

JOHN (CONT'D)
LJ. Nellie. I'm the only thing standing between you and being named unfit. This town will believe whatever I tell them. I'll have those children taken from you - and you sent away before you can even draw breath to protest.

It hits Sarah like a physical strike.

JOHN (CONT'D)
You understand me?

Sarah can't answer. John snaps the reins. The buggy jerks forward into the dark. The horses startled by a command sharper than his voice.

104 EXT. MANKATO STOCKADE — DAY

Snow drifts in thin veils. Chaska sits against the stockade wall, a small boy curled beside him. The boy shivers. Chaska shifts, trying to shield him from the wind. Wraps his coat around the child.

The gate CREAKS open. Smith strides in with a clipboard, two SOLDIERS behind him carrying shackles. He scans the names, then points.

SMITH

You. You. And you. On your feet.

The soldiers move with practiced efficiency, shackling the three men as Smith checks their names off the list. He looks at his clipboard then over at Chaska.

SMITH (CONT'D)

I'll be back for you tomorrow.

(sneers)

Last one standing.

105 INT. MANKATO COURTHOUSE — DAY

The air hangs heavy. Commissioners slouch, doodling on scraps of paper. Whipple sits alone in the gallery, his gaze falling on Sarah's empty seat. Outside the window, forty ropes are being strung on the gallows.

HEARD

(monotone)

Case three hundred ninety...

His voice trails off into the hollow room.

106 EXT. WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD — DAY

Sarah hangs laundry in the sharp wind. Sheets snapping like sails, her face gray with exhaustion. Whipple rides into the yard, breath frosting.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

I haven't seen you in court for days.

Sarah keeps her eyes on the sheet she's pinning.

SARAH

I've been... busy.

(gestures toward the house)

There's coffee on.

107 INT. WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD - LATER

Sarah grips her mug with both hands. Whipple sits opposite, hat in his lap.

SARAH

So that's why I've kept to the house.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

No one would fault you.

He reaches into his satchel, withdraws a folded newspaper, lays it on the table with quiet weight.

BISHOP WHIPPLE (CONT'D)

Have you seen this?

SARAH

(shakes her head)

No post has reached me. Not even mail.

Whipple opens the paper to Ramsey's speech. Sarah reads. A small gasp escapes.

SARAH (CONT'D)

He's banishing all Dakota out of the State?

BISHOP WHIPPLE

And laying a bounty on any who remains. Twenty-five dollars a scalp. Two hundred for Little Crow's.

Sarah sinks back into her chair.

SARAH

My God.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

They've been moving the families from Camp Release to Fort Snelling. They're to stay through winter, Iowa come spring.

SARAH

Winona... Old Bets. She won't survive a month in that cold.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Even the Cut Hairs, Sarah. No distinction. No mercy.

(soft)

How am I to stand by and watch this?

A long beat. Whipple's voice drops, thick with confusion.

BISHOP WHIPPLE (CONT'D)
I wrote to Washington. Again and
again. Not a word in return.

Sarah goes still. Something shifts. Alarm spreading through her.

SARAH
(whispering, horrified)
No... the Governor's mansion... John
tore up a letter. I didn't think.
(beat, breaking)
It was yours.

Whipple's face collapses inward, the betrayal landing.

BISHOP WHIPPLE
They intercepted my appeals?

SARAH
And I stood there. I let him do it.

Her anger rises, sharp, clear. She pushes back from the table, storms into the bedroom. She returns with her journal – worn, swollen with ink and months of names. She drops it before Whipple.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Here. All of it. Every name bent
to fit a verdict.

BISHOP WHIPPLE
And do what?

SARAH
Take it to Washington. Put it in
Lincoln's hands yourself.

Whipple rests his palm on the journal, reverent, almost afraid.

BISHOP WHIPPLE
Sarah... if I take this, there's no
going back.

Sarah lifts her chin trembling, but resolute.

SARAH
Then let it be done.

BISHOP WHIPPLE
I'll leave at first light.

