

The River People grant protection to six travelers who are expected be part village life. The men hunt and walk the war path. The women make wampum and deal with anger directed at all Whites. They all change in ways no one expected.

The River People: Book Three in the Bompeau Family Saga

By Brien Brown

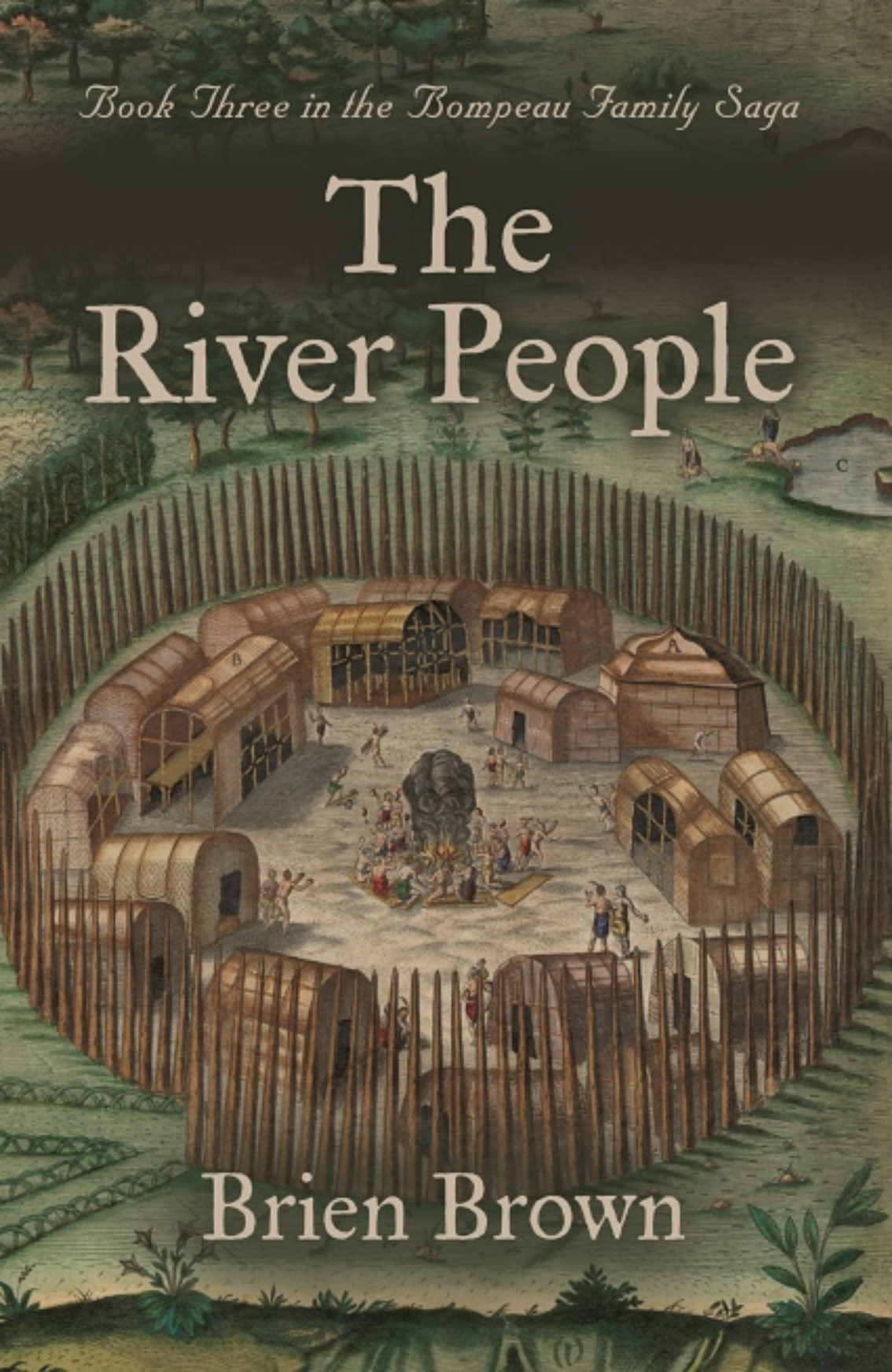
Order the book from the publisher [Booklocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com)

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/13460.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

Book Three in the Bompeau Family Saga

The River People



Brien Brown

Copyright © 2024 Brien Brown

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-959620-01-3

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-959620-02-0

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-757-3

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2024

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Brown, Brien

The River People: Book Three in the Bompeau Family Saga by Brien Brown

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024912224

A Few Words To My Readers

Those of you who read *Abigail's Tale* will recall that Abigail and company found safety in Schodack, a Mohican village. This book picks up where *Abigail's Tale* left off but now the tribe is called the River People and the village is called Mootauk. The villagers' names are now given in English. This deserves an explanation.

While critiquing one of the chapters in this book, a member of my writers' group explained that he had Native-American ancestry and was offended that I had used the names of real Mohicans, who really lived in Schodack, at the time when the fictional events of this book would have occurred. The man couldn't explain why he was offended, but it was clear that he was.

In my earlier books, I used the names of real clergymen in Massachusetts and a real governor in New Jersey. When doing research for this book, I looked for the names of real Mohicans who lived in Schodack at the right time.

The next day, I emailed the Mohican tribe's Cultural Affairs Department, now based in Wisconsin. In part, they responded, "Yes, it actually is taboo to use a deceased person's traditional name as it would be an act of calling them back every time their name is spoken, disrupting their work in the after life. Out of respect for our ancestors, please refrain from using their names.

"I recommend to also look at the negative impact of utilizing real names and tribes in fictional writing, for example. 'Last of the Mohicans.' Majority of non-indigenous peoples and some indigenous peoples believe that our tribe is made up and that the historic names of past leaders are fictional as well."

First, the Mohican tribe is real. During colonial times it occupied land along and between the Connecticut and Hudson Rivers. Out of respect to their ancestors, I found an online Mohican/English dictionary and developed names, in the Mohican language, that were reflective of the personalities of my fictional characters, went back to the chapters I had already written and changed all the characters' names. I called the tribe the Seepoo Aunquan and their village Mootauk.

This created a new problem. Members of my writers' group found the new names unpronounceable. I went back through the chapters and replaced all the Mohican names I had made up with their English translations. The tribe became The River People. The names feel less authentic, but you will be able to pronounce them. I kept Mootauk for the village name. No one had a problem pronouncing that.

I did not change Tamaqua's name to Turtle for two reasons. First, several members of the (very real) Lenape tribe had read chapters of my earlier books without expressing any reservations about his name being used. Second, there is a town in Pennsylvania named Tamaqua. About 7,000 people live there. His name will be said many times a day, regardless of what I do.

