

THE BOY WHO RAN





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*This book is dedicated to my mother and father,
both of whose lives were ended prematurely.*

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	1
1. The Village	5
2. Run!	8
3. The Accidental Student	19
4. The Secret Student	31
5. The Group Hunt	50
6. The Teacher	75
7. Confrontation	93
8. White Flank	103
9. The Naming	131
EPILOGUE	147

THE BOY WHO RAN





The marauders crept quietly through the trees and tall grass, their attention focused on the prey—each man was cloaked in gray fur. The leader of the Wolf Pack carried a stone axe. It was a strange weapon that had been made by fusing several large flint shards into the leg bone of some beast, and was well suited for close-quarter fighting. The rest carried heavy spears, similar to the ones commonly used by hunters, but these men no longer hunted in the traditional sense.

It was dark; just a sliver of the summer moon peeked through the high, thin clouds to illuminate the ground. Within the pack's circle was a small nomadic camp. Ten hide shelters surrounded a fire that had been banked for the night, its coals still hot and ready to flare up with just a little more fuel and a little more air. One lone figure was visible in the camp. The sentinel leaned against a pile of hides; the man's chin, yielding to fatigue and the comfort of a full stomach, rested on his chest.

As the pack grew closer, the lingering aroma from the camp's last meal made their mouths water. A

haunch of fresh bison was spitted but had been removed from the fire. A little away from the center of the camp was the treasure: A large cache of food had been painstakingly gathered and preserved over several hunts. It was packed and ready to be moved back to the camp's home village to the far north. This was the reason the others had come.

Something must have alerted the hunter on watch; he sat up quickly and climbed unsteadily to his feet—maybe he'd heard something.

What is that? he wondered, squinting into the darkness. It appeared to be a lump of rock where none had been before. Was this something new, or had he simply not noticed it before? The man took a few steps towards the trees to get a better look at the mysterious object, his spear grasped firmly in both hands. The hunter thought about calling an alarm, but imagined what the other hunters would say if he awakened the whole camp to look at a rock.

As the man drew closer, details began to resolve in the dim light. It almost looked like the rock was covered with ... gray fur. Gray fur with eyes! He opened his mouth to yell, but rapid footsteps from behind made him pause for just one deadly moment. The last thought that passed through his mind was regret, not for himself but for his brothers, his mate, and his young son. An abruptly strangled cry was all that sounded when the multi-bladed axe cut through his neck; even that small noise triggered the predators into action.

Each ran to a shelter, ready to kill anyone who emerged through the low openings. Several of the

THE BOY WHO RAN

awakened hunters, sensing danger, sprang from their respective shelters quickly and managed to evade the initial killing thrusts of the marauder's spears and began yelling to alert the others of the danger—but it was too late. As the *mêlée* took form, the voices of both defenders and attackers rose and blended in a chaotic roar. But the fight was not even and half of the defending men had been killed as they stepped through their low doorways. The pack leader ran to the last shelter, realizing that it had been left unguarded.

No one had come through the opening yet, but the man saw movement inside and then a figure framed within the doorway—it looked as though it might be a woman. *No matter*, he thought coldly, swinging his axe for the second time that night and striking the woman across the chest. The flint blades embedded into her ribs and the leader was forced to put his foot against the woman's side to pull his weapon free. The blades ripped her body open and she was pushed backwards into the shelter, falling. *This must have been the home of the sentry*, the leader thought, dismissing it as a source of further danger.

By the time the woman fell, just two of the defending men were still alive. A few of the women had joined their mates in battle to protect the children, but they were not a real challenge and died quickly.

Seeing that resistance from the defenders was over, the leader began howling, mimicking the sound of the animal from which his pack took its name. The other men copied the Alpha's voice and one by one

entered the tents to murder the remaining women and the children. Two of the pack members threw fuel on the fire and then used flaming brands to set the shelters alight. The pack would burn everything to the ground and leave no one alive.

