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And they rock, and they rock, through the sensual ageless ages
on the depths of the seven seas,
And through the salt they reel with drunk delight
and in the tropics tremble they with love and roll with massive, strong desire...

—DH Lawrence, Whales Weep Not

Chapter One

The headache spiked down through his left eye, and David raised a feeble hand to fend it off. Today was working up to be the worst day of his life—following the best day of his life, which made it even more painful.

"I understand youthful exuberance and high spirits, David. Naturally you wanted to celebrate the publication of your first book of poetry. But those of us in positions of public trust must avoid even the *appearance* of impropriety. You understand?"

The voice that was echoing around his skull belonged to Dr. Amy Prentiss, his mentor and the English Department head, and they were both sitting in the office of the dean of Arts and Letters. No, he did not understand. Any of it. The last coherent thought he could remember was seeing the beautiful copies of his first book of poetry, *Sand Creek*, signed and dusted, being placed tenderly in the front window of Undiscovered Books in downtown Boise. Then he went out to lunch to celebrate—chicken enchiladas and nachos supreme at Amigos—and then he went back to work. English comp for freshmen, then office hours, then he... Oh, right. He'd decided to continue celebrating at the Top Hat. He had never been before, but the grapevine suggested this was a friendly bar. He remembered thinking, downing his third tequila sunrise, that the fresh-squeezed orange juice he was drinking would give him cold virus protection for a month.

"You can take an administrative leave of absence pending an investigation, or you can just resign, if that would make you feel better." The dean sounded hopeful, and David raised his pounding head and uttered a groan of protest that came out as a small tequila-rich burp.

He swallowed hard. "Sir. I'm confused. I still don't understand what's going on. And I'm afraid I have a migraine."

Eyebrows flew up at this. The dean leaned back in his office chair. "Is that what we call them these days?" He turned to the woman sitting next to David. "Dr. Prentiss, can you explain to this young assistant professor that we do not drink and dance in gay bars and have sex with our students?"

"David..." Her voice was gentle.

"He was not one of my students!"

"I understand, but he was a student of this university," she began. "As I explained, even the appearance..."

The photos were on the dean's desk. They were dancing; that was all! He didn't even know the guy! What the hell was going on?

Dr. Prentiss had him under the elbow, helping him up. Out in the hall, she pushed him kindly against the wall. "You look like you're about to fall over. Listen, I should probably wait until you're feeling a little better to explain the facts of life to you, David, but poetry is a tooth-and-claw world, utterly vicious. You have no idea." She gave a little shiver. "Your book is brilliant. You got two rave reviews, and for your first book! That is really extraordinary. And you made it so easy for one of your more jealous-hearted colleagues to stick a knife in your back. I don't know if you were set up. I mean, this student you were dancing with, he looks thirty if he's a day. Regardless, someone was kind enough to photograph you dirty dancing with a student in a gay bar, with a drink in one hand and his ass clutched in the other. Just let this be a lesson, David, and keep your back to the wall when you're surrounded by poets who are having dry spells."

* * *

Thirty-six hours later, David lay in bed staring at the ceiling and brooding about the destruction of his life. He was going to take a leave of absence. He could not stand the thought of resigning his job and slinking away like a guilty weasel when all he had done was go dancing and drinking at the Top Hat. He was sure now that Amy was right and he had been set up. The guy had asked him to dance, if he remembered correctly, had slid up next to him at the bar with a pretty blue-eyed smile and handed him a tequila sunrise and told him he had read *Sand Creek* and loved his poetry. It had never occurred to David to find it odd that a stranger in a bar would recognize him as the author of a book of poetry that had been released to the public just hours before. The asshole had probably never read poetry in his life.

David was going to his grandpa's cabin. When he was a boy, he had spent every holiday in Stanley, in a log cabin just inside the Sawtooth Wilderness. His parents would drop him off and head for the airport in Sun Valley, destination someplace with sun and white sand beaches, and he and Grandpa would settle into their routine and watch the snow pile up to the roof. David remembered those short weeks as the very best of his childhood, with the gruff, bearded, pipe-smoking grandpa who loved him despite his lack of any traditional boy skills. It was his grandpa who had told him for the first time that if he wanted to be a poet, he should not let anything stop him. Grandpa had explained that there was room in the world for everyone, that they didn't all need to know how to chop wood and hunt deer, and that someone needed to write the poems.

David climbed out of bed and called his mom.

"Honey! I got my copy of the book. It's beautiful, darling. I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks, Mom. Did you read any of the poems?"