The early 18th century was an interesting and exciting time in what we now call America. I hope to be respectful of all the people who lived there.

Prologue

“Women’s tears are but the sweat of eyes.”

Juvenal

Abigail was twenty-six when her husband, John, was arrested for murder. Days later, their home was destroyed, and John was lost in the great fire. Their son, Benny, was born the same day. Witnesses said a body, burned beyond recognition, was John’s. Abigail insisted it was not and would later resist pressure to remarry.

Abigail took in laundry, harvested thistle to spin into thread, weave into cloth and sew into shirts to support her son. Then she took in Tilly, a twelve-year-old orphan.

While harvesting thistle, they met Caesar, a young, escaped slave and decided to help him get to freedom in New France. Abigail’s friend, Tamaqua, a Lenape warrior, agreed to help them. But first, they had to get the boy to the Hudson River, north of York City.

Posing as a wealthy woman traveling with her children and servant, Abigail, Benny, Tilly, and Caesar took a coastal schooner from Philadelphia to York City, walked the length of Manhattan Island and took a ferry across the Harlem River. Two days north of the city they reached Tamaqua, his ten-year-old son, called Boy, and, after two years of separation, John, disguised as a Lenape.

After a tearful reunion, they headed north in two dugout canoes.

In a time of intermittent warfare between Native-American tribes, they were attacked by Mingos, members of the Haudenosaunee Nation, hoping to kill Algonquin men and kidnap women. A running

battle along the Hudson became a prolonged siege in which John and Tamaqua both received life-threatening injuries. The siege was broken when Caesar sacrificed himself destroying the Mingo camp.

John and Tamaqua took weeks to recuperate as winter set in.

Led by Tamaqua's Manitou, his Spirit Guide, they left their tiny shelter and were granted sanctuary in a River People village.

It is 1704. Abigail is twenty-eight. John is twenty-nine.

Chapter One: Another Separation

“Gratitude, the greatest virtue, is the parent of all others.”

Marcus Tullius Cicero

“You can’t go! You scarce can walk!”

John glanced around, aware of the constant flow of people coming and going in the bark longhouse. They would hear everything. “It may be well that we do not dispute this where all can hear us,” he whispered, hoping to quiet his wife.

“And what matters it if they do?” she asked, far too loud, “None here speak English!”

Holding his index finger in front of his lips, he said, “They understand more than they would have you know. Many a Christian’s betrayed himself with a loose tongue around Indians he thought not to understand.”

Abigail reddened, looking around. “That may be, but I’d wager none here understand me,” she said in a lower voice.

“So, they would have you believe. We’re strangers. They trust Tamaqua, so they shelter us. As yet, they’ve seen no cause for trust in us. Tilly has Benny. Can we go outside, where there be fewer ears and talk?”

She nodded.

They pulled on their thick, bearskin robes in silence and walked the forty-odd steps, past the row of fires they no longer smelled, to the

door-flap in the longhouse's narrow north end. Some of the River People they passed averted their eyes, others grinned and nodded uncomfortable greetings, all pretending they had not noticed the angry exchange of words.

Outside, men and women went about their chores while laughing children played tag and wrestled the cold air. Tilly's long blonde hair was easy to spot.

Abigail waved to her. "John and I'll be by the river. You've got Benny?"

"I've got him," she called back.

Angry as she was, Abigail smiled seeing the girl she thought of as a daughter watching Benny. She said, "Benny gets on so good with children here."

Happy to change the subject, John said, "He does. You know, he'll be speaking in the River People's language afore you."

"Will? He already does."

They each pulled their robes tight against their chests and headed for the opening in the circular stockade surrounding Mootauk. The tall, log wall blocked the worst of the strong north wind. Abigail felt sorry for the men on the walkway, high above their heads, along the inner edge of the fortification. "Raw day to stand guard."

John nodded. "Experience's taught them to be ready, but an ambush in the forest or on the river's more Mingo style."

They walked through the gap in the fortification into the dim, high-walled pathway curling almost all the way around the inner stockade. Anyone attacking the village would have to run many yards through a crossfire from above. They flattened against the inner wall

to make way for a hunter dragging a gutted stag on a litter behind him. Emerging from the passage, each held up a hand and squinted into the bright sunlight. When their eyes adjusted, they saw swirls of snow blowing across the broad fields and drifting behind the wall. They walked some two hundred paces through ankle-deep snow to the forest abutting the river the English called the Hudson.

John started, "Now, we can speak, not shout, and expect none to hear us."

Abigail pulled her robe close against her chest. Wind whipped her hair across her red, chapped cheeks. "Can we stand behind that tree, out of the wind?" She stepped into the shelter of a large oak before turning to face him. "We were apart for two years."

He shook his head. "I ached for you the whole time." Shivering, he stepped next to her, out of the wind.

She tightened her lips and looked a little to her left, then straight into his eyes. "You vowed you'd not leave us again."

He blew on his hands. "And I meant it. Think you that I'd choose to leave you and Benny so I could spend the winter in the wild?"

"A vow, John!"

"I know."

She lowered her face and her voice, "Then why are you leaving me?"

He tried to put his arm around her, but she pushed it away.

"I asked a question."

"You did. And you deserve an answer." He paused before going on. "They asked me and we're beholding. These people hazard war to

shelter us from the Mingos. They've been at war with the Mingos for as long as any remember."

Her hands became fists on her hips, letting her robe fall open for a moment, before she grabbed its ends and snapped it closed, shoving her hands under her arms. Her voice raised. "And they would drag you into their war?"

"Recall, we spent most of leaf-fall in that war. The River People have risked much taking us in. But for Tamaqua, we'd have been turned out."

She looked down, pushing the toe of her moccasin against a fallen branch sticking out of the snow. "But you scarce can walk."

He reached for her hand. She thought about pulling it back but let him have it. "I've limped since the fire. Naught'll change that."

"But why would they ask, if they've no trust in you?"

"They've no choice but to send men trapping and the River People, like the Lenape, lost many to the Dutch fever."

"I remember. 'Tis what took Wisawtayas." She shook her head, remembering Tamaqua's wife.

"Took many here too. They need to send a hunting party to get skins they can trade for the things we would buy, guns, powder and shot, flour and cloth. But they fear sending all they ought, and then not having enough here, should the Mingos attack."

She pulled her hand back. Her eyes widened. "And you'd leave us before they attack to go off shooting beavers!"

"You know I'd druther be with you!" He had raised his voice, and realized it made matters worse. Struggling to speak in a normal tone,

he went on, "But sending me to hunt leaves them another warrior they trust, whilst sending out someone they –"

She snapped, "Do you hear yourself?"