Inside the last burning shelter, the woman who had been wounded by the leader crawled painfully to the back of her home, a razor-sharp knife grasped in the crawling hand while the other was held across her chest. The boy was awake; his large eyes stared past her through the door of the shelter as she moved over him. He tried to speak, but the woman placed a bloodied hand over his mouth.

“You must be silent!” the woman commanded. There was a compelling, undeniable force in her whisper that the boy had never heard before. He couldn’t imagine disobeying her.

The mother reached over his body, pausing with the knife over his chest as he stared into her eyes. Her hand hesitated there a moment but then continued past his body to cut a long vertical slit in the already-burning shelter. With a supreme effort, ignoring both pain and weakness, the woman rolled the boy onto her back, telling him to hold on.

The mother began crawling through the opening towards the edge of the forest. If she could reach the thick underbrush, maybe the boy could escape ... maybe he would live.



THE VILLAGE

The village was nestled between the western edge of the forest and the extreme eastern edge of the Great Plains. It was small; perhaps seventy or eighty people lived here. Twenty-four earthen mounds of various sizes and shapes were arranged in what seemed a haphazard configuration, but the position of each was carefully measured, dictated by tradition, and dependent on the status of the home's occupants. These were the winter dwellings of The People, the place they returned each fall to prepare for the frigid winds and snows of winter.

One shelter was much larger than the others. The Long Lodge was a gathering place for the community in the winter, a refuge from the cold where everyone could come together to share stories, conduct ceremonies, and celebrate important feasts. Sharing was essential when the frozen wind blew across the prairie and snow piled high around their homes; it helped them forget their hardships for a while.

Just north of the village, a small river emerged from the forest traveling roughly westward at a leisurely pace and along a seemingly undisciplined path. It was just an overgrown stream at this point, but its banks provided a nice place to take a nap under the shadow of the trees during the hottest days of late summer. People nearby drew comfort from its music as water rolled over smooth, worn stones and trickled into shallow pools. During the deepest parts of winter, the surface froze over with a thick crust of ice and the river's voice was muted. The People missed hearing its steady song in winter and listened for its return every day. The river always knew when spring was coming.

East of the village was the Great Forest, a mixture of old growth and new flowering trees interspaced with evergreens. It covered much of the Atlantic coastal region, the Great Lakes and Mississippi Basins, and the Tennessee and Ohio Valleys of what eventually, in six thousand years, would become the United States.

From here, the Great Plains stretched out to the west, an ocean of grass over subtle hills. Little groupings of trees were sprinkled here and there, lonely woodland castaways that seemed to have wandered off from the old forest. It was here at the edge, the place where the land transitioned from forest to rolling prairie, that the boy lived.

To people of the village, he was an unexceptional-looking boy, neither especially tall nor obviously talented. Few paid much attention to him if they thought of him at all. But the boy could move

THE BOY WHO RAN

through the forest in a way that seemed almost magical—and he could run very, very fast.

For the boy, running was what was best in life. He sometimes ran across the wide-open pastures to the west, where even the wild animals might pause to look on at this strange human—to watch his lithe, smooth motion as he hurtled the rocks that seemed to grow from the soil. But it was in the woods where his talent was really special. He could run amazingly fast and in absolute silence through the densest forest without slowing. His body seemed to defy gravity as he slid between trees and through brush as though it were not there—a ghost. The boy saw and used his environment in three dimensions rather than the two that most people and animals perceived. This expanded vision provided him options the others didn't notice, and he was as comfortable ascending and moving along paths high in the trees as he was on the ground.

There was a freedom and joy in his stride that belied his demeanor in the village. Nothing in the world was better than to run; and there was no place as special to run as the forest. It was his greatest pleasure and could lift the weight of his long sorrow like nothing else. No one could run like the boy, and no one but the boy knew this—it was his most important secret.