Sarah exhales with the first real breath she's taken in days.

108 EXT. MANKATO TOWN SQUARE — DAY

Chaos. Settlers jam the street with pitchforks, hatchets, sticks jeering as Dakota families are forced through town, past the gallows, under armed escort. Sarah pushes into the mob searching, frantic. She spots Winona.

SARAH
(shouting)
Winona!

WINONA
Sarah?

Their eyes meet across the moving, frightened mass. Suddenly a FARMER lunges from a doorway, pitchfork swinging at Winona. Sarah grabs the handle, shoves him back. He sprawls into the mud. The crowd heaves. Soldiers shove back with rifle butts. Sarah is swept away from Winona. A boot crushes her skirt nearly dropping her.

WINONA (CONT'D)
Sarah!

SARAH
I'll find you!

The two women vanish, swallowed by the mob.

109 EXT. FORT SNELLING HOLDING CAMP — NIGHT

Wind knifes across the bluffs. Sarah waits in the shadows near the outer fence, lantern low, breath trembling in the cold. A GUARD escorts Winona toward the gate, wrists bound, head down.

GUARD
Mission woman said this one was
expected. That you'd vouch for her.

Sarah steps forward decisive, composed.

SARAH
Yes. She's mine. Thank you.

The guard barely glances at them as he unhooks the rope. Sarah wraps a shawl around Winona, pulls her quickly into the dark.

SARAH (CONT'D)
(low)
Hurry. Before anyone decides to ask
questions.

IN THE TREE LINE — CONTINUOUS

They slip into the trees, torchlight fading behind them. Winona shivers violently. Sarah pulls her behind a fallen log.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Here. Change into this.

She hands over a plain calico dress.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Old Bets? Little Eagle?

WINONA
On the trail to Fort Garry, Canada.

Sarah nods, relieved. Winona grips her hands suddenly.

WINONA (CONT'D)
But Chaska. They've taken him.

SARAH
Taken? On what charge?

WINONA
Murder.

Sarah's voice breaks before she can stop it.

SARAH
Murder? Who.

WINONA
Does Mr. Gleason mean anything?

The name hits Sarah like a strike. She sways slightly.

SARAH
Dear God...

A SHOUT from the fort.

GUARD (O.S.)
Who goes there?

Sarah jolts back. She pushes Winona deeper into the trees.

SARAH
Go. Now. I'll find him.

WINONA
(pleading)
Don't let them hang him.

Sarah grips Winona's face, urgent, fierce – but a tremor breaks through her composure.

SARAH
 (whispering, shaken)
 I don't... I don't know how to stop
 them anymore.

Winona's eyes widen fear mirroring Sarah's. Sarah forces herself to steady. Breath in. Breath out. A decision hardens behind her eyes. The terror still there, but pushed aside.

SARAH (CONT'D)
 But I will find a way.

Sarah pulls Winona closer, holding her as if anchoring them both.

SARAH (CONT'D)
 They've taken enough from you Winona.
 They'll not have him too.

Winona turns to flee. Sarah catches her.

SARAH (CONT'D)
 Wait.

Sarah kneels, pulls off her shoes, presses them into Winona's hands.

WINONA
 Your shoes?

Sarah looks down at Winona's moccasins. The one thing that will betray her disguise.

SARAH
 You need them more than I do... sister.

Winona's eyes fill. She hugs Sarah tight, fast. Then she's gone. Vanished into the winter dark, Sarah's shoes crunching in the frost.

Sarah remains kneeling a beat longer before rising to face the fort alone.

110 INT. SIBLEY'S OFFICE - MORNING

Sibley sits at his desk, rubbing his temples, a man drowning in petitions, affidavits, and a mounting death list. A knock. He looks up.

COL. SIBLEY
 Come in.

Sarah steps inside composed, but urgency radiates beneath it.

COL. SIBLEY (CONT'D)
Mrs. Wakefield...?

SARAH
It's about Chaska.

