

*Snakes*  
*in*  
*Paha Sapa*

**Tale of a Lakota Nation**

*Cyndie M. Styles*

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by Cyndie M. Styles

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# Chapter 1

Land generally north and centrally located within the boundaries of what is known as the United States had once belonged to the Lakota people, a tribe known to the White man as Sioux. It had a bountiful food supply from its plush vegetation. The hunting grounds were stocked with enough deer, antelope and buffalo to last tens of thousands of lifetimes. The land had crystal-clear unpolluted streams which offered a plethora of catch, where the eagle could soar above and free to enjoy a meal unhindered from poisoned sea life. The air was fresh enough to enable the wildlife to smell prey for miles. The coyote's howl could be heard in village after village. Because of their beauty alone, the wondrous mountains could be marveled over until the end of time. These elegant mountains of Paha Sapa, translated to the Whites as the Black Hills, got their name due to the closely woven foliage that forms their unique rich color of blackish-green.

The Lakota and the governmental army of Blue Coats engaged in many bloody battles during the 1860s. One in 1867 was particularly abominable. Many men fell to the ground. Limbs were severed, wounds gaped open, and bodies were horribly mangled. With so much devastation to both sides, there was no clear winner. Many attempts were made to declare peace between the Lakota and the Blue Coats. Both sides wished to see their sons, brothers and husbands soon return to continue future generations, yet neither side was interested in forfeiting their ego by being the first to suggest a compromise.

By the following year, the two sides succeeded in communicating. In 1868, the Blue Coats employed an interpreter

and ceremoniously gathered together with the Lakota on the prairie. A temporary camp was assembled and signing tables stood inside the military tents. Outside beside the tents, many Blue Coats stiffly paced as the Natives sat on the ground smoking pipes while they discussed the terms of the agreement presented to them. Their travels through history led the Lakota Nation to the mandatory signing of the FORT LARAMIE WYOMING TERRITORY TREATY OF APRIL 29, 1868. In it was the protection of their sacred Paha Sapa, which would be deeded to the Lakota Nation for eternity. Apprehension from the Lakota people was evident, but in the end the treaty was signed. The Natives would be confined to live on specific areas of land, known to the Whites as reservations, and the boundary lines were outlined in the treaty. Various reservations were designated due to the Blue Coats wanting to divide and separate the Lakota, in line with the wish to conquer them.

Even though some Natives traveled by wagon to the reservations, others were forced to walk only to be encumbered by the long journey through the arduous Trail of Tears. A few were not compliant, many were disillusioned, but the majority submissively surrendered themselves to the reservations. The Blue Coats had fastened the Lakota with a reputation of being difficult *before* the signing of the treaty, which had already brought them a surplus of unenviable and brutal attention from the Blue Coats.

Only four short years later in 1872, the Whites broke that treaty when they allowed miners to invade Paha Sapa in search for gold. Then, in 1874, the Blue Coats ordered a reconnaissance mission, sending Son of the Morning Star, known to the Whites as Custer, to protect the treaty-breaking trespassers from the Natives. The Lakota Nation was not told of the order, and lesser, not asked for consent as outlined in the treaty.

Paha Sapa was the kind of place where one could see spirits. It was the kind of place where one *would* see spirits. It was holy land. But all of that was changing as more and more trespassers arrived equipped with Blue Coats by their side. As a result, that glorious beauty was stolen from the Lakota Nation in 1877 and held in Federal custody. To the Lakota people, the loss of Paha Sapa was the turning point in their heritage and their spiritual culture.

There were ***Snakes in Paha Sapa***...the kind that slithered unscrupulously with the worst of intentions...the kind that

struck without warning or provocation. The Lakota Nation endured strikes from the Whites for many more years.

The beginning of the end for Chief Clever Spirit's Lakota village was in the year 1879, which harbored **THE DAY OF DISHONOR**. Chief Clever Spirit directed his 200 villagers to strike their winter camp adjacent to the hills, and haul it across the wilderness. The villagers moved slowly over the rocky terrain to their summer village site on the prairie, firmly within the reservation's borders. Once their land had been so vast with the inclusion of Paha Sapa that one could have forgotten they were restricted to boundaries.

Chief Clever Spirit was filled with contradictions. He was an older man yet had a sense of objectivity usually seen in someone much younger; this characteristic empowered him in leading his people through the aging turmoil with the Whites. Even though he was smaller than an average-sized man, his persona was like that of Paha Sapa. The Chief was respected by many who saw fair-mindedness in him, but no one foolishly mistook that for weakness. He taught his warriors to stand their ground and fight to the death for the honor of his people.

