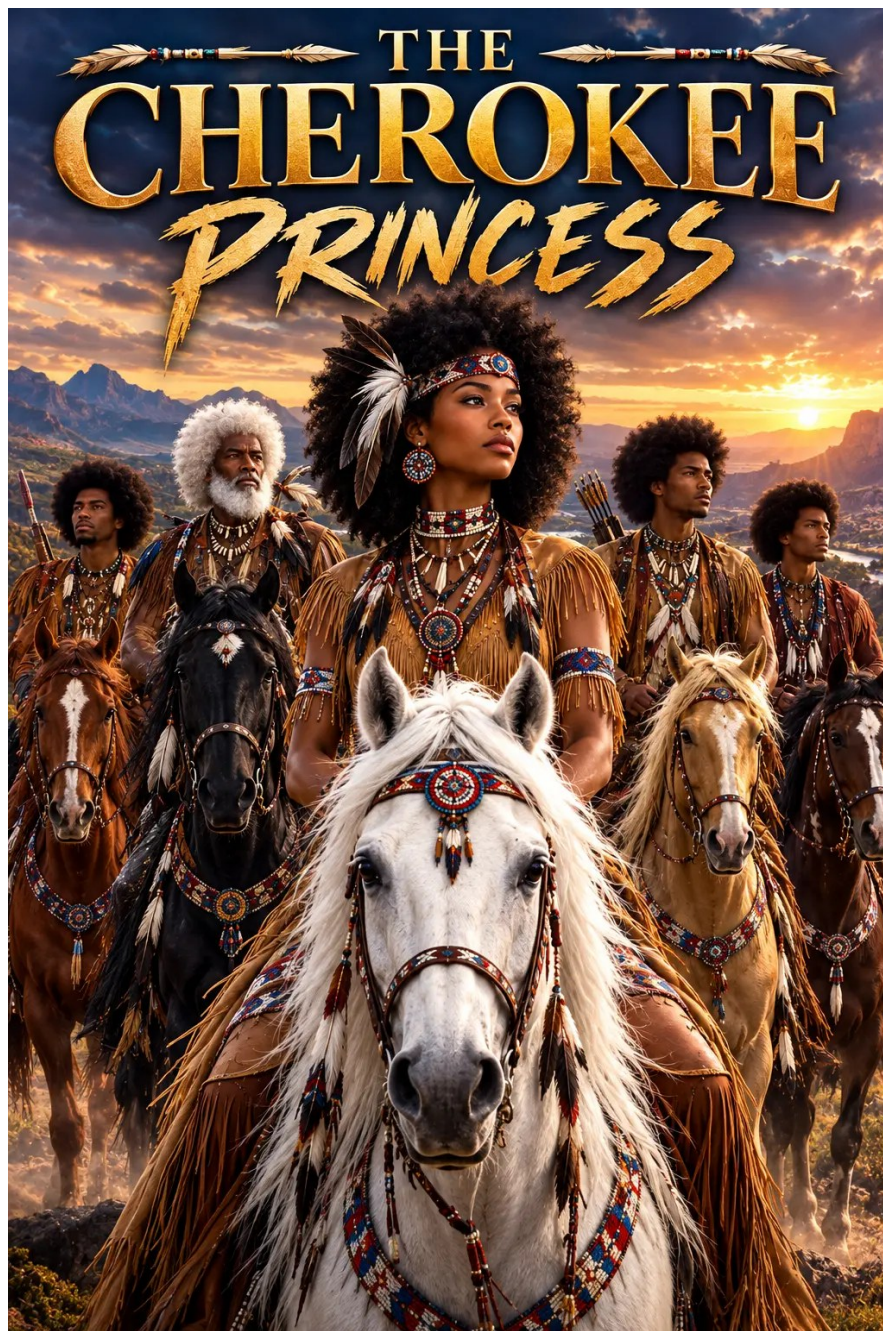




THE CHEROKEE PRINCESS

Remember Who You Are

SFCN Public Library

An inspirational novel for every Black woman and girl who was handed half a story about herself and asked to build a whole life on it.

© SFC Nations. For personal use. Please do not resell or redistribute.

Chapter One

They Never Told Her Who She Was

The mirror in the hallway had a crack in the bottom corner, and Kandyce had learned to stand so it never crossed her face.