Sibley straightens, guarded, bracing.

SARAH (CONT'D)
You gave me your word. You know
he's innocent.

COL. SIBLEY
A witness has come forward that says
otherwise.

Sarah absorbs this, tightening resolve.

SARAH
Witness? How could that be? There
was no one but me there.

Sibley hesitates. A crack in his official composure.

COL. SIBLEY
Mrs. Wakefield... even truth has little
weight in that room.

He lifts a hand defensive, retreating back into procedure.

COL. SIBLEY (CONT'D)
You have been called. You will have
an opportunity to respond then.

SARAH
No summons has reached me.

Sibley frowns. Realization spreading across his face, and
hers. The silence becomes the truth.

SARAH (CONT'D)
When is the hearing?

COL. SIBLEY
Tomorrow at nine.

Sarah nods. Her hand trembles on the knob, then her fingers
close around it like a choice. She opens the door without
looking back.

111 INT. WAKEFIELD HOMESTEAD - EVENING

John sits at the table, untouched supper, scotch in hand.
Waiting. Sarah enters, breath quick from the ride.

JOHN
And where have you been?

SARAH
Meeting with Colonel Sibley. You
knew Chaska was arrested.

John lifts his drink – irritation, not surprise.

JOHN
So?

SARAH
We're talking about a man's life.

JOHN
You should have stayed out of it.

SARAH
(voice tightening)
I was subpoenaed. Only it never
reached me. Why?

John doesn't answer. He doesn't have to.

SARAH (CONT'D)
You know what the real problem is?
Respect. You have none for me.
You've tried to silence me since the
day I arrived. Why?

She holds his gaze.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Because you fear me. You fear what
I see... and what I might say.
(beat)
Chaska never feared my words. Because
he respects the truth and you only
respect the power you get from burying
it.

That hits him. He goes still.

JOHN
(quiet, too quiet)
You think respect makes a man?
Honor? Pretty speeches about an
Indian farmhand you barely know?

Sarah doesn't blink. It rattles him.

JOHN (CONT'D)
I built this house. I keep this
family alive. Me.

A slow, deliberate step toward her.

JOHN (CONT'D)

But you don't want a husband. You want an audience.

(beat)

Your writing... all that dangerous nonsense you slip to Whipple behind my back.

He leans in, voice tightening to a razor.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Those words only have power because *I allow them*. Why do you think the Gazette wouldn't publish your stories?

Sarah's face hardens.

SARAH

You can silence me but no force in the world can take away my mind. As long as there is paper and pencil on this earth, I will write whatever I want.

John's self-control snaps. Not in rage, but in cold, exacting punishment. He grabs her wrist. Tight. Controlled. Sarah gasps.

JOHN

If you believed that... you wouldn't be shaking.

A small whimper. LJ stands in the doorway, clutching his blanket, eyes wet. John freezes. Exposure, not remorse. He releases her, then leans close enough only she hears.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Step into that courtroom... make sure you kiss the children good-bye first.

Sarah jerks her hand free. Drops to one knee, gathering LJ into her arms fierce, protective, unwavering. She looks up at John, trembling, but unbroken.

SARAH

My duty is to the truth, John. And I won't let you stand in its way.

John stares at her, shaken.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Go on.

(MORE)

SARAH (CONT'D)

Follow through with your threat... and
I imagine Whipple will have plenty
to preach about on Sunday.

John's jaw tightens, then loosens... as if something inside him slips. He looks at LJ, contemplates, turns abruptly, snatches his coat. As he leaves, his eyes catch MITTEN curled on the windowsill. He picks the cat up – gentle – then squeezes just a shade too tight, a hint of the violence beneath. He lets it go. The cat bolts. He turns back, mask restored, but hollow.

JOHN

You've made a grave mistake.

He exits. The door slams. Sarah holds LJ close.

SARAH

(soft, steady)
Tomorrow, it ends.

