

PROSPECTING

CHERRY
BOMBS



Prospecting
by JL Jensen

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I was hip deep in ice-cold water, sluicing water over a screen full of mud and gravel, when I was startled by a shout from behind me.

"Hey! What are you doing? This is private property!"

As I turned around I slipped, fell into the stream, and lost my grip on the screen. I watched with horror as the metal-framed screen sank to the bottom. As it vanished from view, so did any hope of finding enough garnet rough to sell at a local shop so I could afford a room for the night.

The day had started off with so much promise. I'd found the spot I'd been told about and had gotten permission to prospect, and was able to start digging for garnets immediately. Within two hours, though, it had started to rain.

I'd dreamt about prospecting for gemstones for years, much to the amusement of my parents and the dismay of my siblings. They couldn't understand why I wanted to waste my time looking for precious and semi-precious gemstones, then faceting or polishing them to bring out their inner fire and beauty. Of course, they all liked interacting with people, something I could barely do.

I had finally gotten some promising gravel and the rain had stopped, so my hopes had risen. Now I was cold, wet, and miserable and just wanted to give up.

"Hey, you okay?"

I didn't turn around; I just sat there, hoping that if I stayed still he'd go away.

I heard splashing behind me, then felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned my head to look at my nemesis, and froze.

He could have been my long-lost twin brother, if I'd had a twin brother. He said something in a language I didn't understand; I shook my head and shrugged.

"I'm Mike Clearwater, who are you?" he asked in English.

"N-n-n-nobody," I finally managed to say.

He cocked his head as he stared at me. "Ooookay. Let me help you up so we can get out of the water."

I shook my head. "M-m-m-my screen."

He gave me a funny look, then walked over and pulled the screen straight up out of the creek. He looked into it before handing it to me. "Looks like you've got some nice sized garnets in there."

It took me a few minutes to process his words. I looked down and realized he was correct. There were five marble-sized, reddish colored lumps, along with a dozen smaller ones in the gravel that was left in the bottom of the screen. I'd done it! It was only when the screen started to tremble that I realized I was shaking.

"Come on, let's get you warm." He took the screen from my hands and set it down next to the rest of my gear. "My truck's on the fire road, can you walk that far?"

I nodded automatically. I was cold, but that wasn't the only reason I was shaking. I'd actually found garnets! Since I had no idea where the fire road was I didn't know whether or not I really could walk that far.

After the second time I tripped, he put an arm around my waist to steady me. I flinched away from him, I just wasn't used to being touched.

"Hey, I just want to help, okay?"

"S-s-s-sorry."

"Don't apologize. My truck is at the top of the next ridge. Can you make it that far?"

I nodded and focused my eyes on the goal. I tried not to think about how good his arm felt around my waist.

We got to his Suburban, where he pushed me into the front seat, leaned over me, started it up, and put the heater on full blast before he went and rummaged in the back. After a minute he came around and opened my door.

"Here, wrap this around yourself for warmth. It's a space blanket and will reflect your body heat. I need to make a call, but yell if you need me, okay?" He waited for me to nod before he walked away.

I felt guilty for doing it, but I cracked the window open so I could listen to the call.

"Henry? This is Mike," he said before dropping into a different language.

I sighed and wondered what would happen next. I'd been sleeping in my pickup because I was broke; it was only then that I realized I'd left the garnets behind. I was about to open the door when the conversation outside returned to English.

"Yeah, he is. No doubt there, trust me on that. He's my mirror image, it's just like Trey and Tony. Surprised the hell out of me I can tell you. Yeah, I'll bring him by. See you later."

He looked over at me and I flinched when our eyes met; I hoped he wouldn't be upset with me for eavesdropping. I took a deep breath, opened the door and stepped out.

"Where are you going?"

"Back."

"Why?"

"Garnets."

He cocked his head to one side and looked thoughtful. "Is it easier for you to talk when it's only one word?"

I was surprised by the perceptiveness of his question, and I nodded in answer.

"Okay, I can live with that. Henry Smith, the guy who gave you permission to dig here, would like to meet you. I told him I'd drive you over to his place."

I shook my head. "M-m-m-my truck."

"It'll be fine where it is. Come on; let's get your garnets and gear and head to Henry's. He said we're invited for dinner and he's a great cook."

"N-n-n-not like this," I said as I gestured at my jeans.

"Hey, he won't mind. But if it makes you feel better, we can stop by your motel and you can change."

I shook my head. "N-n-n-no motel."

"What? You don't have a room? Why not?"

I mimed pulling my pockets out.

"No money?"

I nodded, pleased that he understood.

"Don't tell me, you've been sleeping in your truck?"

I nodded and looked down, for some reason I was ashamed to admit that to him. I was usually proud of the fact that I didn't need anyone else, especially my family. But my luck hadn't been as good lately, so I was pretty much broke until I managed to polish or facet some of the rough material I had in my truck so I could sell it to a jeweler. I was only

willing to sell the rough itself as a last resort, when I was totally broke. Like now.

"Listen, Henry said that you told him your great-grandmother was Nez Perce. I told him that when I saw you it was like looking in a mirror, and he really wants to meet you. He's an elder of the tribe, and it's best to respect his wishes. So how 'bout if I drive you over to your truck, we grab your garnets and clothes, then I take you to my house where you can clean up and change, then we go over to Henry's. Afterward, I can bring you out here and you can follow me back to my place."

"W-w-w-why?"

"Why am I being so nice to you?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Because you're kin. Henry told me that your great-grandmother was my great-grandmother's sister, so we're cousins. Out here we take care of our kin, understand?"

I felt my eyes fill with tears and I turned away; I didn't want to appear weak. I felt warm arms come around my waist from behind, and it took all of my willpower not to melt into his arms.

"It's okay, Nathan, it's okay."

I stiffened when he called me by name, but then I realized that Mr. Smith must have told him my name when they were talking on the phone. I allowed myself to relax slightly, and was struck by the realization that it was the first time I could ever remember being comforted by someone. None of my family would have bothered. I was the black sheep because, among other things, I looked like a full-blooded Indian while

my siblings took after my father's side of the family and were blondes. The fact that I stuttered only confirmed my status in the family.

Mike turned me around and pulled me close while he stroked my back. "It's okay, you're safe with me."

I took a deep breath, then panicked as I felt myself respond to his scent. I prayed that I wouldn't get hard, but, as usual, my prayers weren't answered. I tried to pull away, but Mike held me close.

"Hey, calm down," he said as I pushed against his chest.

I froze when our groins touched and I prayed he didn't notice how hard I was. It took a few minutes for me to realize that he'd also gone still and was also hard. I looked up and was shocked by the tender expression on his face.

"That's what they meant," he said.

I raised my eyebrows in an unspoken question.

"I've been dreaming about my soul mate but every time I saw his face it was my own face. Now I understand. I was looking for you."

"M-m-m-me?"

"Yes, you. You are gay, aren't you?"

I nodded.

"Well up until the point when I started to dream about a male soul mate, I considered myself bisexual. Now? Who knows? What I do know is I've been looking for you for quite a while."

"B-b-b-but, I do-do-do-don't understand. I've ne-ne-ne-never..." I trailed off when I realized what I'd just admitted.

He frowned, then looked at me with astonishment. "You're a virgin?"

I felt my cheeks get warm as I nodded.

"Why? How?" He looked totally baffled.

"C-c-c-can't talk." I watched understanding cross his face.

"Nobody bothered to try to talk with you? Didn't you ever see a speech therapist?"

I shook my head.

"I don't understand."

"Th-th-th-they're ashamed of me. I lo-lo-lo-look too In-in-in-indian. I'm the on-on-on-only one."

"You're the only one who looks Indian?"

I nodded.