It was 2:14 in the morning. She had come in from a ten-hour shift with her keys still in her hand, and for reasons she could not explain, she stopped in front of that mirror instead of walking past it the way she did every other night of her life.

The house was quiet. Her grandmother's clock ticked in the next room. Kandyce looked at the young woman in the glass, twenty-four years old, tired to the bone, hair pulled back so tight it ached, and she asked the question out loud, because there was nobody awake to hear it.

“Who am I?”

She waited. That was the strange part. She actually waited, the way a person waits when they expect an answer.

She could recite what she had been told. She had heard it in classrooms where her history began in chains and ended in a paragraph. She had heard it on television, where women who looked like her were either loud or invisible and rarely simply loved. She had heard it in the small, careful way people said *you're actually really pretty*, with that word sitting in the middle of the sentence like a stone in a shoe.

She had heard it in a hundred places, and every version had one thing in common.

None of them started at the beginning.

The thing she could not name

It was not anger. Kandyce had been angry before, and anger had a shape she recognized, hot and fast and gone by morning. This was older than anger. It sat under her ribs and it did not shout. It felt like standing in a room you know you have been in before, in the dark, reaching for a light switch your hand remembers and your mind does not.

It felt like being handed half a story about yourself and being told to build a whole life on it.

Kandyce turned off the hallway light, went to her room, and lay down in her work clothes because the distance between the bed and the closet was farther than she had left in her. She thought she would fall asleep the way she always did, with the ceiling fan spinning and tomorrow already pressing on her chest.

Instead she dreamed.

The dream

There was wind first. Not the sound of it, the feel of it, warm and moving across her arms as if she were standing somewhere high and open. Then the light came, low and gold, the kind of light that only exists in the last twenty minutes of a summer evening, and Kandyce found herself standing on a ridge above a valley wider than any place she had ever been.

Mountains stood shoulder to shoulder to the west. Below her, the land rolled green and unbothered, a river bending through it like something written in cursive. The sun was going down behind a ridge and it was setting everything on fire without burning a single thing.

And there was a sound coming up the slope toward her.

Hooves.

Kandyce should have been afraid. In the dream she was not. She stood at the edge of that ridge with her bare feet in the grass and she watched them come.

The first horse over the rise was white. Not gray, not cream, not the tired white of an old animal, but white the way a lightning strike is white, mane loose and lifting, chest wide, moving up that hill like the hill had agreed to it.

And on that horse was a woman.

The woman on the white stallion

She rode without hurry. She wore tanned buckskin, fringed at the sleeve, and beadwork ran across her chest in red and blue and bone-white rows that caught the last of the sun. There were feathers in a beaded band at her brow. Her earrings were wide and worked with careful hands.

And her hair, her hair was an enormous crown of natural coils, lifted around her head like something that had never once been asked to apologize for the room it took up.

Kandyce's breath went out of her.

Because the woman was Black, and the woman was Cherokee, and the woman was beautiful in a way that had nothing to do with being looked at.

Behind her came four riders.

They came up the ridge in a loose line and stopped when she stopped. The one directly behind her rode a horse as black as a closed door, and he was old, older than anyone Kandyce had ever seen sit a horse like that. His hair was white. His beard was full and white and reached his chest. His face had been carved by weather and by something heavier than weather, and his eyes went over Kandyce once, top to bottom, the way a man checks a fence he built himself years ago to see if it is still standing.

The other three sat their horses on either side, young men with dark faces and full afros, a bay, a buckskin, a chestnut with a white blaze, each of them still in the way that only people who have carried weapons and had reason to are still.

Nobody spoke. The wind moved. The white horse shifted his weight, and his bridle made a small sound like rain on a window.

Then the woman looked at Kandyce. Directly at her. Not near her, not through her. *At* her, with the unhurried attention of someone who has finally arrived at a place she has been walking toward for a very long time.

And she said:

“You have been searching for me your entire life.”

Kandyce's mouth was dry. In the dream she could feel her own heart, which is not a thing that happens in ordinary dreams.

“I don't know you,” she said.

The woman on the white stallion did not blink.

“You don't remember me,” she said. “That is not the same thing.”

The old man on the black horse shifted his reins. He did not say a word. He did not have to. Every line of him said *listen to her*.

Kandyce took one step forward and the grass was real under her foot, cool and slightly damp, and she heard herself ask the only question she had.