112 INT. MANKATO COURTHOUSE – DAY

Nearly empty. A few exhausted settlers. Soldiers. The commissioners slump in their chairs. Through the window, forty nooses sway in the gentle breeze. Sarah sits front row, rigid. Whipple beside her. Chaska shackled at the defense table. At the back, in the shadows – John, coat pulled tight, watching.

HEARD

Case number three hundred ninety-two
– Chank-wash-ta-don-pee, commonly
known as Chaska. Charge: murder.
The court calls...
(checks notes)
Miss Nora DeCamp.

Sarah's head snaps up. Stunned. Nora rises avoiding Sarah's eyes, smoothing her shawl with a small tremor. Whipple pats Sarah's hand.

CROOKS

Miss DeCamp, you informed the court
you had knowledge of this man's
conduct?

NORA

Yes.

She glances at Sarah.

NORA (CONT'D)

She was... different from the rest of us.

CROOKS

Explain.

NORA

We had a chance to escape. She wouldn't go. Later, I understood why.

(points at Chaska)

They were familiar. She said she was his wife.

Sarah rises.

SARAH

You know I would say anything to stay alive.

CROOKS

Mrs. Wakefield, sit down. You will speak when called.

Sarah sits, trembling. Nora steadies herself, voice thin but committed.

NORA

They were always together. One day, I heard them talking about Mr. Gleason. I heard Chaska say clear as day, "he only offered whiskey. And I killed him. I killed Mr. Gleason"

A ripple through the gallery.

CROOKS

He confessed?

NORA

Yes.

A pulse of pain tightens her features. Brief, then gone.

NORA (CONT'D)

And she hushed him. She'll blame that other Indian, Hapa. But she told me herself she was in the brush when Mr. Gleason was shot. She didn't know who fired.

CROOKS

Mrs. Wakefield. Were you in the brush?

Sarah stands, spine straightening.

SARAH

Yes... I'd stepped into the brush, to relieve myself. By the time I looked, Mr. Gleason was already falling to the ground. Then I saw Hapa fire a second shot. It killed Mr. Gleason's dog.

Her voice tightens.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Then he turned his rifle on my children. I ran out. I grabbed the barrel... begged him to shoot me instead.

Sarah lifts her palm, a faint scar.

SARAH (CONT'D)

It burned my hand.

CROOKS

How do you know Chaska didn't fire the first shot?

SARAH

Because, a minute later, when Chaska raised his gun to force me into the wagon, I pushed it aside. It was stone cold.

Nora's face crumples. She flees the stand. At the defense table, Chaska watches her go. Not angry, but with soft, sad pity. Crooks clears his throat.

CROOKS

Duly noted. Major. Another witness?

HEARD

The court calls Heinrich Smith.

Smith swaggers in, smug. John leans in.

CROOKS

Mr. Smith, you claim you saw this man fire in battle?

Smith shifts, hesitation tugging at him for a beat before he squares his shoulders.

SMITH
Yes sir. At Wood Lake. He fired
into our ranks.

Sarah's voice bursts out.

SARAH
That is false.

CROOKS
Mrs. Wakefield. Are you suggesting
that this man never left your sight?

Sarah's throat tightens. Crooks' voice drops with insinuation.

CROOKS (CONT'D)
Or, perhaps your defense of this man
is colored by more than gratitude?
(beat)
Thank you Mr. Smith. You may step
down.

Smith passes John who gives him a tiny nod. Smith smiles.
Crooks confers briefly with Heard barely lifting their eyes.

CROOKS (CONT'D)
On the charge of murder.

Sarah grips Whipple's hand.

CROOKS (CONT'D)
Not guilty.

Chaska exhales with a rush of relief. A heartbeat.

CROOKS (CONT'D)
On the charge of firing on U.S. forces
— guilty. Sentence. Death by
hanging.

SARAH
NO! Not him. He protected me, my
children.

A GAVEL SLAM

CROOKS
Sit down, Mrs. Wakefield! The ruling
is final.

