



Excerpted from the book, RED
HAWK'S LADY

Setting down her trowel, Effie knew the time had come for a break. She exhaled deeply, and straightening up, wiped her brow of perspiration. Having helped her parents at the site of the dig throughout the early morning hours, she had done her duty, at least for a while. It was time for a bath.

“I am so hot,” she whined. She started to pout, but then thought better of her actions, and in a more adult voice asked, “May I go swimming?”

RED HAWK AND THE
MERMAID

By
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With a quick nod and a sweet smile, her mother endorsed the action. She did advise, however, “Stay close. It’s still quite hazy out this morning, and I don’t want you missing a step and falling.”

“I won’t do that, and I will stay close.” Immediately Effie’s spirits lifted. If there was one thing Effie liked most about accompanying her mother and father on these excavations, it was the sense of freedom she enjoyed. No one—outside of Lesley—treated her as if she were too young to know her own mind. And perhaps it was in response to her parents’ trust that Effie behaved herself uncommonly well.

Tantrums were an unknown affair. Truth be told, Effie considered herself as adult as the next person. She was simply trapped inside a child’s body.

“Is Lesley going with you?” her mother asked.

“No. She left with one of Father’s students, someone named William, I think. They said they were going to survey the lay of the land.”

“Oh. That’s nice.”

Effie sighed. “Yes, Mother. Now may I go swimming?”

“Of course, dear.”

“Thank you.”

Deciding to leave before her mother changed her mind or asked more

questions, Effie padded toward her favorite spot. She could almost see the place from the excavation site.

Caught off to the side of the Big River—the Missouri River—was a splendid water hole. Not too deep, not too shallow, the place was hidden from view by long, green prairie grasses, as well as pine, cottonwoods and a magnificent willow. In the distance—and able to be seen from the pool on most days—were white-capped mountains, which favored the land with a fairytale appeal. It was the ideal place for a quick dip.

Effie knew it was dangerous to swim alone—and briefly she wished that Lesley were a little more friendly

toward her, for it would be fun to have a swimming companion. But Lesley's attitude in regards to Effie was far from amicable, except of course when Lesley wanted something.

Perhaps Lesley thought Effie too young. Certainly, Effie was the younger by four years. But in attitude, Effie considered herself to be the more mature of the two of them. Lesley exhibited more tantrums than Effie had ever witnessed in anyone.

As Effie treaded toward the water, she couldn't help but notice the profusion of pink wildflowers whose fragrances filled the air with a sweet scent. She touched their soft, dewy petals as she passed by them, her

fingers coming away wet from the encounter.

Odd, in places this morning the fog was so thick she could barely see her hand as she flattened it over the grasses and flowers. But in other areas, the haze was starting to dissipate, lending to the land a cathedral-like profusion of golden streams of light slanting through the mist.

For an instant, Effie caught her breath, so beautiful was the sight—so profound. The moment felt sacred, as though she were close to something...something wonderful. Perhaps it was the Creator that she felt so near to, since such beauty could not be by accident.

She let out her breath. It was a good way to start the day, and as she stripped off her dress, her petticoats and chemise, throwing them to the side, peace filled her soul. She left her square-toed boots on her feet so her tender toes need not tread on any sharp rocks. Her pantalettes also remained in place, since she couldn't bring herself to strip to bare skin from the waist down. Her drawers were green, not white, as a woman's pantalettes might be. Green, because her mother had made them from the canvas-like material of an old tent.

At last Effie was ready to swim, and unafraid, she waded into the water.

In truth, there was little need for fear. The swimming hole was close to her parents' dig, well within earshot were there to be any trouble. And Effie was an experienced swimmer, her parents having schooled her in the techniques of lifesaving when she was so young she could barely crawl. Thus, Effie felt safe and quite exuberant.

The water was only ankle deep at the shoreline, but it was cool and refreshing, as she had known it would be. Soon, Effie plunged into the water completely, wetting herself from the top of her very red head to the bottom of her heavy, wet boots. Surfacing, she grinned.

What pleasure!



As Red Hawk treaded a path to the water, a few rays of golden sunlight pushed their way through the fog. In response, the ground came alive, welcoming the warmth of those beams. Here, and as far as the eye could see, the lush, green earth was covered with a misty haze. Mother Earth was awakening.

The early morning scents of grass and pine were bursting with aroma, sweetening the atmosphere. The terrain was solid and firm beneath Red Hawk's feet, and the air enveloped the boy in a cool embrace. But Red Hawk barely noticed the earth and all her scents and secrets, so inward was his attention.