"Shit! I didn't think people still thought that way! Come on, let's get your stuff, get cleaned up and go talk to Henry. Afterward you can stay with me—in the guest room, okay? I'm not going to push you into anything."

I nodded, relieved that he understood. I was still more than a little unnerved at how comfortable I felt with him. Because of my stutter I really didn't have friends in school, so I really wasn't used to being around people.

He drove to where my truck was parked and watched as I went to the back of my pickup, and opened the topper. I got a plastic bag, labeled it with the date and location using a permanent marker, and put the garnets inside. I put the bag into the case where I'd put all of my other finds and handed the case to Mike. Then I gathered all of the prospecting gear and stowed it in the back, next to my lapidary saw and

faceting machine. Finally, I pulled my duffel bag out from the crew cab, and locked the truck.

"Ready," I said.

He nodded and opened the back door of his Suburban. I tossed my duffel bag on the seat, took the case from Mike and placed it carefully on the floor. He closed the door and went around to the driver's side as I got into the front seat.

"So, if you don't mind me asking, what are you going to do with those garnets?"

"Fa-fa-fa-facet them."

"Really? You're a jeweler?"

"No-no-no-not yet."

"But you want to be?"

"Yes."

"So, where's your workshop?"

"Truck."

"What? Where's your home?"

"Truck."

"Why?"

Much to my surprise he sounded upset about it.

"M-m-m-my parents wa-wa-wa-wanted me to go to college. I mo-mo-mo-moved out. But n-n-n-no one wa-wa-wa-wanted me to wo-wo-wo-work for them."

"Wouldn't your parents help you out?"

I shook my head. It wasn't so much that they wouldn't help out; it was impossible for me to ask them. I just couldn't do it.

"You mentioned others in your family. Wouldn't they help?"

"My bro-bro-bro-brothers think I'm stu-stu-stu-stupid. My sis-sis-sis-sisters are ashamed of m-m-m-me."

"I don't blame you for leaving, then."

We pulled onto an unmarked side road, which turned out to be his driveway. We pulled up in front of a single story ranch house.

"Welcome to my house. I own about twenty acres, most of it forested, so it's nice and peaceful."

I frowned as I realized I didn't know what he did for a living. "Wha-wha-wha-what do y-y-y-you do?"

He smiled at me. "I'm an Internet service provider for the area and I repair and help set up computers. The pay isn't as much as I'd make in a large city, but this is where my people live and I'm able to help out some of the kids here by giving them part-time jobs. I also teach some computer courses at the high school."

He showed me the guest room and the bathroom, found me a towel and washcloth and told me he'd be in his office, checking his messages, if I needed anything.

I nodded and smiled at him, then grabbed some clean clothes and headed for the shower.

The hot water felt so luxurious after months of cold campground or tepid motel showers that I wanted to stay for a while, but I knew we had to get going, so kept it brief. I dried off, got dressed and followed the smell of coffee to the kitchen. He looked up as I entered and laughed when I sniffed loudly.

"Ah, another coffee fiend." He waved toward the drip coffee maker on the counter. "Cups are in the cupboard

above, there should be another travel mug up there. Cream and sugar are on the counter."

I shot him a dirty look when he mentioned the cream and sugar, and he laughed.

"I like it black, too. I just thought I'd offer."

I nodded, found the mug, filled it and took a sip. I closed my eyes and sighed. Perfect.

I jumped, and nearly dropped the mug, when I felt his arms come around me.

"Sorry," he apologized.

I carefully put down the mug and turned in his arms. I met his eyes, smiled and hugged him back. "It's okay," I whispered. He tightened his arms around me then let go.

"Come on, Henry's waiting. Oh, he also said you should bring whatever stones you found."

I nodded; it was his land, after all. I went and got my case, picked up my mug and followed him out to his truck.

We drove into Lewiston and pulled into the driveway of a small, well kept, two-story house. We went up onto the porch and I was surprised when the door opened before Mike could knock.

An elderly man greeted Mike with a warm smile. When he looked at me his smile widened and he nodded. When our eyes met, I felt an unfamiliar warmth and felt some of my tension melt away.

"Nathan, it is good to finally meet you. Please come in. You are always welcome here."

"Th-th-th-thank you," I finally managed to say.

He frowned for a moment and his eyes grew unfocused as he looked at me, then at Mike. His eyes focused when he looked at me again, and he nodded. "It is good that you are here. Now you can start healing."

I looked at Mike, who shrugged. Henry waved us inside.

"Come, let's eat. We can talk after that."

I enjoyed one of the best meals I'd ever had and listened avidly as Mike and Henry discussed different people they knew. My ears perked up when I realized they were talking about a gay couple.

"When are Joe and Cody coming up again?" Mike asked.

"In a couple of weeks. They've got a couple of mares who haven't dropped their foals yet."

"Are they Arabs or Nez Perce Horses?"

"One of each. The Arabian mare is Joe's favorite, Habiba, so he's being extra careful with her. If she doesn't foal soon, I'm sure he'll call my son about her."

"Must be nice having a father who's a veterinarian, especially when your horses are worth so much."

"Yes," Henry said before he turned to me. "Joe is my grandson, Nathan. He and his husband, Cody, breed Arabian and Nez Perce horses, with the help of another two-spirit couple, Trey and Tony."

"T-t-t-two spirit?"

Mike answered. "A lot of Native Americans are calling themselves two-spirit people because they feel that using gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered to describe themselves is promoting division instead of unity."

"M-m-m-makes sense," I said after thinking about it for a few minutes.

When we finished eating, we moved to the living room.

"Mike said you found some garnets, may I see them?" Henry asked.

I nodded and put the case on my lap. Mike was sitting next to me on the sofa and he let out a soft whistle when he saw all of the bags of stones I'd collected.

"How long have you been prospecting?" he asked.

"M-m-m-most of my l-l-l-life," I told him as I handed the bag of garnets to Henry.

Henry poured them into his cupped hand, placed his other hand over them and went still for a moment, then he smiled.

"It is good. They wanted to be found." He poured them back into the bag. "I have a gift for you. I will be right back."

He handed the bag back to me and left the room. I was about to put the bag back when Mike put a hand on my arm.

"Can I see what else you've found?"

I nodded and pulled out some of my most prized finds.

Mike held up one bag and gasped as he saw the red flashes of a fire opal.

"This is beautiful. Where'd you find this?"

"Nevada," I said absently as I was looking for my most precious find.

"And these?" he asked just as I found the bag I wanted.

I looked over and saw he was holding the bag of turquoise. "Colorado," I said as I handed him the bag I'd just found. "That's my prize."

He opened the bag and poured the clear, pea-sized stone into his hand just as Henry walked into the room.

Mike held the stone under the light and Henry gasped.

"May I see it?" Henry asked me.

I nodded and Mike handed the stone to Henry.

Henry rubbed a finger on the stone and nodded, then handed it back to Mike.

"Okay, what is it?" Mike asked, a baffled look on his face.

"A di-di-di-diamond," I told him. "I found it in Ar-ar-ar-arkansas."

"My god!" Mike put the stone back into the bag and handed it to me. "No wonder you wouldn't leave your case in the truck."

"Here," Henry said as he handed me a blue stone, which had been wrapped with silver wire and was hanging on a leather thong. "This is for you."

"Ap-ap-ap-apatite?" I asked.

"Yes. It's supposed to clear the throat chakra and help with stuttering," he told me. "At least according to some New Age website I read. I just listened to the stone person and knew you needed it."

"Th-th-th-thank you," I said as Mike took the stone and tied it around my neck.

"There's also something else you need to know. When Mike told me about your resemblance to one another I thought it might be the case; now that I've seen both of you together, I know it to be truth. You are only the second pair I've come across in my lifetime."

"Pair of what?" Mike asked.

"People who share a single soul."