Chaska is unshackled from the table, then re-shackled for transport. As the chains tighten at his wrists, he turns looking to Sarah not with fear for himself, but with a quiet, protective worry for her. She meets his gaze, breaking, but unbowed. Crooks gathers the papers, exhausted.

CROOKS (CONT'D)

This court is adjourned.
 (mutters, dead-eyed)
 Let's see any man alive endure three
 hundred ninety-five cases in six
 short weeks.

John stands in the back, the room settling around the verdict. He exhales, slow, the breath of a man who knows he's supposed to feel victorious but his hands betray him. A tremor he can't still.

His eyes find Chaska. Measuring the man who, even now, is more concerned with Sarah's well-being than the verdict itself.

John's gaze shifts to Sarah. She's studying Chaska. Not the verdict, not the room, him. There's respect in her eyes. The kind of regard John has never been able to command.

The truth of it hollows him.

113 EXT. MANKATO STOCKADE — NIGHT

Frozen wind rattles the boards. Sarah stands outside the fence, lantern trembling in her hand. Inside the yard, Chaska steps from the shadows. Exhausted, bruised, hollow-eyed... yet still holding his dignity.

CHASKA

You shouldn't keep coming.

SARAH

I have news.

She slides a frost-stiff newspaper through the slats.
 HEADLINE: LINCOLN REDUCES EXECUTIONS — 38 TO HANG, 265 SPARED.
 Chaska doesn't react.

SARAH (CONT'D)

He reviewed every case himself.
 (beat)
 Those convicted of murdering
 civilians... hang. Participation in
 battles, imprisonment.

She swallows, meets his eyes.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Chaska. Prison. Not death.

CHASKA

It may not be death... but it isn't
 living.

(MORE)

CHASKA (CONT'D)

(beat)

A cage never kept a man from losing
the rest.

His voice deepens. Not angry, but truth worn to the bone.

CHASKA (CONT'D)

They wanted Ridge Point Valley the
day they set eyes on it.

(beat)

I was a fool to think if I walked in
their world... they'd let me stay in
mine.

SARAH

There are men who were at Wood Lake...
men who swear you were not among
them.

(beat)

I'm going to St. Paul. Whipple
arranged a meeting with a lawyer.
If your truth is going to reach the
right ears... I have to carry it there
myself.

Chaska absorbs this, a deeper hurt settling in.

CHASKA

How long will that take?

(beat)

They're already carving up my land.

A cold silence. Her lantern flickers.

SARAH

John was first put in a claim.

Chaska exhales hollow, hurting, lowers his eyes.

CHASKA

The cottonwood... they'll cut it down
without a thought. And Winona.
Gone. I may never see her again.

A pulse of pain tightens Sarah's features. She feels the
weight of what he's losing. She steps closer, fingers brushing
the boards.

SARAH

You'll see me.

Chaska looks up, surprised, moved in a way he cannot hide.
Sarah steadies herself.

SARAH (CONT'D)

I spent years trying to be what John wanted. Small enough to disappear in his shadow.

(beat)

But you... you never tried to silence me. You heard me. My words mattered.

The truth clarifying inside her.

SARAH (CONT'D)

You taught me what a story can do – that truth only reaches people if someone writes it.

Chaska holds her gaze. A long, steady moment. His throat tightens. A rare crack in his composure.

CHASKA

(stripped bare)

Between your people and mine, there is no path for us.

(beat)

But if there were one... I would have walked it toward you.

He leans his forehead against the slats, inches from hers. A shared breath. A shared truth. A goodbye. Sarah steps back a pace, steady, composed.

SARAH

I promise you, Chaska... they may cage your body, but they will not keep you in their lie. Your name will not carry their guilt – not while the truth lives here.

She touches her chest. Turns, walks into the night.

A shadow shifts behind the fence. John stands in the darkness beyond the fence, motionless, fists white, expression unreadable. He has heard everything.

114 INT. JOHN'S DOCTOR'S OFFICE – NIGHT

A guttering lantern. John sits stiffly at his desk, Sarah's locket in his hand. He opens it. Sarah's miniature. His jaw pulses as he snaps it shut, harder than he means to.