"I did, sweetie. 'Sand Creek' and 'Wounded Knee' and that one about Buffalo Hump. Strange name for a warrior. So, each poem is from a real Indian massacre?"

"Yep. I used a different point of view for each poem. Sometimes the narrator was one of the soldiers, sometimes one of the people of the native tribes. I used Edgar Lee Masters as a sort of template."

"Ah. Well. The book is beautiful, honey! I'm so happy for you. I did notice..."

"What?"

"Well, the poems seem sort of grim, darling. I mean, white people really came off as the bad guys."

"We were the bad guys, Mom."

"Okay, sweetie. I just thought...well, that's all in the past now, and I wish you could write some poems people would enjoy reading. You know, something sort of uplifting."

"Mom, I'm thinking about going up to Grandpa's cabin in Stanley. You still have it, right?"

"Of course, honey. I can't imagine why you would want to go now. It's almost Halloween, and the snow is probably piling up." He could hear her shiver over the phone. "You always liked to go up there, but I thought it was Grandpa, not the cabin. I mean, it has an *outhouse*, for God's sake!"

"Mom, when the weather is below freezing, the outhouse doesn't smell bad. Everything is frozen."

"Oh, honey. Why don't you come to Hawaii with your father and I?"

"I want some time by myself, Mom. It's a poet thing."

"I remember that boy who lived down the river from Grandpa. He was Indian, wasn't he? I haven't thought of him in years. What was his name? I wonder if he was the one who got you thinking about Indian massacres and such. What a strange boy he was. Well, to be frank, you were too, honey. And look at you now! Your own book of poetry! Assistant professor!"

"Mom..."

"Just go to Sam's Club before you leave town and stock up on canned fruit and vegetables, darling. And meat. Oh, and don't forget toilet paper and candles, and you better get a new ax. For firewood," she explained. "Sweetie, you can't imagine how much I hated going to that cabin when I was a girl."

"I know. Grandpa told me. Why did you keep it, Mom? After he died?"

"He always meant for you to have it, David. Said there would come a time when you would need to spend a winter snowed in on the Salmon River, and I should keep it for you. I didn't understand, but your grandpa, he always seemed to know you better than anyone, honey. So I saved it for you."

"I love you, Mom."

"I love you too, darling."

The boy's name was Quanah Parker Running Bear, and he lived with his father in a cabin a half mile down the Salmon River from David's grandpa. David's mom was right. Quanah Parker had been the source of his first fascination with Native American history, and David could still remember the combination of delight and terror that came over him in Quanah Parker's company. He was a year older and several inches taller. Every year when David arrived, he would make his way down the river, and somewhere along the way, Quanah Parker would ambush him, stealing out of the woods in silent moccasins, sending homemade arrows whizzing by his head until David would freeze, captured. Usually Quanah Parker tied him to a tree, then told him a story of a famous Indian massacre. When he was punished enough and Quanah Parker would untie him, David would crouch down next to the older boy, watch him play with his knife or his bow and arrows, help him make a small campfire, and listen to his stories.

His mom was right about Quanah Parker Running Bear being a strange boy. He went to school in Stanley, in the one-room schoolhouse, and spent most of his time roaming the wilderness with a bow and arrow and pretending it was 1760. The last year before Quanah Parker had been sent off to boarding school, David was thirteen and Quanah Parker fourteen.

Quanah Parker had ambushed him near the river and captured him in a hail of arrows as usual. He had marched David to a lodgepole pine and tied his hands in front of him with a lariat of intricately braided rawhide. He wrapped a piece of woven belt around David's waist, securing him to the tree. Then Quanah Parker had stood in front of him, eyes narrowed, studying his prisoner. He was wearing blue jeans and moccasins, a plaid flannel shirt, and a battered barn coat that looked two sizes too big for him. He was taller this year, and his hair had grown out almost to his waist, a messy tangle of black.

David was bursting with his news. "Quanah Parker, you told me you were Cheyenne and Arapahoe, but I know where you got your name! Your mother was Cynthia Ann Parker, kidnapped by the Comanche from the Pease River in Texas. She lived her whole life with the tribe and was kidnapped back by the Texas Rangers in a terrible raid! You were the last great Comanche war chief and led your people to the reservation in Oklahoma when it was clear defeat was inevitable!"

Quanah Parker Running Bear narrowed his eyes. "Ha. You know nothing. The true story, the secret history of my people, is told warrior to warrior." He studied David and then shook his head gravely. "I can't tell you. You are not a warrior."

David did not say a word, just stared at Quanah Parker. The boy sighed and loosened the blue bandanna from around his neck. "I don't know. It might kill you. The warrior's way, it's not for the weak."

