

STORY SYNOPSIS

Based on true events.

During the Dakota War of 1862, a white woman's bond with a Dakota man who protects her during captivity is later weaponized in military tribunals that lead to the largest mass execution in U.S. history—forcing her to choose between silence and telling a truth that will cost her everything.

In 1857, 25-year-old **Sarah Brown** arrives in New Ulm, Minnesota with one clear ambition—to become a writer—having agreed to an arranged marriage with **Dr. John Wakefield** she believes will buy her the freedom to pursue it. She enters a land raw, divided, and volatile, where white settlers expand west under broken treaties and the Dakota people are driven toward hunger as their hunting lands vanish. Sarah observes everything, recording her thoughts in a private journal, unaware she is standing at the edge of a reckoning that will define her life.

Five years later, in the summer of 1862, Sarah's youthful ambition narrows into domestic obligation. Marriage and children replace the freedom she once believed the frontier promised. Around her, the Dakota endure the consequences of broken treaties: annuity payments fail to arrive, traders withhold food on credit, and starvation tightens its grip. When a chance encounter between four starving Dakota teenagers and settlers erupts into violence, an entire settler family is killed—an act driven by hunger, fear, and desperation. Fearing retaliation and believing war inevitable, Dakota leaders—most notably **Little Crow** (Taoyateduta)—choose to strike first. Settlements, farms, and forts along the Minnesota River Valley are attacked; panic spreads, and hundreds are killed. The violence reaches Sarah's door. In a single, shattering moment, the life she built collapses, and she and her two young children are taken captive into a Dakota camp.

In the camp, Sarah is placed under the protection of **Chaska**, a Dakota man who straddles two worlds—raised within Dakota tradition yet fluent in white society. Alongside Chaska and his sister **Winona**, Sarah survives as massacres and reprisals escalate around them.

An uneasy bond forms between captor and captive, forcing Sarah to confront everything she has been taught to believe about “savages” and civilization. Within the Dakota community, she witnesses humanity, internal division, and leaders torn between restraint and vengeance.

Meanwhile, U.S. forces under **Colonel Henry Sibley** launch a campaign of total military suppression, ultimately defeating organized Dakota resistance. Sarah and her children are released alive and unharmed. She returns to settler society profoundly altered—no longer fully belonging to either world, carrying knowledge that contradicts the official narrative of Dakota rebellion.

In the aftermath, the U.S. military sweeps up hundreds of Dakota men—guilty and innocent alike—and convenes military tribunals designed for speed, not justice. **Bishop Henry Whipple**, alarmed by the proceedings, urges Sarah to help record what unfolds, hoping the truth might still reach Washington before the sentences are carried out. Rumors spread about Sarah’s relationship with Chaska during her captivity, and her husband—driven by jealousy and fear of public disgrace—moves to protect his reputation.

Sarah spends a month in the courtroom, increasingly alarmed as nearly four hundred Dakota men are rushed through trials lasting minutes, not days—given no legal representation, often no interpreters, and frequently condemned simply for participating in battles. Whipple attends as well, increasingly alarmed as his written appeals to Washington go unanswered. As the trials race toward their conclusion, John uses his influence to have Chaska arrested on a charge of civilian murder as one of the final defendants. Through emotional coercion, he pressures Sarah to stay away, warning that defying him would cost her her marriage and her children.

When Sarah learns that Chaska is on trial, she rushes to court against her husband’s warnings and testifies, absolving him of the murder charges. But another accusation remains: participation in battle, supported by false testimony she cannot corroborate.

As executions draw closer—and it becomes clear that written appeals are failing to halt them—Sarah gives Whipple her notes and urges him to take the evidence to Washington himself. Because the death sentences require presidential approval, time becomes a countdown.

Whipple secures an audience with **President Abraham Lincoln**, urging him to personally review the trial transcripts. After examining the records, Lincoln distinguishes acts of war from crimes against civilians, reducing the number of condemned men from 303 to thirty-eight. On the day after Christmas, December 26, 1862, the condemned men were hanged simultaneously on a single scaffold in Mankato—the largest mass execution in U.S. history.

In the aftermath, Sarah learns that Chaska—cleared of murder and never sentenced to die—is among those hanged. He is killed after answering to another man’s name, a fatal error the authorities later acknowledge without explanation.

The remaining Dakota are formally banished from Minnesota. Women, children, and elders are forced south into internment and exile, while hundreds of men are imprisoned. Scalp bounties are issued against any Dakota who remain. Survivors flee north into British territory, where their descendants establish the **Sioux Valley Dakota Nation in Canada**.

In defiance of public opinion—and at great personal cost—Sarah becomes the writer she set out to be, publishing her account of the war and its aftermath to defend the innocent Dakota and expose the injustices she witnessed. Her words cannot undo Chaska’s execution or the exile that followed, but they preserve a counter-history—one that reveals how truth is shaped by power, and how survival can demand moral compromise. Sarah is left with no absolution, only the knowledge that telling the truth, however late, is its own form of resistance.