



Pathfinders

FINDING GRACE

KIM SIGAFUS

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CONTENTS

- CHAPTER 1 **The Dance**
- CHAPTER 2 **A Crisis Arises**
- CHAPTER 3 **Talking It Out**
- CHAPTER 4 **The Surprise Visitor**
- CHAPTER 5 **Unforgiven**
- CHAPTER 6 **The Journal**
- CHAPTER 7 **Starting Again**
- CHAPTER 8 **Nokomis**
- CHAPTER 9 **The Healing Begins**
- CHAPTER 10 **Coming to Understand**
- CHAPTER 11 **A Clear Mind**
- CHAPTER 12 **The Medicine Wheel**

RESOURCES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Dance

Standing on the sidelines of the large arena, Autumn clasped her hands in front of her and sighed. She was so nervous. To even be there was a huge deal for her. Normally she would prefer to sit in the audience and applaud those who were brave enough to put themselves out there and dance for hundreds of people. On top of that, this was a contest, so she was being judged. While Aunt Jessie clearly thought she was ready, she didn't feel ready.

This was an important time, for the Jingle Dress dance was one hundred years old now. Aunt Jessie had told her the dance had come about in Minnesota during the Spanish flu epidemic. The dance was a healing one, and the first dance was said to have healed a sick little girl. Every Jingle Dress dancer dances for others who are sick or hurting in some way. Autumn knew it to be a very powerful dance of prayer.

She watched as the music started and a young girl began dancing. She moved methodically and gracefully, and it was obvious to Autumn that the girl had been dancing all her life. The dance seemed to become a part of her, and Autumn wondered if her own dancing would give away how nervous she really was to even be there.

She glanced behind her to see Aunt Jessie smiling at her. Her father and mother were there as well, and Adam sat beside them in the bleachers with a grin on his face.

She smiled back at them as she adjusted the beaded necklace her father had made for her. Her red dress was simple, with sequins sewn into designs. She wore a white beaded belt and held a beautiful fan Aunt Jessie had given her. It had been hers when she danced many years ago, and Autumn felt honored to be gifted with it.

A minute later Autumn's number was called, and for a moment, she froze. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes for a minute and then took her place and waited for the music to begin.

When the drums began, Autumn started moving to their beat, picturing herself as a graceful butterfly. The three hundred and sixty-five jingles moved in rhythm as she danced around her space in the arena. Her traditional steps were bouncy, and as she moved, she sent prayers out to those people who were suffering in some way. She knew some people were dealing with terminal illnesses or death, and some even had missing daughters. Reservations were known for having missing women that no one in the outside world seemed to care about. Autumn could feel the sorrow those families felt, and as she made a half-turn, she glanced up at her family sitting in the bleachers. She danced for them as well, hoping the healing prayers she was sending out would help repair the damage that her family had done to themselves.

As soon as it had begun, it was over. There was applause as Autumn walked to the sidelines of the arena, breathing heavily. Her red dress glittered in the arena lights, and she pulled her two braids in front of her, trying to cool off her neck. The girl next to her gave her a smile, and she suddenly realized that she was now part of a very special group of people. She was a Jingle Dress dancer.

When the whole group was finished, they all walked off the sidelines and headed for their families. Autumn walked over to hers, and Aunt Jessie reached out to hug her excitedly, telling her how wonderful she did.

"I am so proud of you," said her father, giving her a smile over Jessie's head. "That was just beautiful."

He had his arm around her mother, and Autumn turned to smile at her, watching her tear up.

"You looked so grown-up out there," she whispered. "I did a double take when I saw you. I almost didn't recognize you."

Autumn smiled and turned away, embarrassed by her mother's tearful emotions.

"Miika."

Adam had taken a step toward her and raised her chin with his fingers. "I have never seen anything like that," he said softly. "It was so graceful."

She smiled, and a warm look filled her eyes.

“Thank you,” she said, taking his hand and giving it a squeeze. He reached over to kiss her cheek.

They helped her get settled and then waited for the contest results. It wasn't long before they were announced. Autumn didn't place, but it didn't matter to her. In her mind, she had won first place for even going out there. She was proud of herself.

The drive back to Aunt Jessie's apartment was a good one. Autumn's parents drove Jessie's SUV, and Jessie was in the middle seat talking with them. Adam and Autumn were sitting in the last row of seats, holding hands and whispering back and forth. Every once in a while Autumn's dad, Tom, would glance back at them, and Autumn would give him a smile and nod. She knew he was watching them, but it didn't matter. Adam was very respectful of her family.

Jessie was talking excitedly about the pow wow and noted that every once in a while Autumn's mother, Melissa, would reach up to touch the gorgeous beaded necklace Tom had made for her. It matched Autumn's in design, but he had used all her favorite colors while making it.

Jessie wondered how things were going with the two of them. From the outside things looked great, but she knew her brother had a temper and wondered how that figured into things.

Melissa looked happy. Jessie knew she was proud of her daughter, but as she caught the smile Melissa was giving her brother, she hoped Tom was working hard to make Melissa happy as well.

“Aunt Jessie?”

Jessie turned now to see Autumn leaning forward in the seat.

“Yes?”

“How's Ryan?”

She turned back around. “He's fine.”

“Just fine?”

“Yup.”

“That's it? That's all you're going to say?”

“Yup.”

“Come on . . . fess up. What's going on with you two? Is he still asking you to marry him all the time? Did you ever grow a brain and finally accept?”

“Autumn Dawn, that's no way to talk to your aunt,” scolded her mother.

“Ryan asked you to marry him?” Tom shook his head. “You haven’t known him that long, Jessie. No wonder you turned him down.”