He was confused.

This was to be his last day in camp. On the morrow, he would awaken, never to see Grandfather or any of the people again, unless he was successful in lifting the curse, which plagued his people. Though Red Hawk had often wished for this very opportunity, the

reality of it was more than he could easily assimilate.

He would have eighteen years in which to break the curse. Surely, he could accomplish this. To his young mind, it seemed like a great deal of time had been allotted him.

However, if that were true, why was the spell proving to be so hard for others to break? So many champions before him had tried; so many failures.

Would he be successful? He certainly hoped he would be, although without even starting his mission, he was disadvantaged, for his heart longed to seek revenge for the deaths of his mother and father. But alas, this

was not to be his fate. The welfare of the tribe now depended on him.

“Remember Grandfather in all things,” he muttered to himself. “Remember Grandfather.”

And so it was that Red Hawk was grumbling when he saw her.

There, sitting on a rock at the edge of the pool, was the most unusual but perhaps the most beautiful creature he had ever witnessed. He stared. Was she a vision?

She could be, for he was unable to see the girl as well as he might. The ever-present mist that swirled around her made her appear dreamlike. Yet,

for some unknown reason, he felt certain she was real.

Was she part fish?

No, she must be human. She looked human...well, at least she did from the waist up. But she was certainly like no other being he had ever seen. For one thing, her hair was a dark shade of red, not black or brown, and the locks of her mane were curling about her head in cascading spirals. Her skin color was a shade or two whiter than that to which he was accustomed, but not enough to draw a great deal of notice.

From her waist upward, she wore nothing, but this seemed a usual sort of happenstance. Most of the children in

the village ran naked, and she was a child, he determined, since from his view of her she had thus far developed nothing that due to modesty must be hidden.

But...did she have legs?

Red Hawk couldn't be certain. From the waist downward, it appeared she no longer grew skin. All he could see from there was green. Surely most forms of human beings were not green on the bottom, were they?

Was she a white person? Had there not been rumors in the tribe about such people? Stories that the tribal medicine man, White Claw, had seen such

people and had talked to them? Were white people half fish?

Slowly, as silently as he could, Red Hawk crept toward the girl and was almost upon her when she moved, stretching. Her hands came up to push back her hair, as though she were combing it with her fingers.

Without warning, she turned toward him. Her eyes were big, a light shade of brown, and she stared straight at him.

He froze.

She grinned.

What happened then Red Hawk could never explain, nor did he ever wish to. One moment he was on his

feet, the next he was tripping all over himself. Suddenly he was all hands and legs, and they seemed to be going in all directions at once. The result of course was that he landed on the ground none too delicately, and quite on his rump.

“Hello,” she said, when things had settled down. “Who are you?”

Red Hawk had no conception of what the words meant that she spoke, or even if those words were part of a language. Was she singing? She might be; her voice was that beautiful.

Looking up at her, for he had yet to arise, he voiced, “*Oki*,” deciding that it was best to greet her politely.

She frowned, clearly not educated in the great language of his people.

“Who are you?” she repeated. However, since he didn’t understand her, and vice versa, he used sign language to help impart his meaning.

Yet, even in this, a most basic form of communication, she appeared to be adrift, for she continued to frown at him. Obviously, she did not understand him or what he said. The scowl on her face lasted but a moment, as though it were unable to take permanent hold on one so bright and cheery, and very soon the grimace had transformed into an easy smile.

Maybe that was his undoing. The grin. It was said that there were people whose faces glowed when they smiled, as though lit from within with magic.

She might be such a one, for when Red Hawk looked into her eyes, he thought that surely he had eaten something bad this day. His innards were awash in butterflies.

“Well, no matter who you are,” said the girl after a while, “would you like to swim with me?” She bestowed upon him yet another of those beguiling grins.

He froze, gaping. He knew of nothing else to do but stare at her.

When he didn't respond to her question at once, she made hand motions at him, giving him to understand that she was about to fly into the air...or at least that was what he thought she said.

Was she a goddess, then?

He frowned at her, and she giggled, and with a single hand motion, she invited him to join her. Then, as quick as all that, she slipped into the water.

Was he to follow? Was she a water being after all?

Blackfeet legends told of such beings. There were said to be nymphs, sometimes monsters, who were sent

from the water's depths only to lure a man to his death.

Perhaps she was such a one. Mayhap he should use caution.