His raised voice had raised hers. He regretted his loss of control.

"What if we left?" she asked.

"Without supplies, in a strange wilderness? And would you leave Tamaqua? He, in truth, can scarce walk. And Boy?"

She glared at him in silence.

After a long pause, she said, "No ... but a vow's a vow. You ought not be so carefree when making them."

He started to speak, but she cut him off. "When will you go?"

"On the morrow, before dawn."

She shook her head. "Winters here be bitter, worse than we knew in Jersey."

"I'll dress warm. I'll be cold."

She started to turn toward the village, but stopped, and crossed to him, resting her head on his shoulder. Wiping away tears, she said, "I thought I lost you. Then I near lost you again. You have to come back to us."

He pulled her close. "Recall, I lost you too. Though I knew where you were, I couldn't go to you. And I'm just getting to know Benny. Come what may, I'll come back."

They held each other and cried.

Well before dawn, John woke to the sound of men carrying their things out of the longhouse. Sliding off the platform he and Abigail shared, he saw Benny sleeping, cuddled against Tilly. He couldn't help but smile. He wanted to kiss his wife and son but decided to wait. *No cause to wake them yet. I'll kiss them goodbye when we leave.* He put on his buckskin robe, then pulled bearskin boots over his moccasins. Looping a powder horn over one shoulder and shot pouch over the other, he slid his hands into thick bearskin mittens, picked up his gun and went outside to the village's central fire.

Bear Arm, younger brother of North Star, the Great Sachem, came up behind him. Speaking in the River People's language, he said, "Good, you are here. I feared I would have to wake you."

John said, "I sleep light. It would be hard for me to sleep with so many moving about the longhouse."

Bear Arm looked around, "Yes, so many hunters packing will wake most people. Your friend, Tamaqua tells me you are a mighty hunter."

"My friend Tamaqua says many things."

Bear Arm glanced around. "Much is happening. You must have questions."

John looked from left to right. "I do, starting with, why are they standing all but naked in this cold?"

"They are covering themselves with bear grease. It is good protection against the cold. You must take off your things and coat yourself too. Put on more than you think right. Then find Thunder. He has your sled."

"Grease?"

“It will be cold, and we will often be without shelter. The grease will keep you warm. Coat yourself well, then dress again and find Thunder.”

John looked around in the pre-dawn dark at the dozen or so men, and the few women moving around the village to prepare for the hunt. Joining the small group slathering themselves with thick coatings of a light brown grease, that stank of rancid fish, he dipped the tips of the middle and index fingers of his right hand into the wooden barrel then brought them to his nose. *They can't be serious.*

Over his shoulder, John heard, “You are called Bear-Slayer?” The man used the name the Lenape gave John years earlier.

John turned, surprised. “Yes?”

“I am called Early Spring.”

John looked at the new man and extended his hand, “Glad to meet you.”

The man dropped his eyes to John's hand. “Why do you do that?”

John tilted his head, “Do what?”

“Hold your hand this way?”

“I would shake yours.”

Early Spring furrowed his brow, “Shake my what?”

“Your hand. It is the way my people greet each other. It means we meet as friends.”

Early Spring laughed out loud and grabbed John's hand with both of his. “Yes! We meet as friends.”

John laughed along with him.

“Why are you not greased?”

Lifting his fingers to his nose again, John said, “Smells so foul. Why would I do this?”

“If you do not, you will later wish you did.” The Riverman pushed his hand into the barrel, pulled out a handful and smeared it across John’s chest. “Soon, you will not smell it.”

Trying not to gag, John stepped back. “Why did you do that?”

Laughing, “You needed the grease. I helped you start.”

John closed his eyes and shook his head. *Here’s one to avoid.*

“Rub it on your chest, thicker than you think you should. Then cover the rest of your body. You will be glad of it later.” He sat back, watched, and pointed out places John missed.

Getting dressed he thought. *Bite your tongue and find a way to be rid of him. You’ve no need for enemies. The others must be better.*

“I’ll take you to Thunder. He has your things.”

Seems everyone knows my business. John followed the man across the yard to a large man fastening things to a sled.

Early Spring chuckled, “Thunder, this is Bear Slayer. He will hold your hand.”

John had decided not to extend his hand, now he felt obligated. He held out his hand. The new man looked at it and frowned. “I am called Thunder.” He pointed, “Your sled is loaded with powder, shot, pemmican, a water skin and skin for our shelter.” He extended two large wooden frames enclosing rawhide meshworks.

“What are they.”

Early Spring took them from Thunder. “These are Snowshoes. You tie them over your boots. They will help when we cross deep snow. You should practice putting them on before you need them.”

John laid his gun across the sled, knelt, and spent several minutes fumbling with the shoes.

Thunder knelt, as if to help, but instead pushed John backward, off his feet. The Rivermen laughed. Thunder said, “It will be easier with practice.”

“We can hope.”

Still smiling, Thunder took John’s hand, to help him up. John tightened his grip, driving his hand forward and down, pulling Thunder off balance. When he felt Thunder try to straighten, John jerked his hand backward, toward his shoulder. The Riverman fell face-first next to the Frenchman. They lay side by side in the snow at Early Spring’s feet, all three laughing.

When John stood, Thunder extended his hand.

John chuckled, “My friend, I was born, but not yesterday.”

John secured the snowshoes on his sled while Thunder, still clucking under his breath, climbed to his feet before saying, “I see I cannot fall asleep around you. Who would suspect such guile from a White Man?” He handed John a rawhide strap connected to the front of the sled. “Tie this around your waist, so you don’t need your hands to pull the sled. Have you brought extra robes?”

“They are still by my platform.”

“You should get them, then tie everything down. Be certain you can get to your gun.”

“No, I’ll carry my gun.”

“Your hands will be filled with these.” He handed John two stone-tipped trekking poles. “It is hard to walk on the ice without them. But have your gun ready should you need it.”

John nodded. The Rivermen set about finishing their preparations. John headed back to his platform for the last of the things he’d need for the hunt. His throat thickened. *I know no one and will be gone for months.* Abigail and Benny were sleeping, cuddled together. Tilly was somewhere under a pile of bearskins, rolled against the longhouse wall. *Let them sleep for now. I’ll wake them to say goodbye later. How’ll I explain this to Benny?* He swallowed, but the lump wouldn’t move.

When he got back to his sled, he saw the others were already headed south on the river. He rushed to secure his things.

“Hurry, tie the line to your waist. You should not fall behind,” Bear Arm called from the frozen river.

“I need to say goodbye to Abigail.”

“She will know you are gone when she wakes and does not see you.”