“Who are you?”

The woman leaned forward slightly on the neck of the white horse. The sun went down another inch behind her, and for one moment the light came around her head like something that had been there the whole time and only just then decided to be visible.

And she said it plainly, the way you say a thing that is simply true:

“I am you.”

Kandyce woke up sitting straight up in the dark with her hand pressed flat against her own chest.

The ceiling fan was spinning. The clock in the next room was still ticking. It was 4:41 in the morning and her work shirt was damp at the collar and there were tears on her face that she had not felt herself cry.

And on her palm, faintly, was the smell of horse and grass and woodsmoke.

A word to you, reading this

There is a difference between not knowing who you are and never having been told.

One is emptiness. The other is theft. Only one of them is your fault, and it is neither.

She sat there until the window went gray. She did not sleep again. And somewhere between the dark and the morning, Kandyce Reed made a decision that would take her the rest of the book to understand.

She was going to find out what had been left out.

The rest of that morning

She made coffee at five and drank it standing up at the kitchen counter with the light off, because turning it on felt like admitting the night was over.

Here is what she could not get past. She had never in her life dreamed a face she had not seen somewhere. Dreams borrow. Everybody knows that. The stranger in the dream is the mailman, the teacher from third grade, somebody from the grocery store with different hair.

But she had never seen that woman. Not in a museum, not in a movie, not on a wall in anybody's house. She had never once, in twenty-four years of American schooling and American television, seen a Black woman with a crown of natural coils riding at the head of four armed men like the ground itself had agreed to it.

So where had her mind gotten the picture?

That was the question that would not let her sleep, and it is a real question, and this book is going to answer it, and the answer is not what she expected.

A word to you, reading this

Some part of you already knows what you were supposed to be. That is why the ache has never gone quiet.

You are not inventing that feeling. You are remembering something nobody ever finished telling you.

Four things she did not tell anyone that week

She looked up whether a person can smell things in a dream. The answer, as far as the internet was concerned, was mostly no.

She drove out past the county line on her one day off and stood in a field for eleven minutes looking at a ridge line that was not the ridge line, and came home and did not mention it.

She took her hair down in the car twice and put it back up before going inside.

And on Thursday night, at the end of a shift, a nineteen-year-old girl she trained asked her, “what's wrong with you lately, you look different,” and Kandyce said “nothing,” and then sat in her car in the dark for a while, because that had been the first outside confirmation that something was moving.

This is how it starts for most women. Not with a speech. With a private week nobody knows about.

A word to you, reading this

The beginning of your change is going to be invisible and slightly embarrassing. Let it be.

You are not required to announce anything to be allowed to begin.

Chapter Two

The Woman in the Mirror

She started with her grandmother, because you start with whoever is still alive.

Miss Etta Reed was seventy-nine years old and made coffee like it was a personal argument with weakness. She was in her chair by the window with the blinds half open when Kandyce came out of her room at seven in the morning still wearing the night before.

“You didn't sleep,” Etta said, without turning around.

“I dreamed.”

Something in her grandmother's shoulders changed. It was small. Kandyce would think about that half-inch of movement for weeks.

“Sit down,” Etta said. “Tell it to me from the start.”

So Kandyce told her. The ridge. The valley. The white horse. The four riders and the old man with the white beard on the black horse. The woman with the crown of coils who looked at her like she had come a long way to do it.

When she got to the last part, when she said *I am you*, her grandmother set the coffee down on the windowsill and did not pick it back up.

“What?” Kandyce said. “What is it?”

“My mother's mother,” Etta said slowly, “had a picture. One picture. A woman on a horse. And everybody in the house had a different story about who she was, and by the time it got to me there wasn't any story left at all. Just the picture. And then not even the picture.”

“What happened to it?”

Her grandmother looked out the window at the street where she had lived for fifty-one years.

“That's the thing, baby,” she said. “Nobody wrote anything down. When you don't write it down, it becomes a rumor. And then somebody decides rumors don't count.”

What she went looking for

Kandyce was not a historian. She was a woman with a phone, a library card she had not used since high school, and four days off in a row for the first time in two years.

She went looking anyway.

And what she found, over those four days, was not one grand hidden truth. It was something quieter and harder to sit with. She found gaps.