My jaw dropped and Mike looked pole-axed.

"Mike, when you called me you said it was like Tony and Trey. They're the other pair." Henry looked at me. "Tony and Trey are about as closely related as you are—sharing great or great-great grandparents. They have two blood ties, one on each side of their families, while you only have one tie. That may be why they can feel each other's emotions, or it might be because they grew up together. In either case, you need to know because your lives are linked together, like theirs are."

"Wh-wh-wh-what do you mean?"

"If one of you dies, the other will follow."

I stared at Henry, unable to believe what he'd just told us. I shook my head, denying it. It couldn't be true; it was just too unbelievable to be true!

"Nathan, I'm sorry to have to be so blunt," Henry said. "I know it's a lot to deal with, but it's better you know now."

I jumped when Mike gave me a hug, then forced myself to relax into the comfort he offered. When I looked up, I saw Henry looking at me, concern in his eyes.

"We will help you, Nathan. No matter how little Ni-mi-poo blood you actually have, you are one of us and we help our own."

"Ni-mi-poo?" I asked, and marveled when I didn't stutter.

"Nez Perce. Ni-mi-poo is what we call ourselves," Mike said, hugging me tighter.

I put my arms over his, holding them in place.

"So, what's next?" Mike asked Henry.

Henry cocked his head as he regarded me gravely. "He is staying with you?"

"Yes," Mike answered firmly.

Henry nodded. "Tomorrow night, fire up the old man. We need to do a sweat. Then we should consider a vision quest."

"Old m-m-m-man? Vi-vi-vi-vision quest?" I asked.

"The old man is what we call the sweat lodge. Mike has one on his property. And you need to seek a vision because you need to find your path in life." Henry looked at Mike.

"Talk to your friends at the University and see who would be the best speech therapist for Nathan, I'll check with my friends as well."

"I c-c-c-can't afford it," I protested, totally confused by their actions. Why did they care?

Henry waved off my protest. "Either Mike or I can pay for it. But you need to learn how to cope with your stutter. I suspect that part of the reason for it was the physical distance between the two of you, but only time will tell if that's the only cause."

Mike pulled away and turned to face me. "Do you want to live with me, Nathan? I'd really like you to stay and I promise we'll take things slow. I've got a small pole building that's only being used to store stuff. We can clean it out and you can have it as your workshop. That way you can polish and facet some of your stones and we can go prospecting for more. We can spend a couple of days looking for star garnets at Emerald Creek, we can go to Montana and look for sapphires or even go to Arkansas and look for more diamonds. Whatever you want, Nathan, just stay."

I heard Henry snicker softly as Mike took both my hands in his, but I didn't look away from Mike as I nodded. The joy in Mike's eyes was reward enough, but then he leaned in and kissed me.

When I could think again, I was sitting in Mike's lap, my head on his shoulder and he was stroking my back.

"Are you okay?"

I nodded. "Meltdown."

He laughed. "Yeah, my brain melted down, too."

I looked around for Henry.

"He headed out back. Said to yell when we were through."

"W-w-w-was he of-of-of-offended?"

"Nah, he's used to Joe and Cody or Tony and Trey doing it every time they come visit him."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really." He lifted me off of his lap. "Now I'll just go tell Henry it's safe."

I blushed, but he laughed and winked.

"I'll be right back."

When Henry came in, I dropped my gaze to the floor. No matter what Mike said, I was still worried I'd offended him.

"Nathan," Henry said gently. "There's nothing wrong with showing love or affection."

I looked up at him. "S-s-s-sorry."

He knelt so he was at my eye level. "It's all right. Really. I figured you'd be embarrassed if I stayed, so I did some chores to give you some privacy."

He put his hand on my head and I was startled to feel my throat tingle. I looked into his eyes and he smiled as he took his hand away.

"I thought you might be able to feel it. Mike can."

"Feel what?" Mike asked.

I put my hand to my throat. "It tingled." My jaw dropped as I realized I hadn't stuttered.

"Ah. I understand. I forgot to tell you that Henry's also a medicine man."

"Really?" I looked at Henry with respect.

"Yes."

"Th-thank you."

Henry saw my disappointment. "Healing takes time. It won't happen overnight, but it will happen. Have faith."

I nodded and smiled. I could wait, and I had a lot of patience.

* * * *

By the end of the second week, I was wondering if my decision to stay had been a major mistake. Every time Mike touched me unexpectedly, I jumped. If I knew he was going to touch me I could control myself, and I really started to enjoy the kisses we shared, but I just couldn't drop my guard completely.

What was worse was that every time Mike tried to go beyond kissing, I froze. I felt like it was my fault; that it was my obligation to do more since Mike was providing me a place to live, so I got more and more frustrated. During the third and fourth weeks, things only got worse. I'd unloaded my

equipment into the pole building he'd been using for storage. Mike had been surprised when all we had to do was clear a small corner for my faceting machine, lapidary saw and cab machine. Once everything was set up, I started faceting some of the stones I'd collected over the past couple of years.

Mike was fine with it at first—he'd come and watch and comment on the stones—but he confronted me after I'd spent eighteen hours a day for five days straight faceting.

"Nathan, what's going on? I never see you any more, and I miss you."

"I-I-I-I j-j-j-just w-w-w-want to g-g-g-get some s-s-s-stones ready to s-s-s-sell."

"Why?"

"S-s-s-so I c-c-c-can pay you b-b-b-back."

"For what? You don't need to pay me back for anything. I enjoy having you here. I don't know what life was like where you grew up, but around here we take care of family."

I flinched as I realized I'd insulted him, then, when he mentioned family, I froze. I didn't really have a family and I'd told him that. Why was he throwing it in my face? Then I remembered all of the times that my brothers and sisters had told me, to my face, that they wished I hadn't been born; that they were tired of explaining to their friends and lovers that I really was their brother, even though I didn't look anything like them. Finally, I remembered how the only person I'd felt close to was my grandmother Sarah because she looked like me. When I realized that I'd never gotten to say goodbye, I got nauseous and made a run for the toilet, where I threw up what little lunch I'd had. I'd never be a part

of any family, I knew that, but, foolishly, I had hoped I was wrong and had believed Mike and Henry when they told me I was part of their family.

"Nathan? Oh Gods, I'm sorry. I take it back, okay?"

I couldn't stop throwing up, even when there was nothing left in my stomach. I felt Mike put his arms around me, which made it even worse. I pushed him away and literally hugged the toilet bowl as the spasms continued. When they finally stopped, Mike was gone and I lay on the bathroom tile, crying. I noticed, distractedly, that my nose was running like a faucet, but I couldn't move. I didn't realize I'd soiled myself until I smelled the fetid odor of my own shit. I think I must have fainted because the next thing I remember is Henry lifting me into his arms.

"It's okay, Nathan," he said softly. "I've got you now. You just let Mike and me take care of you."

I stiffened when he said Mike's name.

"Mike's scared, Nathan. He doesn't know what he said or did to cause this, that's why he called me."

"It's n-n-n-not h-h-h-his fault," I finally managed to say. "I-I-I-I d-d-d-don't know h-h-h-how to c-c-c-care f-f-f-for anyone b-b-b-but me."

"What?" Henry looked at me like I'd grown three heads.

"What, exactly happened, Nathan. Mike can't tell me, he just keeps saying that he hurt you."

It took quite a while, but I finally got it all out.

Henry looked thoughtful. "Nathan, you do realize that Mike considers you family, don't you?"

I shook my head.

"He does. Why is that so difficult to believe?"

"N-n-n-no one w-w-w-wants me."

"We do, Nathan. We want you. You are part of our tribe, our family. We care about what happens to you."

I started to shake. I was so scared that this was a dream; that I'd wake up in my truck, feeling cold and miserable.

"Nathan, look at me."

