

PROLOGUE

One hundred sixty-nine years was too long to stay in one place. The Cherokee were a matriarchal society. Men married and moved to their spouses' villages. Even though the ancient shaman-storyteller traveled from one village to another at least once in a generation, it was foolish to think he could go unnoticed forever. He could see suspicion in Chief Stalking Wolf's eyes. The children of the tribe were eager for the storyteller to finish his tale.

The storyteller's eyes glittered with the reflection of a thousand stars. His hands danced as he spoke, weaving his tale into a rich tapestry of ancient lore. The sweetness of his voice lured his audience the way honey enticed a bear.

"After seven days and nights, only the owl and mountain lion stayed awake," said the old shaman. "That is why they were given the gift of seeing and hunting at night."

The old chief stood, leaning heavily on his wolf-head cane.

"All right, everyone. That's all for tonight," said the chief, dismissing the tribe. "I wish a few words alone with my old friend."

The tribe left the communal hearth, returning to their teepees amidst groans of disappointment from the children.

"How may I serve you, Chief Stalking Wolf?"

"Shaman, I wish to know when the hunting will improve."

The shaman sprinkled tobacco over the waning embers of the ceremonial hearth. The tobacco flamed brightly. Thick white smoke lingered, then drifted away on the cool night breeze.

"Tomorrow will be a good day for large game. The hunters will find elk in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains," said the shaman. "But, what is it that truly concerns you, old friend?"

"I have traveled far in many years," said the chief. "I am old, but my memory is sharp. I have never spoken of this, but I know you to be the same storyteller from the village of my youth. You also match the appearance of the storyteller my father listened to in his childhood village. Can this be true?"

"Old friend, your memory is indeed sharper than the flint tips on our best hunting arrows. My love for the noble Cherokee people has made me foolish. I have lingered here too long. Thank you for keeping my secret."

"There is much sickness among the tribe. I fear you may be the cause. I can still my tongue no longer," said Chief Stalking Wolf, nervously fingering the tip of his cane.

When old age had weakened the chief's knees, the shaman had carved the wolf-head cane as a gift of love. Concealed by a false tip at the cane's base was a fire-hardened spear point. How dare Chief Stalking Wolf even think of turning the weapon against his life-long friend?

The shaman's eyes blazed with the reflection of the hearth's flames.

"The pale warriors I sailed with across the great ocean brought the sickness to your people. I have protected the Cherokee since the time of your grandfather's grandfather by sickening and destroying the devil leader of the invading Spaniards."

"You are a devil," wailed the old chief. "It is unnatural for any man to live for thousands of moons."

"You have led your people well for many years," said the ancient storyteller, with tears in his eyes. He leaped forward, clutching the old chief's stooped shoulders. "It is time for you to rest peacefully with your ancestors."

Chief Stalking Wolf swooned in the shaman's arms and was gently lowered to the dusty earth. A last rattling sigh escaped the chief's withered throat as his skin first dried to aged parchment, then shriveled away, leaving only bones.

A lone wolf on a cold, distant mountaintop howled mournfully at the passing of a brother.

A vigorous middle-aged man stood where the ancient shaman had been. He hastily gathered weapons and a half moon's supply of smoked deer meat. He set off at a run following the silver-mooned path bordering the raging river.

Stealing life had been his way for countless generations. The storyteller preferred parceling small amounts of time from large numbers of people, instead of stealing many years from a few. It protected his anonymity.

Once more it was time to move on, hiding among and fading from the memory of man.