John glanced back at the longhouse, then toward the men heading down the frozen river. *She’ll not like this!* By the time he tied the sled to his waist and dragged it onto the ice, he was well behind the line of march. *Clear they’ll not wait for me.* He looked back toward the village, then toward the men receding into the distance, slammed the stone-tips of his poles into the ice and stepped off.

His scarred legs hurt. He struggled to catch up.

The River People

He did not get to hold Abigail or feel her warm body against his. He didn't get to throw Benny in the air and hear him giggle. He didn't get to kiss either goodbye. And he would not see either for months.

Chapter Two: Into the Cold

“No blessing lasts forever.”

Plautus

John squinted. Light reflecting off the snow hurt his eyes. He struggled to his feet. Again. Limping, laboring to catch up, sweat ran down his flushed face, then dripped onto his bear skin robe where it froze. Hoping to cool himself, he allowed the robe to hang open. His fingers and toes ached from the cold and the constant hammering of his trekking poles into the frozen surface.

Driving the stone-tipped pole in his right hand into the ice, he slid his right foot forward, then drove the other pole downward. *By the hour, I fall farther behind... River's a road to them. No hills, rocks, or roots to slow them.* He looked at the snow-covered banks, then at the clear river ahead. *Most snow blows off... On land, behind so many, trail'd be a quagmire.*

Using their poles for traction and balance, dragging their heavy sleds behind them, the River People seemed to sail across the surface.

Feet just slip away, like, I'm ... he couldn't help laughing at the thought ... *like I'm trying to walk on ice.*

He tried reaching ahead with both poles. *If they hold I can drag myself.* But when he leaned forward, his feet often slid backward, leaving him splayed out on the ice. Again. Then his sled would run into his legs.

Next, he tried extending his left hand and leg at the same time, leaning into that pole for support, then reaching out with his right hand and foot. The going was slow. Often, he put too much weight into the pole. Then his feet slipped away, in the other direction. At least this way he just slid to his side, instead of crashing forward, throwing out his hands to break his fall. Both wrists ached.

Struggling, and alone, his mind took flight. *I'd no choice. How can she not see that? What would she have said had I refused, and they turned us out?* He rehashed the previous day's argument over and over, focusing on the harsh words, without remembering the tearful embrace at the end. *She throws my vow in my face? Can she think I'd druther do this than be by a warm fire with her and Benny? I do this for them!*

Picking himself up, again, *Someone stopped ahead?* He stared. *Who is that? Do I know him? What can he want?*

The man stood, stock still, as the main group receded into the distance. *Why does he not move? Why is he waiting?* As the distance between them narrowed, the man took a few steps in John's direction. The straps connecting him to his sled drew taut.

While still rods apart, the man called, "Bear Slayer, I waited for you."

Who is that? The one I'll hunt with? What was his name? Then he recognized Early Spring and frowned. "Hallo! We met this morn. What was your name?"

"Early Spring. I will walk with you. It is not good that a man is alone on the river. His mind goes places it should not."

He's got that much right. "No, there's no need of that. I go slow, but I go steady." Saying that, his feet slid out from under him, again.

“You are slow as none taught you to walk on ice.” He dragged his sled beside John and helped him to his feet. Then he laughed. “If you knew not before, you know for certain now. Ice is slippery. Your weight must be above your feet and even. Watch.

Early Spring reached out his left hand, drove his trekking pole into the ice and stepped forward with his right foot. “See, my weight stays even. Now watch.” Moving his right hand and left foot in unison, he drove the pole’s tip downward as he stepped past it with the opposite foot. “Use the poles so your weight stays even over your feet. Then you will not slip. Now, you try, but untie from your sled first. It is easier if you are not pulling anything.”

John pulled off his mittens and untied. “Left hand and right foot?”

“Yes. And stand straight. Do not lean ahead or to one side.”

Reaching with his left pole while he stepped forward with his right foot gave John a more stable base. He stepped out again, using the other side. He laughed. “Would that I knew this hours ago. I’d hurt less.” Careful to use opposite hands and feet, he headed back to his sled.

“Practice more before you tie to your sled. Its weight makes moving harder. You will want to lean forward, and then you will fall.”

John nodded. He made his way to the river’s eastern bank, then to the western before returning, all without slipping. He picked up the straps to the sled “I think I have it. Thank you, ah ...”

“Early Spring.”

“Thank you, Early Spring.” He looked downstream. “The others are far ahead. We ought to go.”

“We will not catch the others today. You should practice more.”

“No, I think to have it.”

The Riverman smiled and waited while John tied himself to his sled. When they turned downstream, Early Spring said, “Tell me, Bear-Slayer, I have met few White men and none who would live among us. I am told you all crossed the ocean to come here. Why did you all leave your country and come to mine? Why are you and your woman in my village?”

John straightened and turned to face his companion. “That would be a long story.”

“We will walk long today.”

John reached out his right hand and left foot, tightening the straps to his sled as he moved ahead. “My father was a rich man who had many things. When he died fighting the English —”

“Are you not English?”

“I lived among them, but I was born French.”

Already ahead of John, Early Spring adjusted his gait to stay beside him. “I have heard of these people. They are enemies of the English.”

“And so, my father died fighting the English.”

“I have also heard that these French give weapons to our enemies, the Iroquois.”

“I have heard this as well.”

“Yet I was told you lived among the Lenape before you came to my village. Why would you live among an Algonquin people if your people arm their enemies?”

John thought before answering. “It has been many years since I lived among or thought of myself as French.” He stopped, hoping Early Spring would say something, but he did not. Feeling the need to fill the silence, John said, “Then I lived among the English, but they would hang me for killing an evil man.”

“Why would they do that?”

How do I explain this? “He had many things and I had few.”

Early Spring nodded, “Things are important to the English.”

“They are. And to the French.” As he said this, John’s feet slid out from under him, sending him face-first to the ice. His knife slipped from his belt and slid across the frozen river.

Early Spring picked it up, then raised it to his face. “Such a strange knife. Why are there queer lines on its blade?”

John sat up, “’Tis made from Damascus steel. I’ve carried it for many years.”

The Riverman furrowed his brow. “What is this damask steel you speak of?”

“Damascus steel, a different metal. The best knives are made from it.”

Early Spring pulled out his knife and sat next to John. “See, here is my knife. It has no lines and does not shine as yours.”

John reached for both knives. Holding them side by side, he said, “Your knife’s iron. Been years since my people used iron knives. They’ll not take an edge the way steel ones do.”

“Not take an edge?”

After feeling stupid all morning, John was glad to show he knew something. “Iron knives can’t be made as sharp and they’re brittle; they’ll break.”