I looked up and my attention was caught and held by Henry's intense gaze.

"Let the hurt go. It's in the past and it's time you started to live in the present. We don't expect anything from you except that you be happy. Mike doesn't need to be repaid with money because he enjoys your company and he isn't lonely any more. That's his reward."

"W-w-w-what about y-y-y-you?"

"Nathan, I'm a medicine man. My gift of healing must be used to help others; I've known that since I was a young man. Mike's gift is to understand technology and be able to teach others what he knows. Yours is to find stone people and bring their inner beauty out and show it to the world. Every one of us has unique gifts that must be used or we wither away from soul sickness. You've been very badly hurt in the past, but that is in the past. Today, you are loved. Today, you are part of our family. Today you are safe."

I didn't realize I was crying until Henry brushed the tears away from my face.

"Now, grandson of my heart, you need to get cleaned up. I'll clean up the bathroom and Mike can do the laundry."

"O-o-o-only if h-h-h-he r-r-r-really wants."

"I really want to."

If I hadn't been so wrung out, I'd have jumped a foot when Mike spoke.

I looked up and saw that Mike was sincere, so I nodded.
"O-o-o-okay, then."

Eventually everything was cleaned up, including me, and as I lay in bed, totally exhausted, I began to hope that my life was going to get better.

* * * *

Unfortunately, during the two weeks that followed, nothing really changed, because I still jumped when Mike touched me unexpectedly. I just got more and more frustrated and angry, and I finally decided it was time for me to quit dreaming and let Mike find someone who didn't flinch every time he was touched.

I was loading my truck when Mike found me. I'd been hoping to be gone by the time he got home from the computer set-up he'd been doing, but, as usual, I wasn't that lucky.

"What the hell is this?" He waved the note I'd written to him in front of my face.

I gestured at the note and shrugged. I'd explained everything in the note.

"Damn it Nathan. What did I do?"

"N-n-n-not you. M-m-m-me. Y-y-y-you deserve s-s-s-someone wh-wh-wh-who c-c-c-can l-l-l-love you b-b-b-back."

"Are you saying you don't love me?"

I winced at the pain I heard in his voice. "N-n-n-no. I-I-I-I l-l-l-love you. It's j-j-j-just not en-en-en-enough."

"Why isn't it enough?"

"Y-y-y-you d-d-d-deserve m-m-m-more. I c-c-c-can't even l-l-l-let you t-t-t-touch m-m-m-me."

"I deserve more? Wait a minute. Shouldn't I be the one to decide that? What about you? What about what you deserve?"

I shook my head.

"Damn it, Nathan. Don't go. Please? We can work it out and talk about it."

I flinched like I'd been backhanded. Talk? I wished I could.

"Shit! That's the problem, isn't it? We haven't found a speech therapist for you and you can't talk to me without bringing up all sorts of crap from your past. Nathan, do you really want to leave?"

"I-I-I-I sh-sh-sh-should go."

"To hell with what you *should* do. Do you want to leave?"

"N-n-n-no."

"Then what do you want? Not what you think I want to hear, Nathan. What do you want?"

"I don't know!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. "I don't know!" I whispered, then, much to my annoyance, started to cry.

Mike pulled me into his arms. "It's okay, Nathan. We'll work it out, but we need to do it together. I don't want you to go. Please stay. We'll figure something out."

When I pulled away from him and gestured "what?", he got a very thoughtful look on his face.

"You're very good at nonverbal communication. What do you think about learning sign language?"

Mike laughed at the stunned look on my face. "Does that mean it's a good idea or a bad idea?"

"Good!"

"Well let's try, then. I know the finger alphabet and I'm sure we can find information on American Sign Language and the Native American sign language online. We can also make up our own signs as we go along. How's that sound?"

I nodded enthusiastically; anything that could help me communicate with him was fine by me.

Mike helped me put my stuff back into the pole building and we spent the evening learning some basic signs in ASL and in the Indian sign language. Mike taught me the finger alphabet and I discovered that if I spelled the words with my fingers as I talked, I didn't stutter as much. Mike noticed immediately and his triumphant smile made my heart glad. For the first time in my life I felt hope, that maybe I could actually tell someone how I was feeling without having them get impatient or angry with me. Even if I never got rid of the stutter, I would be able to talk to someone. It was wonderful.

The next evening, we had an unexpected guest. Ron Bear was a huge man, but there wasn't an ounce of fat on his body. He was Mike's school friend and they joked around a lot. I must admit that the look on Ron's face when he met me was priceless. He'd looked at Mike, then at me, then back at Mike.

"Two of you? I had enough problem with one of you, but now there's two of you?" He shook his head, but there was a smile on his face that let me know he was pleased.

"Well I must admit that I couldn't believe it myself. Then Henry told me we're like the twins, we share a soul."

"Really? I didn't believe that sort of thing until I got to know those two characters. Getting Joe to take them was one of the best things I ever did."

I gave him a questioning look.

"Someone figured out they were more than good friends while they were seniors in high school. They graduated, but were really getting hassled by some of the other guys in the horse youth program. I gave Joe a call and he agreed to take them on an internship."

"You mean you guilted Joe into it, don't you? Although I do agree that it was one of the best things to happen to all of them. It got Joe and Cody together as well."

"Yeah it sure did. Now if I can just get Joe to sell me one of the new foals he's got..."

"Fat chance. They think of those foals as their own babies."

As the two of them continued to chat, I thought about what Ron had said. He'd gotten two young men away from a bad situation without asking for anything in return and was happy about it. I continued to listen as they reminisced about the people they, Henry and others had helped when they needed it and not once did they mention anything about repayment. I thought about that a lot as the conversation

moved to horses, which I knew nothing about, and was startled when Ron turned to me.

"You sure are quiet, unlike someone I know."

Mike's eyes got wide, but I signed to him that it was okay.

"It's h-h-h-hard f-f-f-for me t-t-t-to t-t-t-talk."

Ron's eyes got big. "Geez, I'm sorry."

Mike answered for both of us. "Don't worry about it, Ron. We're going to find a speech therapist and I'm teaching him sign language."

"Really? Could you teach me, too? I think that's really cool."

"Sure, not a problem."

After Ron left, Mike asked me if I'd been upset by Ron's reaction.

Instead of answering, I grabbed him and kissed him until we were both moaning. I finally believed that Mike was helping me because he loved me and because we were kin, not out of pity.

"I l-l-l-liked him."

Mike smiled and hugged me.

"Nathan, I'd like to try something more than just kissing, if it's okay with you." Mike sounded so hesitant that I couldn't refuse.

I nodded. He grabbed my hand and I followed him all the way to his bedroom.

"Nathan, do you jack off?"

"Y-y-y-yeah, doesn't ev-ev-ev-everyone?"

He smiled. "Just about. Anyway, do you think you could jack me off while I do you?"

My jaw dropped and I nodded. I was sure I could do that.

"Well get your clothes off and let's get to it."

I never imagined that jacking another guy off would feel so damn good. I did the things I liked to him and he did the same to me. We came within seconds of each other and lay panting on the bed, holding each other's limp cocks.

"Th-th-th-that was wonderful," I said softly.

He laughed softly. "It was, wasn't it?" He turned his head and gently kissed me. "Thank you."

"F-f-f-for what?"

"For trusting me; for staying with me. For letting me try to help you."

"Y-y-y-you're welcome."

When we were done I asked him, could we sleep in the same bed tonight?

"Sure, but let me know if it's too much, okay?"

I nodded. I would definitely let him know.

When we got ready for bed, I took off everything except my briefs. I normally slept in the nude, but I wasn't sure what Mike wanted to do. I looked at him and saw that he was looking at me.

"I normally sleep nude, but if it'll make you feel better, I can keep them on," Mike offered.