“Who said I turned him down?”

Autumn squealed, and Melissa laughed at Tom’s shocked expression. She leaned over the seat to give Jessie’s hand a squeeze.

“I am so happy for you!” she said with a smile.

Jessie grinned as Autumn’s hug strangled her from behind.

“When is the wedding?” asked Autumn. “Can I be in it? Is it going to be in Minneapolis or are you going to come back to the rez? You still have a lot of friends there, you know. Maybe Sam can be the ring bearer. What colors are you going with? Wait . . . it’s going to be a big wedding, right? You aren’t just going to the courthouse and getting married by a judge, because . . .”

“Hold on a minute,” interrupted Jessie with a laugh. “Settle down and breathe for a moment so I can answer some of your questions.”

“Congrats, Jessie,” said Adam. “I hope you will be very happy.”

“Thank you. And can I say how happy I am you and Autumn have found each other?” she replied. “It makes me happy to see her so happy.”

He smiled at her and then glanced at Autumn, who was blushing. He laughed.

“I guess you found a way to stop her from talking,” he noted, and everyone laughed.

“Jessie, are you sure about this?” asked Tom, frowning from the driver’s side of the car. “You haven’t known him that long.”

“I have known him for several years, Tom. He drives me nuts, but I suspect any man would.” She paused a moment and then caught Tom’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “I love him,” she added quietly, and after a moment, Tom nodded.

“Then I am happy for you, sis. You deserve happiness.”

“Thank you.”

Tom sighed, and Melissa reached out for his hand as Jessie started to tell everyone the details.

“Minawaanigotaagozi,” she said quietly, and he nodded.

“Yes, I know she is happy,” he replied. He turned to glance at her a moment. “Hey, you just spoke Ojibwa.”

She nodded. "I'm trying to learn some of the language . . . for us," she added, and he nodded.

"Thank you. It's a good start." He paused and then added, "I hope someday I can say those words regarding you, Melissa. You have been unhappy too long."

"I know. But I am hoping that will all change."

"Me, too. I will do my best to make it so."

"Mom," interrupted Autumn, "Aunt Jessie just said that she will be having a big wedding in Minneapolis. Can we go?"

"Of course," replied Melissa, turning around to face her. "We wouldn't miss that for the world."

"Melissa, would you be my matron of honor?" asked Jessie.

"Me? Oh . . . I . . . of course. I mean, yes!"

Jessie laughed. "I do think Sam would be cute as my ring bearer. It is going to be a wedding with traditional Native aspects. I would like him to wear a traditional Native outfit of some kind. We can talk about it later when I start to really plan."

"When is the wedding?" asked Tom. "Have you picked a date yet?"

"The third Saturday in May. We're heading out on a honeymoon the day after."

"Where are you going?"

"Ryan won't tell me. He said somewhere warm, though."

"It sounds so romantic," said Autumn, leaning her chin on the back of Jessie's seat.

"You know, the wedding is only eight months away," pointed out Melissa. "It sometimes takes six to eight months for dresses to come into the dress shop."

"That's true," replied Jessie. "Hmm . . . maybe we should go looking tomorrow before you go home. My friend Barb is the manager of the bridal shop in Lake of the Isles. I'll call her and see if she can fit us in sometime tomorrow. Maybe she can open the shop up early for me if she is booked, or maybe we can come in after it is officially closed."

Jessie picked up her cell phone and punched in some numbers. Barb answered, and they talked for a few moments before Jessie hung up.

"She opens up at ten in the morning," she said. "But she is willing to open up two hours early so we can go through the store and see if we can

find anything we would like to try on.”

“So, that would be eight, right?”

“Yes. I know it’s early, but she is doing us a favor . . .”

“When are we leaving for home, Tom?” asked Melissa. “Will that work with your schedule?”

That was the first time she had ever tried to work with his schedule, and he was grateful for that.

“I don’t work tomorrow, so we can leave whenever we want to,” he said.

“Tom, would you walk me down the aisle and give me away?”

Tom’s intake of breath was audible, and he choked up a little as he caught Jessie’s gaze in the rearview mirror.

He nodded as he cleared his throat. “Of course. I would be honored.”

“Can we all come and watch you try on dresses?” asked Autumn, leaning back in her seat now.

“Well, yes, but I was hoping you would try on a few as well,” answered Jessie. “After all, you are my bridesmaid.”

Autumn squealed again, and Adam laughed as she hugged him and then leaned over the seat to hug Jessie.

Melissa and Tom laughed as Autumn let go of her aunt and settled back in her seat.

“I want to thank you guys for being an inspiration for me,” Jessie said, addressing Melissa and Tom. She pushed her hair behind her ear and gave them a smile.

“Us?” asked Melissa. “What did we do?”

“Your relationship is inspiring.”

“It is? But we are divorced.”

“Yes, but you both see the mistakes you made in the marriage and are trying to fix them. I can see how much you love each other.”

Tom nodded. “I know I am trying to be a better man, and I can see Melissa is trying as well to make things work.”

“That inspires me. Watching you two has taught me that relationships don’t have to be perfect to work. In some ways, Ryan is the complete opposite of me. But we have the same core values, and he will make a good husband for me.”

“He is lucky to have you,” said Melissa, and Jessie smiled.

“Thank you.”

As the women settled back in their seats, Tom watched Autumn slip her hand out of Adam’s. As she looked away and stared out the window, Tom wondered what his daughter was thinking.

Adam glanced at her and sighed, meeting Tom’s gaze in the rearview mirror. He shrugged and looked away, and Tom turned his attention back to the road.

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