

## The Unsettled West

“Watch for Indians,” Joe winked as prepared to leave. “Keep your eye on the horses.”

“I’m gonna blabberslap you, Joe,” she frowned. “You know Indians make me leery. What if they scalp me?”

Joe stroked his wife’s long, blond hair. “The Sioux are harmless. Curious, that’s all. Never seen a white woman.” He kissed her cheek. “I’ll be back in a few days.”

When Joe heard the Homestead Act of 1862 was giving away 150 acres in the newly-formed Dakota Territory, he was hooked. All one had to do was farm the land and plant at least eighty trees. He learned about a place in the James River Valley with lush fertile soil, an abundance of wildlife, and lakes. It was frequented by traders and hunted by the Sioux who lived close by. When they arrived, they thought they’d found their little piece of heaven. Joe cut blocks of sod and built a soddie. Trees and gardens were planted, and pioneer life began for the couple.

Mary wasn’t afraid of being left alone in the middle of nowhere, forty miles from civilization. She knew how to draw water from the lake for washing and split her own wood for cooking. She could use the shotgun to scare off coyotes or wolves. But the Indians made her shiver.

She remembered her first week on the Dakota prairie. Joe was away herding cattle. She was hanging wash one day when she spotted Indians across the 20-acre lake that separated her and the band of Sioux. Her skin prickled with fear. She hid in the tall prairie grass until dusk, waiting for her husband to come home.

“I was terribly afraid, Joe.”

“When John and I first surveyed this land, we saw those Indians too. They eyed us real close. Some Sioux were known as horse thieves, so with all John’s horses, we were a tad anxious. Later we learned they thought **we** were the horse thieves coming to steal their Apaches. They’re people – just like us. Nothing to fear.” He soothed her anxiety.

Three days, and Joe had not yet returned. Mary was not too worried. She knew it took Joe at least a day to walk the forty miles by foot, another day to get the needed winter supplies, and at least another day to walk back home hauling the hand-held wagon –if the weather cooperated. Prairie fires were common in the hot Dakota heat. Heavy rains or tornadoes would threaten travel too.

As she picked beans from her garden, she noticed three Indians watching her from the other side of the lake. Mary kept her head down with her heart beating through her chest and hurried into the soddie. Peering out the window, she breathed in relief as she watched them ride away.

Joe would be home tonight, and she knew how he liked salt pork and beans. She snapped the beans, stoked the cookstove, and put the kettle on to boil. While slicing bread at the table, the door opened and in walked a large-muscled Indian holding a huge hunting knife.

“Need bread, coffee, and sugar,” he demanded.

Mary shook her head and kept slicing bread without a glance. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him run his finger over the blade and stare at her.

“I’ve none to spare. Sorry.” Putting on a brave front, she laid down her butcher knife and rose to put the bread on the shelf behind her.

The Indian grabbed her knife and slid it into his belt.

Mary straightened to her five-foot height and glared at the man who towered over her., and then stomped out the door in defiance. He followed. Shivering in fear, she wondered if she’d

made a foolish choice. But to her surprise, he walked right past her, joining his men at the water's edge.

Mary ran back inside and quickly barricaded the door. Close to midnight, she jerked awake hearing someone push at the door.

"Go away or I'll blow a hole through you!" Mary shouted, her finger trembling on the shotgun trigger.

"You already forgot me?" Joe yelled back.

Mary wilted in relief, letting him in.

Next morning, the Indian walked in again. "Got tobacco?"

Joe retrieved some from his tin.

The half-naked Indian touched Mary's hand. "Brave squaw, Joe."

Joe chuckled. "Mary, meet Blackfoot! Thanks for keeping an eye on my woman, friend."

Blackfoot gave her a nod and walked out the door with a grin.