Early Spring shook his head, “I have broken many knives, but mine are always sharp.”

“Well, let’s see.” John reached for both knives. He turned the end of his sleeve inside out and ran the Riverman’s iron knife over the hair inside of his robe’s sleeve. “See, nothing came off.”

“Did you think something would?”

“Now, see mine.” He ran his knife against the robe, shaving off hairs.”

Early Spring straightened. “That knife is as sharp as flint! Do the lines do that?”

“I know not what the lines do, but I know the knife sharpens well and holds its edge. I’m told knives from Sheffield are the finest in the world.”

Early Spring took his knife and stood. “Your people know many wonderful things. Who would think to put lines on knives to make them sharp as flint?” He waited for John to stand, then laughed and said, “It is a shame they did not teach you how to walk on ice. You should walk more without the sled.”

John returned his knife to his belt. “I will do better.”

Still laughing, Early Spring said, “Those words are easy to believe. It would be difficult for you to do worse.” He waited for John to get started before returning to John’s background. “So, if you do not think you are French and the English would kill you, what do you think you are?”

John thought, *This again*. They walked in silence for a long time. At last, John said, “For years I was happy among the Lenape.”

“The Grandfathers are a wise people. If you were happy there, why are you here?”

“When I lived among the Lenape, my woman did not.”

“And you would be with your woman.”

John nodded agreement, “And I would be with my woman.”

“What will you do now?”

“Would that I knew.”

“Will your woman live with the Lenape?”

“I think not. She is English.”

“Then you are English. A man belongs to his wife’s clan.”

“It is not so among my people.”

“Yet you just told me you have no people. How is it among your woman’s people?”

“You ask questions I cannot answer.”

They walked in silence a long time.

John struggled coordinating the poles with his feet. He still fell often. The poles slipped from his shaking hands time and again. He looked at the specks on the river ahead of them and wanted to scream *You asked me to come! You knew my legs to be hurt. How do you think me to keep this pace?* His legs, never the same since the fire, now withered even more recovering from his battle wounds, throbbed. So did his arms and shoulders. The sled’s broad, wooden runners bounced

across ice gouged ragged by the poles of those ahead. He fell again. *Rough as the ice is, I'd think to find footing.* When he could stand the silence no longer, he said, "And your people? Did they always live on this river?"

"No, in times long past, before the great snows, my people lived far to the west. The Great Spirit sent us a guide to led us through the lands of many other peoples. Far to the south, in Lenapehocking he told half our people to stay and live by that river. The rest were told to move to our river. Leaving their brothers behind made my people very sad."

"So, your people are one with the Lenape?"

"No. We have lived apart for many years. The Grandfathers are our brothers, but we are no longer one people."

"Why did the Great Spirit tell your people to move?"

"In the lands to the west, there were a great many people and little game. He led us here that we would have much."

John laughed. "Our people are not so different as we think. My people come here for the same reason."

Early Spring frowned. "You give me much to think on." He quickened his pace, pulling several rods ahead of John, then maintained that distance a long time, before letting John catch up.

"The ways of the Great Spirit are far above ours. Often, I have wondered why he gave land to the Mingos so close to our river. When you were French, did you wonder these things about the English?"

"I gave it no thought."

"How can this be? I think often on these things."

John thought. When he spoke, he was careful with his words. “As a boy, I was told the English were our enemies. We fought them because that was what we did.”

“And you did not wonder why?”

“I knew why. Because they were English.”

“What did you think when you were English?”

“I was never English.”

“But you woman is English.”

“She is.”

“Is she not your enemy?”

“She is not.”

“What did you think when you lived among the Lenape?”

“I was thankful they took me in. I feel much the same living among your people.”

“You have given me much to think on.” Again, Early Spring pulled several rods ahead and maintained that distance.

Hours later, squinting to see into growing shadows, John smelled roasting meat. Sleds lined the river’s edge. Women who arrived a day earlier cooked venison outside a wikiup in a clearing on the west bank. Early Spring waved to them as he pulled his sled to the river’s edge and untied. John saw him talking to another man before going inside. Minutes later, John reached the clearing.

“Slayer, it is good to see you. Tomorrow you will be stronger,” Bear Arm called from the shore.

John could just make out the black geometric tattoos on the Riverman's face. "Tomorrow, I will scarce be able to walk."

Bear Arm took John's hand, pulling him up the steep, snow-covered bank.

John smiled, "You take some getting used to. I know most men to be bigger than me, but you're near Tamaqua's size."

Bear Arm smiled back, "My cousin makes bears look small."

John pointed past the fire, to a wikiup big enough to sleep the entire hunting party. "You said we would be without shelter."

"We will," Bear Arm said, "But we have wikiups and stored wood in the places we stay every year. We have another where this river is joined by the creek leading to the lands of our cousins, the Esopus. That creek takes us into the mountains. There is a shelter there too. After that, we will go out by twos to find beavers on the mountain's far side. Then we will sleep under skins pulled between our sleds."

Inside the travelers sat on pallets, eating roasted venison, gourds filled with steaming succotash, and drinking hot water from even more gourds.

John dropped onto an unoccupied platform, exhausted. He closed his eyes, tight, to wipe away sweat that made them burn. He inhaled, held his breath, and counted to seventeen before exhaling. Hoping to control his breathing, he had wanted to hold his breath until he counted to thirty but could not.

One of the women brought him a gourd filled with hot succotash. He smiled his thanks, then took some of the steaming vegetable stew into his mouth. The lump in his throat wouldn't let him swallow. Minutes later, the same woman brought him another gourd, this one

filled with hot water. He took a sip. *At least the water'll go down.* He sipped some more, but the water cooled before he could finish it. He put that gourd beside the one filled with now cold succotash and stared at nothing in particular across the wikiup. The woman must have been watching him. She shrugged and took both gourds away.

Leaning forward, he winced kneading his calves and thighs, then rubbed his throbbing shoulders and arms. Reliving his argument with Abigail brought the lump back to his throat.

Minutes later, Early Spring brought him a skewer of roasted venison, more succotash and hot water. "You must eat. Tomorrow will be another long day."

John shook his head. "I will think about tomorrow when it gets here."

The Riverman pulled his lips into a tight smile. "When we hunt, there will be many days like this, but few will end with hot succotash and venison, in a warm wikiup. You must eat and rest when you are able."

John thought before answering. He looked past the fire in the center of the large, bark building. Men bumped into each other, going outside for venison then coming back in. Others scooped steaming succotash from a large iron kettle. He drank some hot water, *If I'm to spend the winter with these men, best I befriend those who'll let me.* "Thank you, my friend. I have not hunted this way before. I have much to learn and I think you have much to show me."