Wasu Kage, or Hail Maker to the White man, was one of those warriors. He was a seasoned hunter of thirty-eight. Unlike Chief Clever Spirit, Hail Maker's size matched his ego; the warrior was both of above-average stature and confidence. His lengthy, straight jet-black hair was a sign that he had not felt the sorrow of death, as the ritual of hair-cutting was reserved for those of loss. Hail Maker had always been the most feared warrior of neighboring villages. The warrior ways were taught to him by the whispery spirit of his grandfather's grandfather. Hail Maker had always been the first of his peers to experience life's trophies and to be asked to seek the adventure of honoring his people. By the time his younger brother, Zuzeca Wawoyuspa, or Snake Catcher in White words, repeated those events, the spirit and excitement were missing. Still, Snake Catcher's competitive nature back when he was a child made him into a great warrior as well, maybe even more so than his brother, but the three-year age span made a great difference in the pecking order of the warriors. Hail Maker even procured his first human kill—a White trapper skinning buffalo to steal their hides. The elder brother became a warrior that day as Snake Catcher could do nothing but watch on. Snake Catcher knew he would be unmercifully

hissed if he tried to begrudge Hail Maker his day.

As time passed, Hail Maker became so efficient at defending their territory that legends were being spread of how he spoke the White man's words through the spirits of his kill. There were *many* words emitted. Hail Maker taught Snake Catcher those words, but it was not permitted to utter any such thing in the Lakota population. His teachings were for bragging to his brother, and not entirely for sharing. Concurrently, Snake Catcher did gain enormous respect when he won the heart of the Chief's daughter, Matching Spirit, a Native woman substantially younger than him. That honor was saved for the most worthy. Hail Maker barely knew of Snake Catcher's accomplishments until he married into such a prominent family. One year prior, at the wedding, was the first day Hail Maker truly recognized his brother's worth—a brother that was of the same height and stature as Hail Maker, along with also being virile and having the fortitude of an accomplished hunter. He had the same lengthy, straight jet-black hair as Hail Maker, which showed the evidence of their community's good health.

Hail Maker and Snake Catcher were the only ones who whispered the White words, and they kept this hidden from the others, except from a precocious youth Kagitaka Makoce, or Earth Raven as translated to English, who would not tolerate being neglected.

Earth Raven was still a boy of seventeen but he yearned to be asked on hunting expeditions. His name signified a person of the earth and sky, as well as a trickster by way of the raven—a trickster who was a shape changer and could take many forms. He loved to strategize and cause disturbances, but in a good way for his people, which was a bad way for those with views not of his own.

Snake Catcher included Earth Raven in the telling of the warrior stories, and the learning of the White words because he knew the feelings of envy, and did not want that for Earth Raven even though they were not kin. While continuously worshiping Snake Catcher, Earth Raven discerned Snake Catcher's pain of envy as word spread among the villagers that the older brother would once more be first at a quest. Some whispered that Chief Clever Spirit would be leaving behind the best man to protect his villagers, or perhaps he was just granting his only daughter's request of keeping her husband safe. Nevertheless, Snake Catcher did not understand what held him

captive.

Chief Clever Spirit sought assistance from Hail Maker, saying: "You are being sent to secure the location of this season's deer. Take your choice of men, but omit your brother."

Snake Catcher stood nearby but out of their sight of the conversation. Even at his ripe age of thirty-five, Snake Catcher deeply idolized yet was torturously jealous of his older brother's adventures...fatigued of endlessly being in his shadow. Competitiveness was clearly present between them though not as much as when they had hearts of young warriors.

Snake Catcher wore a face of torment as Hail Maker and his party disappeared into the distance. The younger brother reluctantly retreated into the tepee that he shared with his wife.

Nightfall bestowed the villagers a full bright moon that early summer's eve. Their horses were restless, sensing trouble. As the hours passed, Snake Catcher could not sleep, restless himself, had led him to pace the perimeter of the village. Soon he jumped onto his horse, and with the fullness of the moon to guide him, rode down to the river. The river had always been a source of serenity for Snake Catcher. As he stared into the tranquil stream of water, the Native huntsman reminisced of the days when he and his friends were young warriors slaying the White prospectors stealing gold from their hills. That was a time of control for him. Back then, Snake Catcher could honor his people with the peace of believing he was protecting their children's futures. Snake Catcher was brought out of his mesmerization when he heard the distant howl of a coyote, which merely left the image of an aging man staring back at him in the pool.