I shook my head, and stripped off my briefs then got into bed. He followed and pulled me into his arms.

"Does this bother you?"

I shook my head. "F-feels good."

"Good." He spooned in behind me, pulled me close.

I felt warm, secure and protected for the first time in my life and I soon dropped off to sleep.

When I woke up, Mike was still spooned behind me and I could feel his morning hard-on nestled between my cheeks. His hand was resting on my stomach, right below my navel. I started to get hard and my first instinct was to get out of bed, but I realized I had to start trusting Mike, so I stayed. A couple of minutes later, I felt him wake up.

"Good morning," he whispered in my ear.

My erect cock brushed against the back of his hand and he laughed softly.

"Looks like it will be a very good morning, for both of us. Do you want to try something else this morning?"

I thought about it for a moment before I nodded.

"Good," he said and grabbed my cock.

I moaned as he started to stroke my erection and I gasped when I felt him rub between my cheeks.

"Don't worry, I won't penetrate, just rub. Damn, you feel good!"

I moaned as he tightened his grip and I surrendered to the pleasure he was giving me.

"That's it, just let me make you feel good."

It was surprisingly easy to let him take control and just allow myself to feel. In no time at all I was coming and I smiled when I felt the warmth on my back that signaled his release.

We were silent for a few minutes, then he kissed my shoulder.

"Thank you."

"Wh-wh-wh-why?"

"Because you let me take charge. You showed me that you do trust me. That's a beautiful gift, Nathan."

"Y-y-y-you're welcome. Th-th-th-thank you for b-b-b-being so patient."

He hugged me tightly. "That's not a problem and it never will be. I love you."

"M-m-m-me too."

* * * *

We'd just gotten out of the shower when the phone rang.

"Hello," Mike answered. "Sure Henry, let me get a pen. Thursday at one? Shouldn't be a problem. I'll tell him. Bye."

"Wh-wh-wh-what?"

"That was Henry. He's set up appointment with a speech therapist on Thursday, if that's okay with you."

"Sure."

"Henry also said he'd be stopping by tomorrow to see how you're doing."

"G-g-g-good. I w-w-w-want to sh-sh-sh-show him the f-f-f-faceted g-g-g-garnets."

* * * *

As we approached the clinic I got more and more nervous. Henry had explained during his visit that she was a new graduate, was Nez Perce and he felt we'd be a good fit. I wasn't so sure.

Mike parked the truck and I started to get out, then hesitated. The original plan had been for Mike to drop me off then pick me up later, when I called him.

"M-m-m-mike, come w-w-w-with. Pl-pl-pl-please?"

He must have sensed how desperate I was because he turned off the Suburban immediately. We got out, locked the truck and headed in to the clinic.

The young woman at the front desk looked up as we entered.

I walked up to her and told her my name. She smiled at me.

"I'm very pleased to meet you. I'm Amy. Henry told me you'd be coming by today."

"Th-th-th-this is Mike Clearwater," I said.

"Pleased to meet you, Mike." She looked at me. "Did you want him to sit in on your sessions?"

I nodded, relieved that she understood. "I'm l-l-l-living with him."

Her expression didn't change at all. "Not a problem." She handed me a clipboard. "Here are some forms and a questionnaire that I need you to fill out before we start. Bring them up when you're done."

I walked over to the small table set up in one corner of the room and started filling out the forms. For next of kin I put Mike, after sending him a questioning look and getting a nod in response. When I finished, she took the papers and showed us to a very comfortably furnished room.

"Take a seat."

Mike and I sat next to one another on an overstuffed sofa.

Amy looked at the sheets and frowned. "Nathan, you didn't indicate what therapy you've already had."

"N-n-n-none."

"What? Why not?"

I shrugged. I didn't want to get into it.

Amy muttered under her breath, then went and got more papers. "Well, I guess we'll just have to start from the beginning. All right. First of all, since your stutter started when you were young and has lasted this long, it's probably what's known as 'persistent developmental stuttering' because you haven't had brain damage. The latest theories are that there's a disconnect between two parts of your brain that are needed for speech. That's why repetition and memorization work as therapies, because your brain uses different pathways for that. If you'd started therapy when you were a child, I'd have told you there's an 80 percent chance of a full recovery. Now? I really don't know, but if you're willing to work hard, we can definitely make it easier for you to communicate. First, though, we need to see if we can find out exactly which therapy will work best for you."

When our time was up, I felt like I'd been dragged through a wringer, because we'd tried every single therapy recommended for stuttering. Amy had been intrigued when Mike told her about teaching me ASL and Native American Sign Language and that I seemed to stutter less when I spelled the words with my fingers as I talked. She told us to keep it up, and gave me a stack of vocal exercises to do. When she mentioned that someone had developed training software, Mike perked up and they talked computers for a

while, the upshot being that Mike ordered the software for me. Amy seemed certain that she could help me speak better, and even though it had been a long, exhausting afternoon, I was very glad that Henry had recommended her.

* * * *

Mike was also very patient with me as we worked through my fears of intimacy one by one, and the day came that I was finally willing to try something more than kiss on the sofa or jack off together.

It was after we returned from Emerald Creek where I'd found quite a few star garnets. Three of the larger ones and four smaller ones, if oriented correctly, showed six full rays, which was extremely rare, they normally had four rays. If I were careful and got everything right when I polished them, they would be worth quite a bit of money, depending on their clarity, color and the intensity of the star.

When I found the first small one, I dropped a bit of mineral oil on it and saw six rays. I shouted with joy and Mike came running; he looked a bit disappointed when I showed him my find.

"It's so small," he said after a few minutes.

"L-look at the s-star!" I told him.

"Yeah, so?"

"It's got six rays! N-normally they only have f-four or four strong and t-two weak. Six strong rays are r-rare. If I p-polish it right it c-could be worth a g-grand or more."

"You're kidding, right?"

I shook my head. "Star garnets only occur in India and Idaho," I said, quoting the website I'd found.

Mike looked down at the stone, then back up at me. His smile lit up his face. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's find some more!"

We'd just finished unloading the ten pounds of garnet rough we'd found over the past four days, when Mike announced that he needed a shower.

I gathered up my courage and asked, "W-want some company?"

At first he looked worried—with six months of therapy, I'd improved so much that I didn't stutter around him unless I was really nervous or excited—then his eyes widened and a smile lit up his face. "Any time, Nathan. But tell me if you need me to stop, okay?"

"Okay."

It wasn't the first time I'd seen him naked, but it was different somehow. He started the shower, tested the water, and stepped into the tub. I took a deep breath and stepped in after him. He pulled me into a hug when I missed the rubber mat and slipped.

"Nathan, we don't have to do anything. You don't even have to wash my back, if you don't want to."

"If I do, will you wash mine?"

"Any time. All you need to do is ask."

We stayed in the shower until the hot water ran out. I finally had the courage to explore Mike's body thoroughly, and I enjoyed finding unexpected erogenous zones, like the area of his back right above his crack. He moaned when I

rubbed it while we were kissing, so I turned him around and kissed it and he nearly shot through the roof.

"That's enough," he growled playfully, and proceeded to explore my body with his fingertips and tongue.

I was soon putty in his hands; the only thing keeping me upright was the fact he'd backed me against the wall. I was almost ready to come when he stopped, looked into my eyes, then swallowed my cock. I remember screaming while having the most intense orgasm of my life. It was all I could do to stay standing as Mike turned off the water and wrapped me in a towel.

"Are you okay?" he asked after a couple of minutes.

I nodded. "That was better than I'd ever imagined it could be."

As I got steadier on my feet I focused on Mike. "What about you?"

"Watching you come was one of the most erotic things I've seen. I came when you did."

I couldn't help grinning. "Next time I get to make you come, okay?"

The smile on his face lit up the room. "Any time you want. I mean it."