2



"It seems most of the boys have been asked to work on the harvest today," the hunter said. He was considering canceling the day's lesson. Only two boys had come for training, but the man knew that sometimes these smaller classes were more fun, and more useful. A small class meant he could spend time with each student.

"We will practice tracking anyway," the hunter decided, looking around for his mate. She was expecting a child, their first, and he had grown more protective of her since learning this under the midsummer moon.

Wild Flower was on the south side of the Long Lodge with her close friend, enjoying the sun and cracking dried nuts to make the cakes. She saw Red Sky looking for her and waved at him, knowing that he would look before leaving. The woman smiled inwardly at how much he had changed recently.

"Let's go," the hunter said at last. "I want to be back before the sun sets." The boys followed the

THE BOY WHO RAN

man into the trees. He chose a path and they began looking for the signs of animals to track.



The boy had been following one of the many deer trails that crisscrossed their way through the forest during the early morning. This area was dense with undergrowth, shrubs, and bramble, all of which grew in the shade of the high canopy formed by well-spaced primordial trees. He almost smiled as he ran this morning; the earthy scent of the soil mixed in with decaying layers of plant material was comfortably familiar—home.

It would be good to visit a large sinkhole. The one he liked was well beyond the second line of hills and much farther than most people normally went. It was a good place to dive, a high rock wall that dropped into deep, still water. The sensation of falling was exhilarating, and he could swim to its tiny island where there might still be a few blueberries the birds and other animals had overlooked. A few of the cakes made from ground nuts and grains were in his pouch; blueberries would add sweetness to their otherwise bland flavor.

The sun was peeking between the branches of the trees that rushed backwards above him, its light created sparkling patterns that played along his skin. The moving bits of sun and shadow combined

with coolness in the air to feed his thirst for more speed—he couldn't get enough speed today!

The animals, attuned to slight noises and subtle changes in the air, were often surprised as he passed closely by. He startled a bear but disappeared before the animal could decide if he was a threat, or even what to do. The bear looked in the direction from which the boy had come, saw nothing to cause alarm, and might have thought, *Strange human—invisible.*

The boy was invisible in the village too. No one looked at him the way he saw people looking at the other boys and girls, their sons and daughters and grandsons and granddaughters. No one looked at him with the smiling eyes and the warm expressions reserved for family. He didn't have a mother or a father or grandparents—or even a name of his own. He was just “the boy,” a part of the background like a stone or a hide, tolerated but always alone and never really accepted.

This morning he was wearing an old deerskin breechclout, the castoff of another who had outgrown it. All of the boy's things were this way. He'd left his light tunic in the village today, since the weather was still good. In winter he wore long pants made from sewn skins and even wrapped his body in furs during the coldest months. Winters were severe on the plains and uncomfortable for everyone. The cold forced him to spend much of his time closed up in one shelter or another with different families; just thinking about the coming winter made the boy shudder.

THE BOY WHO RAN

Maybe the winter will be mild, he thought with a sigh. Last winter, a fearsome storm had all but buried the village in snow, and he was trapped inside for many days.

Never part of a particular lodge, the boy was passed from shelter to shelter to be warmed and fed. He remembered listening to a particular conversation between two women last winter—they didn't know he could hear them.

"It's your turn to look after the boy," Summer Wind said to Forest Water, the mate of the hunter Black Hoof. "We fed him and provided a place to stay for a whole moon and our shelter is smaller than yours. With the new little one coming, we need more space. Next spring, maybe we can enlarge the shelter, but it's winter and we are cramped. Will you please take the boy now?"

"But he's so strange," the woman replied. "I don't know if I can stand a whole moon with him always inside. The wind blows so hard sometimes these days that if he went outside he would be carried away. Why don't the elders assign him to a family?"

"I don't know, Forest Water. I'm not sure why but I wouldn't want to be the one stuck with him forever," the woman said. "My mate is already tired of him. He's always there! I know it's a hardship, but it's the same for all of us. Just take him. You don't need to do much—feed him, let him sleep in your shelter, and ignore him; you know how much he likes being alone."

