

CREATING ESTHER

Chapter 1

School

School was the white man's weapon and the Ojibwe's defense. So why didn't Ishkode's friends respect it?

Maybe it was because the outsiders' language and ways were hard to understand. Ishkode kicked a twig on the path. Even she had trouble learning them, especially when—

Rawrrr!

Ishkode froze as a branch shook snow down on her. She shivered. Was a cougar crouching in the tree, waiting to pounce? It might go away if she remained motionless.

Too late. She saw movement out of the corner of her eye just before the creature pounced and knocked her to the snow-covered ground.

"Tricked you!" The boy's braid bounced as he jumped up and ran off.

Ishkode shook her fist at him. "Waagosh," she yelled, "I'll get you back."

Her name meant "fire," and it fit. Her parents had given it to her nine years ago, when she was three, after learning that her anger could blaze like a fire.

It was burning now.

By the time she caught up with Waagosh, he had made it into the schoolyard and was surrounded by other boys. Ishkode's fists were still clenched, but she left them at her side. She'd wait for a fair fight.

"Little baby is scared of cougars." Waagosh snarled and pawed at the air with his hands. Then he laughed. "They don't even live around here anymore. The white man killed most of them and chased the rest farther west."

Ishkode's friend Miigwan put her hands on her hips. "They aren't all gone. My father saw one last fall."

As the teacher came out and rang the bell, Ishkode brushed the snow off her calico skirt and rabbit cape. Then she ran her fingers through her long hair to get out the pine needles that had rained down on her when Waagosh pounced.

Putting her arm around Miigwan's shoulder, Ishkode said, "Thank you."

Her friend shrugged. "Those boys are awful, and Waagosh is the worst. Let's wait until they get inside before we go in ourselves."

When the girls finally walked into the reservation schoolhouse, Ishkode shivered again. Nobody had made a fire in the stove in the corner of the room, so she left her cape on and blew on her fingers. Even Miss Nau was wearing a heavy woolen shawl.

Books flew through the air as the older boys threw them at each other. The smaller children hid under their desks while Miss Nau stood with her back to the class. Her shoulders trembled as she wrote on the black board in front of the room.

Ishkode glared at the boys. She wanted to yell at them, but they wouldn't listen to her. They always tired of the game quickly, anyway.

After the books stopped flying, Ishkode made her way to her seat and took out McGuffey's first reader. Then she looked up at the black board. The teacher's marks said March 21, 1895. The Ojibwe interpreter had explained that March was the Hard Crust on Snow Moon. The first number told how many times the sun had risen during that moon, and the last number had something to do with years. She shook her head. How did they know how many years had passed since the world was created?

Ishkode looked around, but the interpreter wasn't here today. He didn't come often, and even when he did, Ishkode wasn't sure he translated correctly. Even so, a bad interpreter was better than none.

The school had been open for four years, and the big government had ordered the Ojibwe to send their children there. The government even threatened to cut off their food supply if the children didn't go. But the white teachers never stayed a second year, and Ishkode was the only student who had made it more than halfway through the first reader. Then there were the ones like Waagosh who didn't even try to learn.

Miss Nau had already given up. Tears glistened on her cheeks when she turned around. Her voice trembled as she called the Primer Class to the front of the room.

Four students carried their books with them and stood in a line. Pausing between words, six-year-old Aamoo read, "I see a pig."

It was her first year in school, and she could read better than the other three children in the Primer Class, even the two who had started a year before Aamoo.

Aamoo also read better than Waagosh and his friends. Miss Nau wanted to put them in the Primer Class, but they refused to take part in the lessons.

"I wish Miss Nau could speak Ojibwe," Ishkode whispered to Miigwan. "How are we supposed to learn if we can't understand her?"

And how could Ishkode study with all the noise in the room?

Still, she opened her McGuffey's reader and found the place where she had stopped last time. Miss Nau would hear her read later and help her say the words correctly.

The room had quieted down because the bigger boys were drawing pictures of the teacher and each other, trying to see who could make someone look the ugliest.

At her desk, Ishkode silently read Lesson 38, "The Boy Who Told a Lie."

Oh, how guilty and ashamed did that boy feel as he walked along by his father. His look of innocence was gone, and he was ashamed to look his father or his mother in the face. He tried to appear easy and happy, but he was uneasy and miserable.

Ishkode stopped reading and thought. How would she feel if she told a lie? Terrible, she was sure. Was that what "miserable" meant? And what was "innocence"?

She was almost done with the story when Waagosh yelled, "Fishing time."

All the boys jumped up and ran outside. The girls looked after them, then at Miss Nau. When she put her head in her hands, the girls left, too.

On the way out, Miigwan asked, "Are you coming?"

Ishkode shook her head. "I want Teacher to hear me read and help me say the words correctly."

But first Ishkode had to wait until Miss Nau stopped crying.

The government in Washington said Ojibwe children had to go to school but sent beginning teachers who didn't know the language.

Did the white man want Ishkode and her friends to fail?