Simultaneously, with the moon beaming bright as daylight, Blue Coats were strategically sprinkling themselves across the ridge of a slope overlooking the village. A signal was rendered before firing commenced from the Blue Coats onto the Lakota villagers without warning with Snake Catcher situated far away from their view. When Snake Catcher heard the firing, he launched his horse toward the battle. Suddenly, the animal lost its footing, slipped on the rocky riverbed, and threw its six-foot rider to the shore where he lay unconscious and bleeding. His skittish horse meandered a short distance away. As Snake Catcher slumped at the water's edge, one could hear the gunfire for miles echoing down through the rocky river banks. The Blue Coats continued firing on the village, killing at random. Many

fell to the ground. Some scattered into the foliage nearby, but it was difficult to stay hidden with the brightness of the full moon. Earth Raven successfully disappeared into the night. Chief Clever Spirit was not as fortunate. He was pelted with Blue Coats' bullets, and fell to the ground.

There was no warning...there was no mercy...the Lakota people were ambushed. The pounding of their village was relentless and it only took a short time before the Blue Coats had no more targets in their sights. When the ruthless clearance of the village subsided, so many from the tribe were dead or lay dying. The Blue Coats seized the scarce living and uninjured Lakota in view, shackling the men. They departed, stepping over the bloody dead and injured bodies. The remaining were left where they lay to rot in the wilderness, or to be picked apart by the wildlife that day, **THE DAY OF DISHONOR**, as it became known to the Lakota people from that night forward. The news that the Blue Coats were tracking a renegade warrior not of their tribe was not released to the Natives, nor the fact that they had mistakenly attacked a village not of that renegade's people.

Hail Maker and his party were unaware of the slaughter of their villagers. They found a comfortable location for their first night's campsite, unpacked their gear, and settled in. Hail Maker felt troubled, and headed out for a brief night ride. His camp soon found slumber and was unaware of Hail Maker's return a short time later.

About an hour later, with the river water babbling beside him, Snake Catcher slowly rose with his hands on his head while discovering the massive amounts of blood dripping from his wound. He slowly mounted his horse, and headed back to the village. Snake Catcher reluctantly rode through what was left of the village when he saw the devastation of bodies lying on the ground, including his wife still sheltering their unborn child, and his brother's wife and children. As far as he could see, only ghosts remained, and any unimpaired living were absent.

Remembering his brother's mission, Snake Catcher rode hard to find Hail Maker, his heart heavy with the need to warn him of the danger that Blue Coats were on the prairie. When Snake Catcher descended on the camp, he found Hail Maker barely alive while lying a short distance from the temporary tents, and everyone else there dead. He was briefly perplexed to find a civilian White man amongst the lifeless. Snake Catcher



learned that a few wandering Blue Coats took it upon themselves to gun down those at the campsite, while his party slept.

As the two brothers spoke their words in English, Snake Catcher revealed the demise of the villagers, including their wives and families. Hail Maker deeply felt the pain of the news. He requested Snake Catcher to lean closer and then made his bequeath of a blood-soaked lessons and poetry book that rested in his hand. "Give this to Susan, daughter to Jacob Paradise who lives in Sundance, next valley west of Paha Sapa. But first, you must bury me alongside wife." Then Hail Maker's last words on this earth were spoken in Lakota. "It is time to take the final journey."

Hail Maker's last words *heard* on this earth were spoken by his brother in Lakota. "Then it shall be."

Immediately after Hail Maker died, Snake Catcher wrapped his brother's body in a buffalo skin, and then dragged him the long way back to the ravaged village with his horse. When Snake Catcher returned, he found a scared uninjured teen standing within the ruins. Earth Raven was crying over the dead bodies of his friends and family.

The two spaded then buried as many of their people as their physical natures would allow, but Snake Catcher was very weak from his blood loss, and Earth Raven was not yet a man. They rested the remaining under buffalo hides, and then placed large rocks around the outside shrouding them from the wildlife. Snake Catcher's wife was among this latter group.

During the placement of the buffalo hides, the two discovered that Chief Clever Spirit had been injured but not mortally. It was at this juncture that the Chief approached Snake Catcher and Earth Raven with a small following, a dozen wounded men along with a few dozen women and their children. Snake Catcher's first response upon seeing the Chief alive was to declare a goal of charging into battle against the Blue Coats.

"Where do you go?" Chief Clever Spirit inquired of Snake Catcher in his native tongue.

"Blue Coats will be no more—the duty falls to me," Snake Catcher answered in their language. "And it is my obligation to complete the act of honor for my brother."

Even though Snake Catcher drastically spiraled up the rung in village seniority that day, Chief Clever Spirit still

outranked him. "You are outnumbered like all the stars to one. There is much to do. Your first obligation is to the surviving villagers, not of the dead."