The boy had heard many discussions of this sort during his years with The People. He tried not to

think about it, but somehow the isolation made him want to be away and in the forest even more.

Strange? he wondered silently, tilting his head and remembering the women's words. *At least I don't argue and complain all winter.*

It wasn't always this way for him. He could remember a time when he was very small and he was not alone, when there was someone special for him too. There was one woman in particular who may have been his mother; that's how he thought of her. Then something terrible happened—something that he wouldn't, or couldn't, fully remember. Every time he tried, his stomach felt a cold chill and he would withdraw more deeply into himself.

At times the same recurring nightmare would awaken him and he would relive the last moments of his forgotten first life. Stubborn little flashes of memory and the absolute horror of its final moments were all that remained of his past, as if his current life began as the last one ended.

Who was I? he asked the forest again, hearing only more silence in return.

Certain impressions from those last moments were sharp and frozen in time. There was the smoke, and the fear, and the angry voices—images and sensations all broken up and scrambled, just like the sparkles of light that made their way through the trees. He remembered the woman crawling with him on her back, slowly, painfully, and in absolute silence. She had suffered some horrible injury and they were both soaked in her blood, but she refused to cry out or to make a noise at all. The woman carried him to

THE BOY WHO RAN

the edge of this very same forest, many days' travel from where he now stood.

In the soft rustling of the leaves above, he could almost still hear her whispers that he would be safe in the forest. And if he chose to let the memory loose, he could still smell her fear, still feel the burning smoke in his eyes and lungs, and could still recall the never-to-be-forgotten scent of her fresh blood.

"You must be silent," she'd hissed, her mouth almost pressed against his ear. The woman was in agony but fighting to hide it; thinking back, he was sure now that she had been dying and was spending everything remaining of herself to save him. For some reason, he couldn't recall anything about her before that night, but her final words were carved into his mind—hushed and anxious, they retained undeniable power.

"Run!" she had said. "Run and do not stop!"

He had obeyed.

The boy had run and run, and run in the darkness, his feet bleeding and his skin torn by the thorns that clawed at him—unable to stop. A purpose had been ignited that night and it burned hot within him, driving him forward, hour after hour. He ran through the night and the next two days, pausing only for water as it found him. The boy had not stopped running until his small body, overcome by hunger and exhaustion, had finally failed and left him to rest on the cool floor of the forest. There had been a feverish awareness of deer—a mother and, especially, her fawn lying beside him for a time. They gave him warmth and a sense of comfort, but

even now he wasn't sure if this had really happened or if it had just been a dream. He didn't know where his original home was then any more than he did today, but the experience of that last night remained fresh in his mind and was always with him.

The boy was approaching a low hill in the forest when a small movement caught his eye; something was ahead and to the right, just off the main trail—he was extra careful to be quiet. It was one of the other creatures of the forest. They fascinated him and he often thought of them as kindred spirits, even brothers. *Be very quiet*, he told himself, barely breathing.

Just a few steps from the trail stood an enormous buck, head erect and alert; eyes unblinking as his broad antlers turned slowly, scanning for danger. The buck sensed something, but the boy had been running as quietly as only he could. By chance, he had been downwind and his scent hadn't betrayed his presence.

"Hello, brother," the boy said.

The deer, looking for movement and shape, saw nothing, heard nothing, and scented nothing. He knew humans, knew what they looked like, how they smelled, and had felt the bite of their weapons before. But the branches and leaves of the brush broke up the boy's outline, obscuring his form.

This was not the first time that the boy had come so close to animals, but he was always interested in watching, following, and studying them. Many of the ways he moved through the forest had been

learned watching different animals. Their competitions were even more fascinating to watch.