* * * *

Over the last year and a half I've been constantly thanking the Great Spirit for bringing Nathan into my life. I hadn't realized what my life had been missing until I saw him sitting in a stream, looking like a drowned rat. Even then, it wasn't

until I felt him get hard when I hugged him, that I realized what my medicine dreams had been showing me.

I must admit that the first months were rough, mainly because I didn't realize just how difficult it was for him to talk. He'd been so badly abused for his stutter that he stayed silent as much as possible. When we started to learn sign language, things got a lot better, and he started to trust me. I nearly died of fright the night he'd had his attack, for lack of a better word for it, after our disagreement over him paying me back. Seeing him puking in the bathroom and having him push me away when I tried to comfort him was the worst moment of my life. I was just glad that Henry was able to get through to him. After Nathan went to bed, Henry and I talked about what had happened.

"As near as I can figure out, he didn't realize that you and I do consider him family. When you snapped at him it brought up a lot of memories about the way his family treated him," Henry told me.

"I'd like to get my hands on them and give them a piece of my mind."

Henry shook his head. "Let go of your anger. Nathan will think it's directed at him, he's very sensitive to the moods of others."

I smiled. "I just figured that out. So what do I do?"

"Let him know that he's welcome and wanted here. Talk about what you've done for other people without expecting repayment. Tell him what our tribe does for its members. Keep reminding him that he's part of our tribe, part of our family. Eventually he'll trust us."

The day after, I could tell that Nathan was making an effort to accept the ordinary kindnesses I did for him, stuff that I'd do for a total stranger. It was a real eye-opener for me—he thought simple things, like asking him what he wanted for dessert, or washing his clothes when I did a load of my own was out of the ordinary. It was only then that I started to realize just how abused and isolated he'd been.

I was startled when Ron showed up in the evening. I wasn't sure how he and Nathan would get along, and I was very nervous. Ron's reaction when he saw Nathan was well worth seeing. Watching Nathan's face light up as Ron teased me was beyond treasure. I nearly shit, though, when Ron asked Nathan why he was so silent. Nathan took it in stride and watching Ron apologize made up for a lot. I was surprised when Ron wanted to learn sign language. Later on he told me that he wanted to be able to talk to Nathan, too.

That night, I asked Nathan if we could try something new. I saw how difficult it was for him to agree and I made a vow to myself that I'd always ask him first and explain what I was going to do before I did it. I kept forgetting that he'd had no sexual experience at all, no wonder he was scared. That night was a major step forward as it was the first time I realized that he did trust me. It was a wonderful discovery.

Our real breakthrough came the night Nathan allowed me to give him a blowjob, and he reciprocated the next morning. It was the best blowjob I'd ever had; not because of his technique, but because of the care he took and because of our love. He'd looked up at me, wide-eyed, after I'd shot into his mouth, and smiled.

"I didn't understand how watching me come could make you come. Now I know," he told me.

I pulled him up and kissed him senseless. "Thank you, it was fantastic."

He gave me a happy smile. "You're welcome."

* * * *

Our next major breakthrough was the anniversary of the day we met. We'd gone to Montana to prospect for sapphires and had planned to stop for the night in Helena. I was surprised when Nathan pulled into the parking lot of a luxurious bed-and-breakfast.

"Why are we stopping here?" I asked, totally baffled.

Nathan laughed. "We're staying here tonight. It was one year ago that we met, and tonight I want you to make love to me."

"Are you sure? There's no need to rush."

"I'm sure. It's one of the things I saw during my vision quest."

I gasped. The night he'd done his vision quest had been the longest night of my life. Henry had forbidden me to leave the house, so I'd stayed up all night, pacing, hoping that Nathan would be all right and he'd come back to me in one piece. When Henry had driven up at noon, I was sitting on the porch, hyped up from all the coffee I'd drunk. I saw Henry and Nathan talk for a couple of minutes, then Nathan got out of the car, waved at Henry as he drove off, and walked up to me.

"Welcome home," I said before I grabbed him as tightly as I could.

"Mike, it's okay. I'm okay. Really, I'm okay."

I didn't realize I was crying until he reached up and brushed the tears away from my cheeks.

"I was so scared," I admitted. "I was afraid you'd get hurt or see something that would make you leave me."

"I'm fine, just tired. And I'll never leave you by choice. Never."

I sagged in his arms and he helped me to the chair.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, just tired. I couldn't sleep at all."

"Then let's go up and get some sleep. When we wake up, I'll tell you what I can about my visions."

I was brought back to the present by Nathan's kiss.

"Come on, let's go celebrate."

Evidently the bed-and-breakfast thought we were brothers, because they didn't say anything when we checked in. We walked into the room and discovered a king size feather bed waiting for us.

When I looked into the bathroom and saw a Jacuzzi I knew it was going to be a perfect night.

We got cleaned up and went to the restaurant that had been recommended by the bed-and-breakfast staff, had a fantastic meal, then retired to our room.

"Do you want to take a bath first? There's a Jacuzzi in the bathroom."

Nathan shook his head. He looked nervous and I realized that I would have to be careful and go slowly.

"Come here," I growled softly, and watched him shiver before he walked over to me.

I started out my seduction by kissing him. He melted in my arms and I unbuttoned his shirt. I pushed it off his shoulders and kissed my way down and across to one of his nipples, which I knew were hardwired to his cock. I kissed my way across his chest to the other nipple. When I bit on it lightly, I felt his knees buckle and I caught him before he fell.

"Let's get to the bed," I whispered in his ear, and was delighted when he shivered in response.

I unbuttoned his jeans and pulled them down, along with his briefs and led him to the bed. He lay back and watched as I did an impromptu striptease. I knew he was enjoying it because his cock was dripping pre-come like a faucet. When I was done, I made a detour to the bathroom to grab a couple of towels, and joined Nathan on the bed.

I spread one of the towels out on the bed and rolled Nathan onto his stomach on top of it. I started rubbing his shoulders and was pleased to find that he wasn't very tense. I kissed him on the nape of his neck and was rewarded by a full body shiver. I kissed my way down his back, enjoying the way he thrust into the towel-covered feather bed when I hit a sensitive spot. When I got down to his crack, I didn't stop, like I usually did, I pulled his cheeks apart and kept going. I felt him stiffen in surprise but when my tongue reached his bud, he moaned and relaxed. I concentrated on relaxing his hole as much as possible. When I stiffened my tongue and pushed inside he moaned again. I kept kissing, sucking and penetrating his hole until he cried out.

"I'm gonna come!"

I pulled away slightly. "That's what I want, Nathan. I want to feel your ass tighten around my tongue."

I quickly inserted my tongue into his hole as far as it would go, and I felt him stiffen, then felt his asshole tighten around my tongue in time to the pulses of his release. When he went limp, I continued my way down to his balls. He moaned when I gently pulled on them then took them, one by one into my mouth and sucked on them. I reached over and grabbed the lube that Nathan had put on the bed next to us.

I put lube on my fingers, then urged Nathan onto his side so I had access to his cock as well as his ass.

"I'm gonna put a finger in, Nathan. Let me know if it hurts."

I waited for him to nod before I grabbed his cock in one hand and stroked it while gently pressing on his hole. There was a little bit of resistance, then my finger slid in easily.

"Oh my God, that feels good!" Nathan said as I found his prostate and pressed on it gently.

"Okay, here's two fingers," I told him as I pulled out slightly and then pushed back in.

This time there was no resistance and I alternated between pressing on his prostate gland and stretching my fingers wide.

He moaned in protest as I pulled out.

"Shhh," I soothed him. "Here's three. Then it'll be the real thing. I just want to make sure you won't hurt."

He nodded and gasped as I slowly pushed three fingers into his body.

"Push out, Nathan."