Snake Catcher and the remaining villagers gathered what they could, and Chief Clever Spirit led the survivors further east with whatever they could carry out of the burial grounds.

Chief Clever Spirit remarked wearily, "Now, with so few to track, they may let us rest."

Snake Catcher exhaustingly nodded in agreement.

The villagers traveled for two days before feeling sheltered enough to stake claim to the earth beneath them as their new summer site.

Starting over was difficult, especially for those who had lost wives and children, as witnessed in the meagerness of Snake Catcher's hair length. Many of the villagers had shortened theirs as well out of respect for the fallen villagers. As time passed, Snake Catcher would often seek solace at a nearby stream. While there, he mentally placed his psyche in Paha Sapa and asked the high spirits to help ease his heartache and guide him to peace. Twenty-six full moons passed overhead, yet Snake Catcher still could not find enough pieces of his heart to make it function again. His resolve to remain separate from affection worried his villagers.

One late summer's night in that year of 1881, Snake Catcher and Earth Raven gathered food, water, supplies and two extra ponies for their expedition.

Chief Clever Spirit was awoken and approached them in the attempt to postpone their departure. "Where do you go?" he asked.

"It is time to complete my act of honor for my brother. No family remains for me to care for," responded Snake Catcher.

"Many Blue Coats surround the area, we ought to stay united."

"Then we must be brisk." Snake Catcher turned his horse around with no further conversation with Chief Clever Spirit, and he and Earth Raven left.

Snake Catcher and Earth Raven reached the first sizable river just outside of the reservation's border before being captured by Blue Coats. Snake Catcher was shackled and treated as a hostile, but not before secretly transferring Hail Maker's book to Earth Raven. Snake Catcher was transported by wagon

going east. Not seeming to be as great a threat, Earth Raven was transported by another wagon going north, back to his native land.

The Blue Coats snarled at Snake Catcher as he was being transported. They knew what they had, they knew what a great catch they had made. They captured a notoriously dangerous warrior, and would be paid handsomely in recognition for their conquest.

Snake Catcher spent his days in prison at a soldier fort with Blue Coats guarding against his escape. They did not make the expense toward prison clothes for the convicts, he wore the same clothes for the duration of his stay. Daily, for two years, Snake Catcher was mercifully granted one meal and two facility passes. Some days the Blue Coats inadvertently forgot. The conditions were despicable and filthy. Deceased Natives would not be extracted for many days, adding to the horrors there. Flies constantly swarmed the area, being Snake Catcher's only visitors. With as wretched as it became, Snake Catcher had peace knowing Hail Maker's book was safe with Earth Raven—a book Earth Raven could now read since the young man was reaping the opportunities of an education that was offered to him as outlined in the treaty. Earth Raven spent endless hours studying on the reservation, securing an education for himself.

Meanwhile, Native chiefs were negotiating for all Lakota to be released from incarceration and returned to their homeland. Even so, Snake Catcher was not transferred back to the reservation until 1883; whereupon, the Blue Coats shaved his head before allowing his release as his final punishment, and to boast of their interpretation of scalping.

Somehow Snake Catcher retained his free spirit, and was feeling increasingly distraught over being forced to stay on the endlessly shrinking reservation. The Whites knew Snake Catcher would be more imprisoned on the reservation, then continually being supported from the White man's pockets in prison. Some Blue Coats who were posted near the borderline of the reservation would egg Snake Catcher to cross the boundary. Snake Catcher tried escaping many times; one of which earned him a broken leg and a dislocated shoulder. Snake Catcher's remaining villagers feared that since he could not be tamed, he would soon die at the hands of the Blue Coats.

Earth Raven stood by powerless. He could not advocate

his friend and mentor's desire to become a fugitive. Snake Catcher finally granted a request from Earth Raven, he allowed him to help obtain the travel permission needed to fulfill Snake Catcher's act of honor for his departed brother. Snake Catcher was endlessly haunted by **THE DAY OF DISHONOR**, as he felt incredibly guilt-ridden about not being able to fight and die amongst his people as a warrior that day.

Snake Catcher and Earth Raven witnessed many atrocities. The hardest were of children dying in childbirth from unsanitary and disgraceful medical conditions. This was all that was available to the people on the reservations, even though their treaty promised them adequate provisions. Nor did they have a practicing medicine man in their village, this was not allowed. With a determined spirit, however, Earth Raven routinely wrote letters to those in Washington for medical aid with minimal recognition in return. And with that, it was not surprising that Snake Catcher's impatience had grown almost out of control from their neglect. His fellow Natives would gather with him on mail day as they waited for word from Washington that their supplies and medical assistance were in transit. But none were received. Snake Catcher was angry and he lashed out blaming those in Washington for the lack of care on the reservation, but no one was listening; not about the aid for his people, nor his permission to leave the reservation. Others, including Earth Raven, were granted permission to travel, but the Blue Coats excluded Snake Catcher from that privilege. As his frustration grew, Snake Catcher knew he could not permit anyone else to make *his* act of honor for him; Hail Maker had made the bequeath unto him.