Early Spring's tight smile relaxed and broadened. "I think some of the women to be on their first hunt, but you are the only new man. For us, before our first hunt, our fathers taught us many things. Still, we, none of us, knew what to expect. You labored today. Tomorrow

will be harder, but when I look into your eyes, I see a warrior's soul. Tonight, eat and rest. You will need both tomorrow."

John forced himself to finish all that Early Spring brought him, then struggled to his feet and crossed the wikiup to get more.

Returning to his pallet, he ate, and struggled to stay awake, listening to the others tell each other lies and laugh for hours.

A small man stood near the fire in the wikiup's center.

Thunder pushed in, next to John on the platform, "Wake up White Man," he said, laughing, "Convince Us is about to tell one of his stories."

It was obvious the man expected everyone's attention. He put his hands on his robe, much the way someone might put both hands on his vest while giving a speech. He looked around, waiting for everyone to be quiet. Even the women, who had been busy preparing the food and cleaning up, sat to listen.

He began. "Many years ago, in a Mingo village, a girl was born with three nipples."

Thunder poked an elbow into John's ribs. He, like almost everyone else, was already laughing.

"The people thought her very special. Years later, when she began to grow, she was given the name Three-Breasted-Woman."

Gales of laughter filled the crowded wikiup. The women exchanged knowing looks, but even they smiled.

The storyteller went on, "When it was time for Three-Breasted-Woman to marry, her mother gave her to a boy her age. But a warrior, Stupid Wolf, went to the Sachem to complain."

The laughter got louder. Even the women were laughing behind their hands.

“He said, ‘Oh, Great Sachem, this special woman cannot be given to a mere boy. She should be given to a great warrior, like me.’

“The Sachem shook his head and said, ‘You already have a wife, and this boy does not. The girl is his.’

“The next morning, the boy was found dead, with a tomahawk in his head.”

The River People seated around the fire hooted and hollered. From the far side someone shouted, “Just like a Mingo, have your way or kill somebody,” causing more gales of laughter.

“So Stupid Wolf went to the Sachem and said, ‘Now will you give this girl to me?’

“The Sachem frowned, ‘No. What need have you for this girl? You have a wife.’

‘I do,’ Stupid Wolf said, ‘But she has only two breasts.’

“The Sachem nodded, ‘This is true, Stupid Wolf, but you have only two hands’.

“Stupid Wolf smiled and said, ‘I have only two hands, but I have also a mouth. Give Three-Breasted-Woman to me.’ ”

John looked at the women on the far side of the central fire. *They laugh as hard as the men.* He chuckled. *What would Abigail think about this?*

“But the Sachem would not give Three-Breasted-Woman to him.”

The laughter got louder every time Convince Us said the girl's name. He waited, what seemed like a long time, for silence, then said, "Three-Breasted-Woman?"

The people seated around the wikiup howled. He held up a hand for quiet, then repeated the name again, with the same effect.

He raised his other hand. When everyone was still, he went on, "So the Sachem gave Three-Breasted-Woman," by now, the mere mention of her name reduced Convince Us' audience to tears, "Three-Breasted-Woman ... to another boy. And the next morning ..." He hesitated.

Thunder stood and shouted, "The next morning he was dead."

Convince Us pointed and shouted back, "Yes! With a tomahawk in his head!"

Tears ran down most of the men's faces. Their sides ached.

"So, the Sachem called Stupid Wolf to his fire. 'Stupid Wolf,' he said, 'I would give you ...'"

He waited for the chorus "Three-Breasted-Woman!"

"I would give her to you, but you have a wife.' The next morning, Stupid Wolf's wife was found dead."

Someone shouted, "I know, with a tomahawk in her head!"

Convince Us pointed at him too, before going on, "The Sachem had Stupid Wolf brought before the elders and asked, 'If I give you ...'"

He waited for the audience to shout, "Three-Breasted-Woman!"

"Yes, Three-Breasted-Woman." He waited, " 'If I give you ...'"

Even John joined the communal shout, “Three-Breasted-Woman!”

“Yes, Three-Breasted-Woman,” another long pause, for laughing, “Will you stop killing our people?”

“Stupid Wolf nodded his head and said, ‘I will.’

“So, the Sachem gave,” Convince Us pointed at the others.

“Three-Breasted-Woman!”

“To Stupid Wolf. They had a great ceremony, and Stupid Wolf took her to his platform in the longhouse. The next morning, a baby girl, with four nipples, was born into the village. The Sachem just shook his head.”

Laughing River People jumped to their feet. They clapped the storyteller on the back and made their own jokes about Mingos, while the moon rose high in the sky. Then, one by one they curled up inside their thick bearskins and went to sleep.

John wasn’t laughing anymore. He rolled onto his back and stared into the gloom. *How will Abigail and Benny be without me? Will the Mingos attack Mootauk with us gone? Will they attack us, when we’re spread out in the wilderness?*

He rolled onto his side and tried to clear his mind. *This other Indian asks too many questions. What am I? Abigail’s English, not me.* He rolled to his other side and pulled the bearskin around his neck. *I was happiest with Tamaqua, in his village. Should have brought Abigail there. What am I? Who is he?*

John was alone, and his mind would not be still.

Chapter Three: Apart

“I dote on his very absence.”

William Shakespeare

Abigail knew she was awake when she realized she couldn't feel the weight of John's arm on her ribs. *He always wakes before me. Mayhap he's gone to relieve himself. He'll be back soon.* She lay on their pallet and fell asleep waiting for him to come back.

In the few weeks since arriving at Mootauk, living in a palisaded village, the feeling of security was palpable. Without concerns for his family's safety, John would snuggle close to his wife. Every morning, she woke with him pulling their bodies close together, one arm around her chest, the other under her neck. Often, the top of his feet were pressed against the bottom of hers. She would lean into him, her head resting on his shoulder, and fall back to sleep. They both treasured their morning time together. Sleeping in a longhouse with perhaps a hundred other people provided little opportunity for such intimacy.

When she woke a second time, Abigail knew John was gone. *He couldn't even bother to say goodbye?* A tear ran from her eye and over the side of her nose. She lay on their pallet feeling as alone as she ever had, until Benny crawled away from Tilly and snuggled against his mother. She pulled him close and tried to enjoy the moment. It lasted until he heard other children moving around in the long central passageway.

Abigail changed him, then pulled back the deer skins that separated their sleeping area from the rest of the smoke-filled house.

Little Star, the Riverwoman who had fed them since they arrived, crouched stirring succotash in an iron pot over the fire nearest to their pallets. The woman smiled and filled two gourds. Abigail took them and forced a smile, bowing, as a way of saying thank you to someone who spoke a different language.