I felt him respond, and my fingers slipped into his body. I kept stroking his cock as I stretched him out as much as I could.

"Okay, Nathan, I'm going to get behind you now. Keep your top leg forward and let me know if you feel any pain, okay?"

He nodded.

I moved so I lay behind him and put my lubed cock at his hole. "Okay Nathan, push out."

I pushed gently in and felt him stretch around me. God he was so tight! I felt him tense slightly and stopped.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, just wait a minute."

"Whenever you're ready, just push back. I won't move; you can take me as fast or as slow as you want."

I felt him relax and he nodded. It was all I could do to keep my promise to stay still, he felt so good. After a minute I felt him slowly move onto my cock. I heard him gasp as the head of my cock raked over his prostate gland and my balls finally hit his ass.

"Nathan?" I asked. I wanted to make sure he wasn't hurting.

"Oh God, it feels so good. I didn't know it would feel like this."

"It's even better if I move," I whispered, and kissed the side of his neck.

"Please. Show me."

I did as he asked and I was soon ready to come. I wanted to make sure he came first, though, so I reached around and stroked his rock hard dick. He came immediately and I thrust deeply into him one final time before I exploded myself.

When I could think again, I kissed his neck. "How are you?"

"Fantastic. No, more than fantastic. I feel whole for the first time in my life. Thank you."

"No, thank you for trusting me. You make my life complete." I started to pull out but he stopped me.

"Please, stay."

"It'll fall out when I get soft," I told him.

"That's okay, I just want you to hold me for a while, okay?"

"Yeah, I can do that." I held him close until I grew soft.

"We should get cleaned up," I whispered. "I'll go fire up the Jacuzzi and we can soak for a while. Then it's my turn."

He turned his head and I saw the surprise on his face.

"What? Why should you have all the fun?" I asked.

"B-but what if I hurt you?"

"You won't. I trust you."

I eased off the bed and started filling the tub. I grabbed a washcloth, dampened it and brought it back to the bed.

"The tub's filling," I told him as I cleaned him up and checked for damage. "Do you hurt anywhere?"

He pulled me down for a kiss before answering. "I don't hurt at all, Mike. Not at all."

"The tub should be ready, let's go soak for a bit."

We lounged around the tub, stealing kisses from one another until Nathan started to yawn. I opened the drain, we got out and then we toweled each other off. When I noticed that he could barely keep his eyes open, I took his towel away, finished drying him off and led him to the bed.

"Wait, what about your turn?"

"It can wait until we're both awake. You wore me out, lover, so let's get some sleep. When do we need to check out?"

"Noon."

"In that case, we'll continue this in the morning."

We got into bed and I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

The next morning Nathan topped me. He was so gentle and filled me so completely that I understood what he meant about being whole for the first time. Just before I came, I realized that I could feel what Nathan was feeling and I felt the pleasure he was taking in making me come. Afterward, I told him about it and he told me that his vision had told him this would happen and that it would seal the bond between us.

I was pleased that he'd decided to take that step. We'd talked about the possibility of a link like Trey and Tony had and I'd made it clear that I would welcome it. I was glad he wanted it as well.

The final surprise of the morning came when Nathan gave me an anniversary present. We'd gotten our right ears pierced on my birthday, it was Nathan's birthday present to me, so I knew what was in the small jewelry box he handed

to me. He watched me intently as I opened it and gasped in surprise. There were two of the star garnets we'd found at Emerald Creek. They were almost identical and both had six strong rays. I looked up at him, wondering why he was giving them to me instead of selling them.

"W-we can't officially be m-married, b-but it's a way w-we can belong to each other."

"But you could sell them for a ton of money," I protested.

"D-don't you like them?"

I pulled him into a kiss, realizing how close I'd come to insulting him. I pulled back and told him, "I love them. Can I put yours in?"

He nodded and I carefully pulled out the silver stud he'd been wearing and put in the garnet.

I sat back and smiled. He looked gorgeous.

"My turn." When he was done, he kissed me with such gentle possessiveness that I was near tears.

"Gods, Nathan, I love you so much."

"Me too."

* * * *

Six months later, I was filling up Nathan's truck in Lewiston when I felt a heavy hand land on my shoulder. I turned around, wondering who the hell was bothering me, and was shocked to see a tall, built, blond guy staring at me like I was his long-lost brother. The problem was I didn't know him.

"Nathan, I'm glad I finally found you. You need to come home."

"Listen, you've got the wrong guy."

"You don't stutter any more! Great! Come on, we've got to get home."

"I'm not Nathan," I yelled at the guy.

He backed up a few steps, startled by the volume I'd used.

"My name is Mike Clearwater. Who are you?"

"Come on Nathan, quit it. You know who I am."

At that moment Ron, who was filling up at the next pump, came up to us. "Something wrong, Mike?"

The blond stared at Ron for a moment. "Mike?" he finally asked.

"Yeah, this is Mike Clearwater. Who'd you think he was?"

"I thought he was my brother, Nathan. He drives a pickup like that. I'm sorry if I was mistaken."

Ron walked away after I nodded that it was okay, but he was muttering under his breath, and I knew he'd be watching my back.

"What's your name?" I asked, wanting confirmation of my suspicions.

"Brian Kruger."

"As you heard, I'm Mike Clearwater." My phone rang. I looked at it and frowned, then looked at him. "Excuse me a moment, I need to get this call."

Brian looked baffled, but he nodded. I walked out of earshot, and answered the phone.

"Mike? What's wrong?" Nathan asked.

I should have known; ever since we first made love, he could tell when I was troubled. "There's a guy at the gas

station who thought I was you. He says his name is Brian Kruger and he's looking for you."

"What? What does he look like?"

"Like he should be playing pro football. Tall, blond, sea-green eyes and with a real attitude. He's driving a Range Rover."

"Yeah, that's Brian."

"He said something about you needing to go home. Should I bring him over?"

"Let me ask Henry, first."

I heard a muffled conversation.

"Yeah, Henry says to bring him over."

"Okay, we'll be there in about ten minutes."

I turned off the phone and went back to the truck. "If you want to talk to Nathan, follow me."

Brian looked stunned, but he nodded and got into his truck.

I pulled into Henry's driveway and Brian pulled up next to me.

As soon as I was parked, I jumped out of the pickup and walked over to him. "A couple of things before we go in. This house belongs to Henry Smith. He's an elder and medicine man, so be respectful. And if you hurt Nathan, I'll hurt you. Understand?"

His jaw dropped. "What?"

"I mean it. He's been abused enough by his so-called family, and I won't have him hurt any more."

"What do you mean by abused? No one ever hit him."

"You can abuse someone without hitting them. Why didn't he ever get help with his stuttering? Speech therapy does wonders for children, yet he never got any. When he wanted to learn how to cut and polish stones, you all laughed at him. He's been prospecting around here and has sold enough finished stones to buy an SUV off the lot, with cash, if he wanted to. He's successful and happy and I want him to stay that way."

Brian looked thoughtful, then got a startled look on his face. "You're lovers, aren't you?"

"What difference would that make?"

"Just that I understand where you're coming from. I'd do the same for Mitch."

"You're gay?"

"Yeah. I finally came out after Nathan left. I'd started seeing Mitch about a month before Nathan left. I brought him over a couple of times, introduced him as a friend. He commented on how the family treated Nathan as an outcast; I hadn't realized we were doing that. It's one of the reasons I spent the last month tracking him down."

I saw Brian glance over my shoulder and freeze, then I felt warm arms slide around my waist.

"I knew th-there was something going on between you two."

Brian looked at us and shook his head. "No wonder I thought you were Nathan—I thought I'd forgotten what Nathan looked like, but you could be twins."

"Henry wants to meet you," Nathan said. "Come on in."

"You don't stutter anymore!" Brian said.