Red Hawk, however, ignored any prudence. He was curious about her because she was...different. Besides, though he was only twelve winters old, at this moment he felt very much the male of the species.

With nary a thought for personal danger, he followed the girl into the water. If she were a siren leading him to his death, why would some men fear it?

But she wasn't about death, he soon came to understand. She was about

playing...and fun. And there was no great need to translate languages when the object of the game was to decide who was "it".

"Catch me," she said, as she tagged him with the slightest brush of her hand. She dove underwater, then he followed her, letting her take the lead.

She is not a fish, he saw at last, as he opened his eyes underwater. *Nor is she a siren, or a goddess.*

She swam by use of hands and legs, not fins. What he had thought might have been scales from her waist down were nothing more than the ugliest sort of leggings he had ever seen.

Why would a girl swim in such things? And with her footgear still on? He was dressed only in his breechcloth.

Catching up with her, he tagged her.

Still underwater, she spun around, and though they were both beneath the surface, she smiled at him. Then, as quick as that, she lunged toward him, her arm extended.

He backed up, but his heart wasn't into retreating from her, and he let her touch him. Her hand was soft, delicate, and he was pondering the experience, when all at once she struck out, away from him.

They both surfaced.

"I am the better swimmer of the two of us," she taunted him, before she giggled. Though Red Hawk couldn't discern the words, her meaning was clear. She was playing to win.

He realized his mistake at once. If he were to earn her respect, he would have to prevail in this game. However, he was wise enough to realize that he best not shove defeat at her too soon. *Saa*, he would need to win this game with her blessing and goodwill. Not an easy feat for a boy of twelve.

"*Kika*, wait," he called out in the Blackfeet tongue. "*Poohsapoot*, come here! Let us define this game."

She paid him no heed, and not because she didn't understand him, language barrier or not.

He followed her, tagged her, but he didn't at once retreat. Instead, opening his arms, he invited her to touch him back. To this end, he swam around her, leaping to and fro, but always at her arm's length.

Tentatively, doubtfully, she reached out toward him. She had almost grazed him again when he extended his hands toward her instead. He tickled her.

"No fair." She laughed, doubling up. "Your arms are longer than mine. Now, no tickling."

He didn't understand her words, though he was fairly certain he comprehended exactly what she wanted. Grinning at her, he repeated the action.

"No!" she said, and there was no mistaking the intent of that word. He wasn't about to end the game, however, not yet, and so he danced around her once again, his arms wide open and tempting her to make him "it".

"What are you doing?" Her gaze followed him as he swam easily around her.

He didn't answer. Instead, he tugged at one of her curls.

“Stop that,” she ordered sharply. Nonetheless, she was giggling.

He repeated the action.

“Oh, this is not fair. You are bigger than I am and your arms are longer.” She leaped toward him suddenly. He backed away, just in time, his arms still open as he treaded water, offering her a clear target.

She laughed, and he joined in with her.

And so it was that the morning hours wore on. Back and forth they played, Red Hawk allowing the beautiful water spirit to win the game of tag. But never more than he.

“Oh, you are too much for me.” She smiled up at him. “Unfortunately, I must pronounce you the winner, though I think you have a terrible advantage over me.” As if to compensate for the inequality, she reached down in the water and pulled off each of her shoes in turn. “Why did I not think of this before now? These awful pantalettes I am wearing get in my way and my boots drag me down, while you have only your breechcloth to restrict you. No wonder you are able to taunt me.”

Taking aim, she threw first one boot at the shoreline, and then the other. Her hurl wasn't accurate, and one by one, each shoe fell short of the shore,

plopping into the water, the hard leather causing them to sink swiftly. At once gallant, Red Hawk propelled himself forward, capturing one shoe, then the other.

She followed, wading right up to him, where she extended her hand, asking for the boots. Slowly he presented the shoes to their owner, his hand lingering over the last boot before dropping his arm to his side.

“Thank you,” she said, looking up at him. Smiling, she held her shoes against her breast and pointed to herself. “Effie. Can you say that? Effie.” Again she indicated herself.

“Eh-h-h—eee,” he repeated.

She nodded. “Close enough. And you are?” She pointed toward him.

Words and gestures aside, he knew instinctively what she asked, but it was beyond his means to tell her what she desired. Somewhat alarmed—for an Indian would never ask another his name—Red Hawk tried to justify her action. She was not from here, he decided. She might not know the protocols of his polite society.