The trials between bucks in their season as they vied for the does were amazing. Every species had some equivalent. The boy had even watched the animals fight, for food, for territory, and for their lives. He recalled one fight in particular.

Two wolves had brought down a doe and were preparing to feed. The boy was high in a tree and had seen the end of the hunt, but the forest had other eyes too. A hungry wolverine had also witnessed the kill and was approaching it, showing no particular concern about the wolves. They were larger than the wolverine, and the boy wondered why it would risk challenging two such capable fighters. Why didn't it wait until they had their fill and then take whatever was left? But the wolverine arrogantly strolled towards the fresh meat as if they weren't there. The two wolves seemed confused and didn't immediately react, but both were ready to defend the kill—each stood defensively on either side of the doe's carcass.

Finally, one wolf expressed his objection to sharing with the newcomer, baring his fangs and laying his ears flat with a lowered head—and the wolverine attacked, but not head-on. It quickly stepped to the wolf's side, circling on its strong legs, and used its razor-sharp claws to strike the hindquarters of its adversary. The wolf yelped in pain and surprise, retreating from the doe and what had seemed a lesser opponent. The wolverine was unperturbed and approached the carcass again.

The second wolf wasn't having that! He probably wondered what his brother's problem was—after all they were wolves. He lunged forward. Once again, the wolverine stepped sideways—allowing the wolf to miss—and circled, marking this second wolf in the same way. This one was apparently a slow learner, because he needed a second lesson before understanding the situation.

Frustrated and bleeding, the two wolves retreated, offering little more than black looks and leaving the choicest parts of the doe to the wolverine. Maybe the wolves returned later for leftovers—the boy didn't stay to find out, but he remembered the lesson. The outcome of a fight did not always depend on which adversary was larger. The wolverine relied on superior intelligence and speed and knew the weak points of its opponents.

The young human harbored no illusions about life; hunting, competing, and defending your kill was the way of the forest. Even brothers fought for food—sometimes people even killed other people.

The boy was not a hunter, but knew that if he had a weapon now he could bring the buck down and provide food for the people of the village—if only he knew how. No one had taught him, and no one was teaching him to hunt or track the way they taught the other boys. He had never asked why—he didn't have to.

They don't really want me. The boy stared bitterly towards the buck, not really seeing him. *I can run faster than anyone in the village. I can get close enough to animals to touch them if I want. I can run all day*

THE BOY WHO RAN

and all night, but... what's the point? I have more in common with that buck than I do with the people of the village.

He wasn't entirely comfortable with the thought of killing, even as he knew and accepted the realities of life. *Still, hunters are the most valued members of the village.* In the early years the boy believed it important to be closer to the people, but as he had grown older he was less certain and felt a kinship with the animals.

I have to eat, he argued. I've tasted venison many times. He knew that if he was willing to eat the meat from an animal then he should be willing to kill it as well. *I know I could kill for food, but I need to think about this some more and I need to learn. After all, I'm one of The People, not an animal... aren't I?*

The boy remained a while longer, watching the buck pull leaves from lower branches, and examining him more closely. This buck had a tuft of white hair on his left flank. It had an odd shape and was probably the result of some injury that had healed long ago. Its antlers were impressive, large and complex and almost twice as wide as the boy. He wondered how the deer could carry such heavy things on its head all of the time and tried to imagine something like them on his own head.

I think I'll call you White Flank, the boy said silently, naming the buck for its white scar. There was a wry expression on his face that gradually faded to something else as his mind wandered back to his unanswered question. A noise from somewhere

MICHAEL SELDEN

behind caused the deer to flinch. Someone or something was moving along the trail from the west.

It sounds like a whole herd of bison, he told the deer silently, sighing. Then he heard faint voices. People were coming, but they were still far away.

The deer was aware of the people and decided that they were already too close. With barely a pause, the buck leapt over a large shrub and disappeared into the safety of the forest within just a few heartbeats.

Run, brother! the boy whispered silently. *Run, and do not stop!*