Little Star nodded her head and gestured as if giving the gourds again, saying, "*Weekaw meethowãakun.*"

Having no idea what the words meant, Abigail tried to repeat, "*Weekaw meethowãakun*".

Little Star's smile broadened, "*Weekaw meethowãakun.*"

Abigail bowed again and led Benny back to their tiny apartment.

Tilly sat up and stretched. "Morning, Abigail." Then she made a face at Benny, "Morning, little man."

Benny giggled.

Abigail sat Benny on her pallet, "Morning," she said, without looking at Tilly. She wrapped Benny in bearskins before handing him his gourd.

Tilly leaned in, sniffing at Benny's steaming breakfast. "At least 'tis hot."

"'Tis hot," Abigail said.

Shivering, she wrapped herself in another skin, then pulled on the moccasins she slept with to keep them warm. Steeled against the cold, she went for her gourd full. "They eat this oft enough, foul though it tastes," she said, sitting next to Benny. "Where's John?"

"Gone."

Tilly waited a long time, expecting Abigail to say more, but she just sat and ate.

“Gone?”

“You’ve ears, gone.”

“Gone, as in, gone trapping for the rest of the winter, gone?”

Abigail wiped the side of her right hand against the corner of her left eye, “Yes. That gone.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’d not heard him leave.”

Abigail put down her gourd, “Nor’d,” she exhaled, “I.”

Tilly stood and moved to sit next to Abigail. She put down her food. “Oh, I am sorry... He didn’t say goodbye?”

Wiping her eye again, “He did not!”

Leaning into her, Tilly said, “’Tis so unlike John to leave that way. Something must have happened.”

Abigail put her hand over her eyes and cried.

Benny climbed into her lap. “’S matter Mama? Don’t cry,” he said, rubbing his succotash-covered fingers on her cheek.

She pulled him close and sobbed, struggling to be quiet. “Mama’s fine, Baby. Mama’s fine.” She wiped a tear, spreading the succotash goo Benny had smeared on her cheek. After a moment, she licked her fingers and used them to wipe away most of the smeared food.

She coaxed Benny to eat a little more, before letting him go play with the other children. Then she and Tilly ate in silence, neither knowing what to say, until Boy arrived.

He was like his father in so many ways. Quiet, almost to a fault, he was much taller than the others his age. His long, slender arms and legs would one day be like a bear's. "Abigail, my father would see you at North Star's fire."

Abigail asked Tilly to watch Benny, who was wrestling with a pile of giggling boys. North Star's fire was a few strides from his wikiup near the center of the village. She shivered and pulled her robe tight against the cold.

Tamaqua sat next to the Great Sachem, close to the blaze. Both men wore bright red shirts made of coarse woolen stroud woven in British mills. Over these they wore heavy red and black striped woolen blankets, also from Britain, instead of the bearskin robes most River People wore.

Tamaqua gestured for Abigail to sit. "With Slayer gone, it is not good for you and Tilly to have nothing to do."

Abigail set her jaw, thinking *Neither is it good for John to be gone*, but managed to not say something she would later regret. She nodded and waited for him to go on.

"Even should you leave when the snows melt, while here, you should live like River Women."

Where goes he with this? She nodded again.

"In winter, Indian men hunt. Indian women make wampum. Slayer is hunting. You and Tilly should make wampum. A woman in your longhouse had an English husband long ago. She remembers your language. She will show you."

Unsure of what she should say, Abigail remained silent.

Tamaqua turned and spoke to North Star in their common Algonquin language, then turned to Abigail again. “Help me stand. We should speak.”

Helping her old friend to his feet, she thought, *‘Tis long since the battle. He still can’t get up ... Wonder if he’ll ever.* She was careful to walk at a slower pace, but still had to wait several times to stay by Tamaqua’s side as they walked past both longhouses toward the bark smokehouse away from the village center.

“Indian and white men are different,” he said, “Even in winter, white men do much in your villages. White men are farmers, smiths, and shopkeepers. Men build your houses.”

“Your limp is worse. Should we stop?”

“My limp is nothing. You must see. Indian men do none of these things. We are warriors and hunters, not farmers. Women grow our crops. Women build our houses.

“Much has changed among my people. Your fevers kill more of us than they leave alive. Your people cut down our forests to build fences. Your cows and sheep graze where deer once ran. Now, deer are few. You taught my people to use guns we cannot make or repair. We trade with your people for things we never had, but now cannot live without.”

Abigail started to speak, but Tamaqua held up his hand. “It is good for you to hear all I say before speaking.”

She nodded and looked at the ground.

“Long ago, there was much game. Indians hunted near our villages. Our children were fat. Now, animals are gone. We go to your traders for our needs, but they want beaver pelts in return. Beavers left

here, as they left Lenapehocking, long ago. Our men cross mountains to find the beavers your people want.”

Abigail started to speak but stopped when he raised his hand.

“Mingos still steal and kill. The people who shelter and feed you have fought against them for many lifetimes. They have no choice. They must send warriors to get beavers, or they will have no guns, powder or shot to defend themselves. They must also have warriors here to protect their women and children, and now there are fewer warriors than were here before your people came. By going on this hunt Slayer is helping these people. He pays a debt of honor. Do not be angry that he pays this debt.”

Abigail looked at him with watery eyes, trying to think of something to say. Tamaqua waited. At last, she said, “His limp’s little better. I just got him back. He ...” Her voice trailed off.

The big man smiled. “He is gone. It is not good for you to be alone. You must spend time with women, doing woman things. They will teach you to make wampum.”

Came Back hit the clam shell with a large rock three times, breaking it into irregular pieces under an inch on each side. “Take white piece. Purple have more value. Use lesser when learning.”

Sitting by a fire in the longhouse, Abigail and Tilly each picked up a piece of the shattered clam. Abigail asked, “How did you get clam shells, so far from the sea?”

“We trade for *poquauhock* shells with the Manhattan people. Put your shell in the split stick, like me.” She waited while they pushed their shell pieces into the open ends of the sticks she had given them,

“Now, tie rawhide, tight around the stick.” She took each of their sticks and checked that they had tied them tight enough. “This way, they will stay when you drill.” She handed them small, split logs, about six inches long with troughs, about two inches deep carved into their flat sides. “Put your stick in the space.” She placed the end of her stick holding the shell fragment in the slot on her log. “Watch me, then you do.” She slid as many thin strips of wood between the sides of the trough and the stick as she could force in. Then she handed them both willow sticks with small iron drill bits pounded into their end. “Watch.” She placed a drill between her palms with the bit in the center of her piece of shell and rubbed her palms back and forth, spinning the drill. “See, this makes the hole.”