For one, a man never spoke his name aloud. Not only was it a taboo, it was also considered boastful, for names often told of great deeds.

Also, Red Hawk was reluctant to willingly utter the name that the others

in the Clan called him. His name was Red Hawk, not Poor Orphan. Even if she wouldn't understand the words, he could not bring himself to say them.

He gazed away from her, prompting her to try again. Pointing to him, she said, "And you are?"

This time Red Hawk shrugged, and turning away, presented her with his back as he swam toward the middle of the pond. There he waited, motioning her forward, asking her with signs to continue their game.

She shook her head. "Aren't you going to tell me your name? After we have spent such a remarkable morning together? What am I to call you?"

Red Hawk feigned misunderstanding, saying nothing.

"Oh, very well," she uttered, clearly exasperated. "It's not very much to ask, though, is it? I'd just like to know what to say if I'm to address you. Will you be here tomorrow?"

Again, he remained silent, not understanding her words, though he did try to get her to join him once more in the center of the pool.

She shook her head. Spinning away from him, she began to wade closer to the shoreline. "I can't. Don't misunderstand me. It's not because you won't tell me your name or anything, but my parents might

become concerned if I am gone too long. Already I've been here a few hours, and so I must return to them. I have enjoyed your company, though.” With a grin that was half apology, she turned to leave the water.

A feeling of loss swept over Red Hawk, and he swam toward her, following her. Coming up behind her, he touched her gently on the shoulder to get her attention, then taking hold of her hand, he guided it to his shoulder, where he allowed her to “tag” him.

Averting his gaze, Red Hawk started to draw back from her, but she held on to him tightly. Curious, his glance met hers, became lost in hers.

“I have enjoyed my morning swim with you,” she said earnestly, the honest appeal in her eyes intriguing. At last, she let go of him, and reaching her hands up behind her neck, she unfastened the necklace she wore—one made of a gold-colored substance. After placing the necklace in her small hand, she extended the jewelry toward him.

“Take it,” she said, when Red Hawk didn't immediately stretch out his hand to capture it. “Take it,” she repeated, motioning toward it and then to him.

At length, he nodded and grasped hold of the prize.

“There,” she said, “that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

But he didn’t understand her meaning as the words were not easily discerned.

Looking down at himself, as he stood before her in only his breechcloth, he searched his body for a gift he might give her.

But what? There was little that he owned.

Time seemed short as he pondered the problem, and he had almost given up the idea altogether, when he remembered...his earrings. The white shell earrings he wore were of some value.

Once they had been his mother’s. Now they would be hers.

After unfastening them, he placed two white shells in his palm and extended his hand toward her.

“For me?” she said, and he nodded.

Her tiny fingers slid over his palm as she drew near to take the prize. Red Hawk was amazed that a simple touch should make him feel as if he were suddenly falling through space.

“I don’t know why I should say this to you,” she said, “for I know that you cannot understand me—and perhaps that is why I feel I *must* say this—but I think I have fallen in love with you.” Her hand briefly clasped his.

And then it was over. She turned away and hurried off in a direction opposite to that of his camp. She was almost out of sight when she stopped still and spun back around.

Running toward him, she came right up to him and said, "I almost forgot." Standing on the tips of her toes, she brought her face up to his, where she placed a kiss on his cheek. She giggled. "I hope to see you here tomorrow." Flashing him one last grin, she fled.

She didn't look back, and maybe it was good she hadn't. For, in response to that kiss, slight though it was, Red Hawk had taken a few quick steps toward her as if to reciprocate, when

suddenly he became so uncoordinated he tripped over himself.

Once again, the earth cushioned his fall. Once again, he lay flat on his fanny.

Though she had not spared Red Hawk a final glance, he watched her, looking at the place where she had disappeared for a long time, as though her impression still remained there.

"*Otahkohsoa' tsis*, Red Hawk," he said to the air, as if it might carry his words to her. "Red Hawk is my name."

Slowly he came up to his feet and stepped toward the water, where he looked out upon the place where they had played. Would she come here

tomorrow, hoping to see him? For a moment, if a moment only, he wished this duty to his people had not been forced upon him.

He would like nothing better than to see her again, and to frolic with her as though the world were without cares. Indeed, although he was too young to know about matters of the heart, he felt certain that he had fallen in love with this water spirit, the girl who had called herself Effie.

“Eff...ee,” he murmured, and as he turned away from the water to step back toward his encampment, he was struck with the idea that somehow, in some way, he would see her again.

The thought caused him to smile.