"He finally got help," I snapped.

Nathan ran a hand along my arm, trying to soothe me.

"I still stutter when I'm under stress or excited, but otherwise I do okay," he told Brian.

"That's wonderful. I really mean it."

We walked into the house and Nathan introduced Brian to Henry. We went into the living room and I dragged Nathan over to the sofa where I sat down and pulled him into my lap. I knew I was overreacting, but I wanted Nathan to know I was there for him. Nathan glanced at me, an amused look on his face, but he didn't protest.

"Why are you here?" Nathan asked Brian.

"First, I need to let you know that I'm ashamed of the way I treated you. Mitch was the first to point it out, then about six months later, the family went to Grandmother Gerten's house and she wanted to know where you were. No one said anything, but later on, she cornered me and I told her why you left. Man, she taught me some new swear words—I didn't know she had such a temper! She looked at me and said I'd better start looking for you 'cause she was going to change her will and leave everything to you."

"What!" Nathan almost yelled.

"Yep. She then told me she had cancer."

"No!" This time Nathan did yell.

I pulled Nathan closer, trying to comfort him. He'd told me about his grandmother; she was part Nez Perce and when they were together he didn't feel as out of place because she looked like him.

"Yeah, I'm afraid so. About a month ago I finally got a lead on where you were, so I came west."

"What kind of lead?" I asked.

"Some Internet gem dealer was advertising star garnets and mentioned who collected and polished them. I contacted them and all they said was that the garnets were from Emerald Creek, Idaho. So I got into my truck and came out here. It took a lot of leverage and several calls from grandmother, before the Forest Service people gave us the address you gave them. I was headed there when I stopped for gas and thought I'd lucked out and found you."

"Grandma's still alive?" Nathan asked.

"Yeah. I think she's holding on until she sees you. You have to come home."

"N-n-n-no! I c-c-c-can't!" Nathan got up and started to pace. "I d-d-d-don't want it! I d-d-d-don't n-n-n-need her money!"

"Nathan, she knows that. She also knows that if she leaves it to you, you won't waste it. You'll make good use of it and help people with it. Please, come home."

Nathan looked so forlorn and confused that my heart went out to him. "Nathan, whatever you want to do, I'll understand."

"I d-don't want to have to d-deal with all that m-money!"

"How much money?" Henry asked Brian.

"If the stocks and bonds were cashed in, over four million. She's also got property worth about two million."

"M-million?" I asked.

Nathan nodded. "I'm s-s-s-sorry. I d-d-d-didn't know h-h-h-how—"

I pulled him into my arms, cutting off his explanation. "It's just a bit of a shock. Finding out that the homeless guy I fell in love with is gonna be a millionaire."

"Homeless?" Brian sounded horrified.

"Yeah, when I met him he was sleeping in his truck."

"Why?" Brian sounded stunned. "Why didn't you ask for help?"

"I c-couldn't," Nathan said. "I was s-such a disappointment to e-everyone. I w-wanted to make it on m-my own."

"You certainly did that," I said as I kissed the side of his neck.

"Were we really that bad?" Brian whispered.

Nathan nodded and Brian shuddered.

"Nathan, come to Grandma's with me. I won't tell anyone else you're coming and I'll tell Grandma to make sure they're not there. She just wants to see you."

"Mike?" Nathan sounded so lost.

"Do you want to go?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Then let me call Greg and make arrangements for shift coverage. We should be able to leave tomorrow about noon, if that's okay with you, Brian."

"Thank you," Nathan said.

"I would like to come, as well," Henry said. "I think I will be needed."

"You can ride with me," Brian offered.

"Where are you staying?" I asked Brian.

"Nowhere. I wasn't sure if Nathan was even here, so didn't make any reservations."

"S-stay with us, then," Nathan said.

"Thank you," Brian said.

We actually left at one and headed for Ames, Iowa. We took two days to get there, and for the first time, Nathan opened up to me about his family. He told me about his oldest sister, Katrina—Katie, who was happy being a stay-at-home mom, even though she had her Master's degree in Teaching. Next in age was Paul, who was a corporate lawyer, then Gary who was working on his Ph.D. in Astrophysics, then Teri who was running her own boutique and finally Brian, who was working his way through vet school by modeling for print and catalog ads.

Once we got to Ames, Brian took the lead and we pulled up to a brand new townhome development.

"Grandma felt that this would be easier to keep up than her big house. She sold it to Katie and her husband, when they started looking for a bigger house," Brian told us as we walked up the driveway.

"Why were they looking?" Nathan asked.

"Katie found out she was expecting triplets," Brian said, and then explained. "She already had two boys, and they knew the triplets were girls, so they really needed at least a four-bedroom house. Anyway, Grandma likes it here, they've got a really active seniors club and they've got a shuttle bus that takes her to the clinic."

Brian knocked on the door. When it opened I gasped, because the woman there could have been my grandmother,

come back to life. She smiled when she saw Brian, looked curiously at Henry, then her eyes widened when she saw Nathan and me.

"You found him!" She pulled Brian into a hug, then held her arms out to Nathan.

"Grandma," he said as he lifted her gently off her feet. "I missed you so much. I want to introduce you to my soul mate, Grandma. This is Mike."

I held out my hand only to be pulled into a tight hug.

"I am so pleased to meet you," she said after she stepped back.

"And I am pleased to meet you, Aunt Sarah."

"Am I really your aunt?"

I smiled. "My great-grandmother was your mother's sister, so in my book, that makes you my aunt."

Her smile lit up her face.

"Grandma, this is Henry Smith," Nathan said. "He helped heal my stutter as well as finding me a speech therapist, and letting me dig for garnets on his land."

"It is indeed an honor to have an elder and medicine man visit my house," Sarah said. "One of the few things my mother taught me about her people was to honor the elders."

"I am very glad to meet you, as well," Henry said with a smile.

I watched the interaction between them and signed to Nathan, "I think they like each other."

Nathan smiled and nodded, the sun glinting off of the star garnet in his right ear. I smiled, remembering our anniversary night.

We were ushered inside and, only after everyone had something to drink and was comfortable in her living room, did Sarah allow Nathan to talk.

"Grandma, Brian says you have cancer. How are you doing?"

"A hell of a lot better, now that I know you're all right. About a month ago the doctors switched to a new chemo regime and the tumor on my liver started to shrink. They think I'll be in remission soon."

I felt Nathan start to shake, so I put my drink down and pulled him close.

"That's good news, Grandma. I'm not ready to lose you yet and I don't want your money, either."

"Well when I'm dead, I won't need it anymore and I know you won't fritter it away on useless things. So get used to the idea, Nathan. I'm not going to change my will."

Nathan shook his head and I signed to him, "Leave it alone. It's what she wants."

He sighed and nodded, then signed, "I know."

"That's very clever," Sarah said, startling us both. "Does it help Nathan's stutter?"

"A bit. Speech therapy helps more, but signing does allow us to communicate when Nathan's under stress and his stuttering gets bad."

"Or when they don't want others to understand them," Henry added with a smile. "I've had to learn it just so they can't talk about me behind my back."

I snickered because Henry had complained about having to learn a new language at his age, but now, when he was with

us, he'd make wry comments, and it was all we could do to keep from laughing out loud.

As I felt Nathan relax against me, I breathed a sigh of relief, and I suddenly had the feeling that everything was going to work out, that our troubles were finally over.

As we chatted, I realized that there seemed to be a connection growing between Sarah and Henry. I sent amusement along my link to Nathan and, when he turned to see what I found so funny, I signed, "Watch Henry and Sarah."

Nathan started shaking with suppressed laughter when I realized what I was seeing. "They're perfect together," he signed.

I glanced at Henry and found him watching us. He nodded and smiled as our eyes met. Yes, life was going to be good; I could feel it in my bones.

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