After several minutes of spinning, Abigail lifted her drill and frowned. “The shell’s scarce scratched.”

“You did right. Making the hole is slow.” Came Back leaned back. The bearskin robe slid off her thin shoulders. Lifting the robe with both hands, she pulled it tight over her worn, undecorated deerskin shirt. “Too much snow this winter. Now I am old. Cold hurts my bones. I will smile when the ice melts.”

Abigail nodded in agreement but pressed her about drilling. “I’ve seen so much wampum. It can’t take so long to make.”

The old woman smiled revealing brown teeth worn almost flat by years of use as pliers, or shears and from eating corn ground with stone mortars and pestles that left fine stone fragments in the meal. “I will tell you some things,” she said, “You see much wampum because many women worked many days making it. Wampum has great worth. Even when the hole is drilled, you have much to do. When you can make the hole without breaking your shell, I’ll show you how to use a pump drill. Much faster. Watch.” She lifted what looked like a fire

bow, wrapped its string around her drill, put a piece of wood against the end of her drill and ran the bow back and forth, spinning the drill much faster. In less than a minute the bit was through the shell. “When I was a girl, we had no iron drills. We used stone to make holes. I struggled to make one bead a day. Then the Dutch brought iron bits. I could make six beads a day, sometime more. When we started using pump drills with iron bits, I made many. Be glad you use iron bits. Soon you will use the drill.”

The tedious activity gave Abigail’s mind time to wander. *Naught but pie crust vows, easy to make, easy to break! How can his word to them mean more than to me?...And what of Benny? Means his son so little?* Try as she might, her mind refused to quiet.

Tilly saw a tear roll down Abigail’s face. She stopped drilling long enough to put her hand on Abigail’s arm and looked into her wet eyes.

Abigail forced a smile and mouthed, “Thank you.”

Tilly wiped a hand against her own eye and nodded. Now both their minds ran free, Abigail holding her side of the same argument John was having on the frozen river, Tilly, her heart breaking for her friend, who was more like her mother.

Came Back either missed or chose to ignore their emotions.

They spun the drills until their hands blistered, then bled. Their hearts ached more. Tilly finished her hole first. She rubbed her hand’s sore muscles and joints, wincing at the raw skin on both palms. Abigail raised her palms to the sky and sang, “Ta Da,” when the bit broke through her shell. Then she shook her hands, blew on their raw skin, and shook them again.

The Riverwoman’s craggy face widened into a smile. Brushing her shoulder-length, gray hair behind her ears, she said, “Your hands

will get hard.” Lifting a piece of rough stone, she said, “Now take your shell from the stick and rub it against the stone. Keep turning it, to make it round. ‘Tis small enough when’s half so big as the nail on your little finger. Then use sand to make the beads shine. When ‘tis done, you have one bead. You need many.” Abigail’s eyes widened, causing Came Back to laugh. “You,” she pointed at Abigail, “must make name-strings for you, your man and boy.” She pointed at Tilly. “You make your own. If you are her friend, you will help White Birch make hers.”

“What’s a name-string?” Tilly asked.

“Name-strings be three strings of wampum, as long as your palm is wide, tied to stick. The string holder keeps name-strings for all in the village.” She pointed at Abigail. “You be White Birch. Your string maybe three lengths white beads, with few purple on each string.” She pointed at Tilly. “You are She Bear. She Bears are big, dark. Yours maybe three strings of purple beads with lines of white beads across strings, to show claws.” She pointed back to Abigail. “Your man is Bear Slayer. Maybe you use purple beads across white strings, to show the many bears he killed. Your boy has no name.”

Abigail interrupted, “His name is Benny.”

Came Back kept talking, ignoring Abigail, “Your boy did nothing to earn a name. Maybe three strings of white beads could be his sign. His spirit has no marks or scars.”

Tilly put down her drill. “Making so many beads’ll take weeks.”

The old woman nodded. “Yes. Women make wampum when the men go in cold to gather pelts.”

Abigail and Tilly worked the full day to make one bead each. Came Back made dozens of perfect beads.

Just before dark, the Riverwoman said, "Show me your beads."

They each wiped the fine sand from their bead and handed it to the old woman. She brought her hand close to her face and rolled the beads around with the index finger of her other hand. Then she put one of her white beads in her hand, shook her fist beside her ear and opened her hand. "Which bead is mine?"

One bead looked perfect. Tilly picked it up, held it close to her face, then put it in her palm and held it out to Abigail.

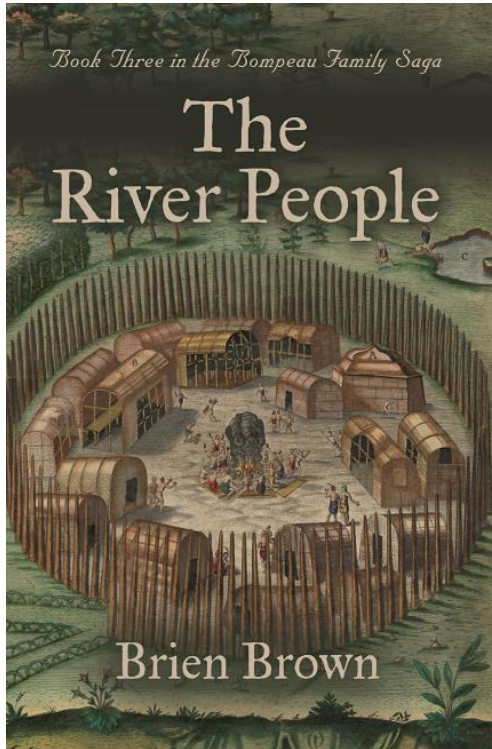
"How'd she do this? 'Tis round as a knitting needle," Tilly said.

Abigail took it, then reached for one of the beads she and Tilly had made. Theirs were irregular with flat areas and edges. She shook her head and handed them to Came Back, who picked her bead from her palm, then threw the others into the fire.

"Now you know why you did not use the purple shell. Tomorrow, you will make better." She worked her way to her feet. "Now we will eat succotash. Good for your belly." She tottered on bowed legs toward a large iron pot bubbling on another fire.

Tilly looked at Abigail, "Methinks we worked the day for naught."

Abigail shook her head. "Methinks we learned much today." She straightened her stiff legs before standing. "And we've much to learn."



The River People grant protection to six travelers who are expected be part village life. The men hunt and walk the war path. The women make wampum and deal with anger directed at all Whites. They all change in ways no one expected.

The River People: Book Three in the Bompeau Family Saga

By Brien Brown

Order the book from the publisher [Booklocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com)

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/13460.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**