She found records that counted people as property and never once wrote down what they were like. She found census pages where a woman appeared as a single first name and then never appeared again. She found family lines that ran back three generations and then stopped at a wall, not because the people stopped, but because whoever was holding the pen decided they were not worth the ink.

She found towns whose names had been changed and roads whose names had been changed and land that had been walked and farmed and buried in and loved, by people whose own descendants could no longer say their names out loud.

Nobody had to burn a library to do this. All anybody had to do was not write it down.

A word to you, reading this

History is not only what happened. It is what somebody chose to record, and who they thought was worth recording.

If your grandmothers are missing from the page, that is a fact about the page. It is not a fact about your grandmothers.

The questions that would not leave her alone

By the third night Kandyce had filled half a notebook, and most of what was in it was not answers. It was questions, written and rewritten, getting shorter each time until they were down to the bone.

- Where are the stories of our mothers?
- Where are the queens? Somebody had to be a queen. Somebody always is.
- Where are the warriors, the ones who stood in a doorway and did not move?
- Where are the women who kept whole families alive on nothing and were never called strong for it, only expected to be?
- And who decided which of us got a paragraph and which of us got a page?

She sat with the notebook open on her knees at one in the morning and she noticed something about her own handwriting. It had gotten firmer as the list went on. The first question was a whisper. The last one was not.

What she saw in the glass the second time

On the fourth night she went and stood in front of the hallway mirror on purpose.

Same crack in the corner. Same tired face. Same twenty-four years.

But she did something she had not done since she was a girl. She took her hair down.

She pulled the tie out and let it go, and it rose the way it wanted to rise, wide and soft and taking up exactly as much room as it had been born to take, and Kandyce stood there and looked at the shape of her own head against the light.

And she thought about a woman on a white horse who had never once, in that entire dream, apologized for a single thing about herself.

“All right,” Kandyce said to the mirror. “Tell me the rest.”

She was asleep before her head was fully down.

The ridge came back. The gold light came back. The wind moved across her arms exactly as it had before, warm and real, and the sound of hooves came up the slope like it had been waiting four days for her to lie down.

This time, the woman on the white stallion was already there.

She was sitting the horse at the edge of the ridge with the valley behind her and the four riders behind that, and she watched Kandyce arrive the way you watch someone walk in late to a room you have been holding for them.

“I have questions,” Kandyce said.

“I know,” said the Princess. “You wrote them down.”

Kandyce's skin went cold in the warm wind.

The woman on the white horse looked at her for a long moment. Then she said the thing that Kandyce would carry with her out of the dream and into the rest of her life.

“You think you came here to discover my story.”

She paused. Behind her, the old man on the black horse lowered his head very slightly, the way a man does at the exact moment something he has been waiting on finally begins.

“You came here to discover yours.”

What she wrote at the top of the page

Before she went in the second time, Kandyce did one small thing that she now says changed everything. She took the notebook, turned to a clean page, and wrote seven words at the top of it in

ink.

I am not looking for permission anymore.

She did not feel it when she wrote it. That matters. People wait to feel a thing before they will write it down, and then they never write anything down, and then they wonder why nothing moves.

Write it before you feel it. The feeling is slow. The feeling comes in behind the decision like a dog that has been circling the yard.

Her grandmother's list

On the second morning, Miss Etta made Kandyce bring her a legal pad, and then dictated names for forty minutes without once looking anything up.

Some of the entries were full: a name, a county, a year, a church. Some were half: *Aunt Bird, on my father's side, kept bees, would not be spoken to on Sundays.* Some were nearly nothing: *the woman from Alabama who took in my mother when nobody else would, name lost.*

Kandyce read that last line four times.

“That's a whole person,” she said. “That's a whole person and all we've got is what she did.”

“That's more than most,” her grandmother said. “Write it neat.”

Kandyce wrote it neat. Twenty-two names on a legal pad in blue ink, which was, as of that morning, the most complete written record of that family that had ever existed anywhere on earth.

A word to you, reading this

One legal pad and one afternoon can end a hundred years of forgetting in your family.

You do not need a website or a service or a kit. You need paper and the oldest voice in the house.

END OF PREVIEW

Continue reading to discover the truth.

The full 70-page novel

Ten chapters, the four warriors, the meaning of the crown, and the truth in Chapter Ten.

Get it for \$9.99 at sfcnations.com/library/the-chokeee-princess.

FREE PREVIEW