At the end of that year, the Blue Coats insisted there be another way of communicating with the Natives, other than actually riding all the way onto their land each time they needed information from them that could not wait until mail day. That was when a small wooden one-room shack, a structure they called their telegraph office, was built to house a telegraph machine. The Blue Coats taught some of the Natives how to decipher the codes, Earth Raven being one. Even though some of the Natives were insulted that the Whites were trying to force an industrial progression onto them, Earth Raven was thrilled to see it installed, as more messages of the Lakotas' needs were sure to be dispatched due to the telegraph's expeditious delivery

to Washington.

Since he was of twenty-one years, Earth Raven continued his studies by learning from the other children in the village who were still of age to receive schooling. But after the treaty-guaranteed educational provision had elapsed due to the ages of the willing participants, Earth Raven took it upon himself to continue his education by meeting with whomever was available for his teachings. Earth Raven was on another path. He would further an education that his people encouraged. A select few who could understand the English words by this time were assigned to quiz Earth Raven on his continuing studies. When accepted into a college, Earth Raven was granted his passage to leave the reservation. He forged ahead through the world of being educated by professors, earning a college degree. As the years were passing, Earth Raven was aging into a man.

In a Washington chamber room, a prominent Native aide reread his letter addressed to Snake Catcher before it was en route care of Earth Raven. "Sir, I am an assistant to a member of the House of Representatives in Washington. I am writing you today with exceptional news. I have secured permission for you to travel the 250 miles to your destination in the Wyoming Territory. You are allowed two weeks to conclude your business and return. You will be escorted to the reservation's border, where you will then ride solo southwest through the land once belonging to the Lakota people to Fort Pierre, where you will roster with them within two days of your departure. There, you will be allowed to continue into Sundance to the Paradise family homestead located at the Paradise Valley Ranch. Jacob and Elizabeth are no longer living; however, their surviving daughter is known to reside there. Truly, Nathaniel Black Deer Davis."

Outside the Washington chamber room, Mr. Davis relinquished the letter and the permission papers to a trusted special messenger. The courier was instructed to ride to Snake Catcher's reservation with it.

It was a glorious spring day in the year 1884 when Snake Catcher's day of honor had arrived. He held up his permission papers to view them again before he folded them up, and then packed for his trip—securely including Hail Maker's blood-stained lessons and poetry book as well.

The 1868 FORT LARAMIE treaty encouraged the Native

children to obtain an education, which is exactly what Earth Raven had accomplished. Earth Raven had much to do with Snake Catcher being able to fulfill his promise. He too learned the White words, and was a very powerful and dangerous warrior to many—he was a lawyer. Even though Earth Raven was forbidden to take the law bar exam among the Whites, he was knowledgeable in law to the fullest degree possible for his kind. That was where Snake Catcher's and Earth Raven's separate trails would begin, but they would meet again very soon.

## Chapter 2

Snake Catcher's trek began smoothly as he traveled to the boundary of the reservation accompanied by a cavalry of Blue Coats. Only a few wished him a safe journey, on this Day One away from the reservation.

As Snake Catcher wandered through the land once belonging to his people, he was forced to recognize that life as a Lakota Native would never be the same as in years gone by. He could see what the Whites were doing to the land; the most striking was killing off most of the buffalo just for a few of their advantages while not utilizing much of their usefulness. Through incident after incident, Snake Catcher felt the violation and invasion of his world that was littered now with evidence of what the White man deemed expendable.

Snake Catcher carried his travel papers during the first stage of that thirty mile trip to Fort Pierre, where he sensed the first sign of trouble. He arrived at the fort by day's end. The Blue Coats there postponed Snake Catcher's trip, stating that the officiating of his paperwork was required. They sent a message through the telegraph lines to Washington asking for verification of his permission. There, Snake Catcher was detained in and confined to dormitory-like housing.

A flood of old scars surfaced, and Snake Catcher began to relive his days in prison. The room where he stayed was only of a minute improvement over his former cell with only the betterment of the smell. After an eternity of four days, the Blue Coats released Snake Catcher to continue his quest. Embarking on his fifth day away, he found that much of that day had deteriorated, so Snake Catcher camped for the night. The next