A soft knock. Smith stands in the doorway, a ledger under his arm.

SMITH

Still stewing?

JOHN

Five years. That's all he gets?

Smith steps inside, lays the ledger on the desk, flips it open. Two columns stare back. CONDEMNED - SPARED. He taps a name.

SMITH

Four men named Chaska here. Clerks get nervous with repeats.

John's eyes narrow. He stares at the page. The neat columns, the fragile ink.

SMITH (CONT'D)

Mistakes happen. Ink smudges, names shift... paper's thin.

A long, awful silence. John's hand hovers above the pen, trembling. He picks it up. Slowly, deliberately, he crosses out one Chaska. Moves it into the CONDEMNED column. Signs his name beneath the change. A tiny blot of ink spreads. He pushes the ledger toward Smith without looking up.

JOHN

Make it clean.

Smith closes the book. A quiet, definitive thud. He leaves. John sits alone with the silence he's made. The lantern flickers, casting his shadow across the jars of medicine - tools meant for healing, now a witness to what he's become.

115 EXT. MANKATO TOWN SQUARE GALLOWS - DAWN

Snow drifts across an empty scaffold. Forty nooses sway in the wind. Ghostly pendulums.

116 EXT. MANKATO STOCKADE - SAME TIME

Cold light. Chaos. Dakota families pushed toward wagons. Men sorted into two lines - PRISONERS and CONDEMNED.

SMITH

Prisoners to the right. Condemned to the left!

Chaska steps toward the prisoners' line. Smith blocks him. He taps the altered name in his ledger.

SMITH (CONT'D)

Wrong line.

CHASKA

I'm not one of the condemned.

SMITH
Says here you are.

Chaska sees it. The crossed-out name. The signature. The lie. A stillness enters him. He lifts his gaze. John stands among the officers. Their eyes meet. John breaks first, jaw tightening. A voice breaks the silence.

WINONA (O.S.)
CHASKA!

Winona fights through the crowd. A soldier grabs her. She tears free, runs to the fence.

WINONA (CONT'D)
He's in the wrong line! Let him go.
He's in the wrong line!

Chaska moves toward her. The soldier steps between them.

SOLDIER
You move again and she goes with
you.

Winona freezes. Terrified. She grips the slats, face crumpling.

WINONA
(crying)
I should've run - Why didn't I listen.

CHASKA
Because running was never your path.

She looks at him, breaking.

CHASKA (CONT'D)
(soft)
Hé^hetu.
(Subtitle: You carry
our fire now.)

A sob escapes her.

WINONA
I can't lose you.

Chaska holds her gaze, unwavering. Protector to the end.

CHASKA
You won't be.
(beat, gentle)
I only walk ahead of you.

She clings to the fence as soldiers pull her back. She fights them, reaching out to him.

WINONA

CHASKA!

CHASKA

When the wind stirs the cottonwood,
It'll be me.

The soldier drags her away. Chaska turns. And with a steady breath — a man unshaken by the lie that condemns him — he steps into the line.

117 EXT. ROAD TO MANKATO — DECEMBER 26, MORNING

A HAWK circles overhead. Whipple's wagon is mired in frozen mud. Another wagon approaches.

FARMER

Headed to the hangings?

BISHOP WHIPPLE

I should've been there an hour ago.

FARMER

You're headed the wrong way for mercy,
Bishop.

He leaps off his wagon, helps free the wheel.

118 EXT. MANKATO TOWN SQUARE GALLOWS — MINUTES LATER

Snow drifts. A packed crowd. Jeering, restless, hungry for blood. The HAWK wheels high in the sky over the gallows.

Two empty nooses. THIRTY-EIGHT HOODED MEN on the remaining others. Soft chanting. Declarative statements of courage. Some asking the spirit to walk a good path.

Whipple forces his way through. Smith blocks the stairs.

BISHOP WHIPPLE

Remove the hoods. Let me see their
faces.

SMITH

Their faces won't change the outcome.
I cut those ropes at ten.

Smith checks his pocket watch.

SMITH (CONT'D)

You've got one minute.

Whipple pushes past him, mounting the platform. He moves fast blessing each man. He reaches the last hooded figure. A white handkerchief is pressed between his bound wrists - S.W. stitched in the corner.

An egg explodes against Whipple's temple.

MAN IN CROWD
Get off that platform Whipple! God
ain't saving them savages.

The mob roars. Smith raises the axe.

SMITH
I'm cutting this rope now.

119 EXT. MANKATO STOCKADE - MORNING

Sarah approaches at a run, breath smoking, clutching a folded notice. A GUARD blocks her path.

SARAH
I need to see one of your prisoners.
We-Chank-Wash-ta-don-pe
(beat)
Chaska.

The Guard stiffens.

SARAH (CONT'D)
They're reconsidering his sentence.
I need to talk to him.

He looks back over his shoulder. Sarah slips past him.

120 INT. MANKATO STOCKADE - CONTINUOUS

Crowded. Dim. Heavy with despair. Sarah scans desperately. Chaska is nowhere. A PRISONER steps forward.

PRISONER
They took him at first light.

She clutches the notice in her hand.

SARAH
For Lincoln's review?

The Guard appears behind her, shaking his head.

GUARD
The gallows. I'm sorry, ma'am.
Truly.

A small crushed sound escapes her. She pushes past him toward the rising roar coming from the town square.

121 EXT. MANKATO TOWN SQUARE GALLOWS – DAY

The axe comes down. Whipple hurries off the gallows, slipping through bodies as the mechanism shifts.

FORTY TRAPDOORS RELEASE AT ONCE. THIRTY-EIGHT BODIES DROP.

A deep, concussive thud. At the base of the scaffold stands John. Rigid. Face drained. He forces himself to look at the bodies.

From Chaska's hand, the white handkerchief slips free, drifting, tumbling.

122 EXT. MANKATO TOWN SQUARE – GALLOWS – MOMENTS LATER

The square empties. Soldiers cut bodies down. Sarah steps into the clearing. She turns away then freezes. Her handkerchief – S.W. stitched in the corner – lifts on an updraft, rising higher and higher. A breath catches in her throat. Recognition. Grief like a blade.

123 EXT. ST. PETER – ARGUS PRINTING OFFICE – DAY

Hot metal. Paper hisses through rollers. Sarah studies the final galley. Her hand trembles over Chaska's name.

SARAH V.O.

*They called it a mistake. But a man
is not a line of ink on thin paper.
He is a name. A life. And truth
does not vanish because the powerful
cast it aside.*

The printer watches her.

PRINTER

You sure? They'll come after you
for this.

Sarah doesn't answer. She takes the metal block of type with Chaska's name, presses it back into the chase herself.

SARAH

Set it.

The press THUNDERS. A cover slaps onto a stack: AN UNCIVIL WAR – By Sarah Wakefield.

EXT. RIDGE POINT – LONE COTTONWOOD – DUSK

Wind moves through the branches. Winona sits beneath the tree, a smudge bowl beside her. A HAWK perches high in the limbs. Sarah approaches, stops several yards back, unsure. Winona doesn't turn.

WINONA

He hears you.

Sarah kneels. She sets a single printed page at the base of the tree. Chaska's name in black ink.

Winona looks at it, lowers her head. She lifts her hand toward the trunk. The carved wooden horse rests in the roots – half-buried, weathered, waiting. Her hand pauses over it, just for a breath, before she sets her palm on the bark.

SARAH V.O.

*I wonder how much sorrow might have
been spared, had justice risen where
vengeance fell. They refuse to clear
his name. History may turn from
him.
But I will not.*

Wind stirs through the branches. Above them, the handkerchief caught in the limbs flutters.

The HAWK lifts into the sky with a scream, circling.

FADE OUT.