"I'm not weak, Quanah Parker."

The boy leaned in close to him, and David could smell wild mountain air and wood smoke coming from his hair. "But are you afraid? You could get hurt."

"I trust you."

Quanah Parker took the bandanna, wrapped it around David's mouth, and tied it behind his head. It smelled like the sweat on the back of his neck, under that wild black hair. "You'll have to wear a gag. So you won't scream."

David felt his eyes grow wide and a tingle of terror snake down his belly. Quanah Parker stuck his hand in the pocket of his jeans, brought out an old black pocketknife. He opened the blade and held it up between them. The knife blade was dull, but he sawed through a long piece of his black hair. Then he cut a brown curl from David's head.

Quanah Parker held the hair from both their heads together in his fist; then he opened his hand and sliced into his palm with the knife. David watched the blood well up, shocking bright red. Quanah Parker unwrapped the rawhide from his wrists, and David held out his left hand, palm up. The cut Quanah Parker made was tiny, almost delicate. "I can take it," David said, holding his palm out. "It doesn't hurt." But Quanah Parker refused to make it bigger, said all they needed was a drop of blood from each of them.

They clasped hands, staring into each other's eyes, and David felt the small pieces of hair soaking up the blood from their hands. When Quanah Parker pulled away, he rolled the bloody locks of hair into a ball and put them into the tiny buckskin bag he kept around his neck on a thong. "Now you are my squire," Quanah Parker said. "I can tell you the secrets of our people."

They made a campfire and sat together next to the juniper logs. David had not pointed out to Quanah Parker that squires belonged to the knights and not to the Indians. It made perfect sense to him that a warrior as fierce and dangerous as Quanah Parker should have a squire. He combed out the tangled black hair, braided it with thick pieces of buffalo hide, and when the hair was lying neatly over Quanah Parker's shoulders, he moved around to the front. Quanah Parker had brought his war paint. David knelt in front of him, painted two bloodred streaks across each dark cheek, then a black line down his nose. David studied him. "I think you're ready for combat," he said.

"We need to steal some horses," Quanah Parker said. "The Comanche were the Lords of the Plains. The thunder of our hoofbeats across the prairie grass would cause the stoutest and bravest men to rush inside their forts, hiding and praying we would pass. We were not interested in the men. We had come for the horses!"

Quanah Parker led him deeper into the woods, to where his fat old pony was tied to a tree, eating ferns. He pulled himself into the saddle, then reached a hand down for David. "Put your foot on mine."

David slid his foot into the stirrup, and Quanah Parker pulled him into the saddle. The tugging had started the cut on Quanah Parker's palm bleeding again, and he pressed his hand to David's cheek, first one side and then the other, leaving smears of blood. "Now you are starting to look like a warrior," he said, and David felt a flush of heat and pride in his chest. "Quiet. We don't want to alert the settlers."

David wrapped his arms around Quanah Parker's waist and rested his head against the older boy's back. He could smell the wood smoke from their campfire on their clothes, feel the promise of snow in the cold air as the old horse clomped silently on pine needles, making his slow way home. David was nearly lulled asleep when he felt Quanah Parker stiffen. "Soldiers!" he said, his voice a harsh whisper, and he wheeled away, kicked the pony into a slow trot, bent his head low over the saddle horn. "Quick! We have to get back to the camp!"

When they reached the riverbank, Quanah slid from the horse's back, and David jumped down after him. Quanah Parker tossed him the pocketknife, grabbed his bow, and slid an arrow against the bowstring. David opened the knife blade. "Back to back," Quanah Parker said, and David pressed against him, stared downriver, ready for the approaching soldiers.

Quanah Parker let out a war whoop and shot off his arrow, David spun around, knife at the ready, and the boys had stared into the incredulous faces of James Running Bear, Quanah Parker's father, and Caleb Miller, David's grandfather. The two men had looked at each other for a long moment, then turned back to the boys. James Running Bear spoke. "Aren't you two getting a little old for this?"

Quanah Parker and David had to go to the clinic for tetanus shots. When David woke the next morning, he'd had Quanah Parker's buckskin bag around his neck.

Chapter Two

David enjoyed packing for the cabin very much. He felt like he was peeling away the layers of an oniony life that he had only been half trying to live. He said good-bye to his freshman comp students without the smallest feeling of regret and cleaned out his cubicle in the English department one quiet Tuesday evening, thus avoiding his smirking colleagues. Amy Prentiss, perhaps grateful he was going quietly, arranged for him to teach a couple of online poetry classes, which would give him food money. If his pickup truck didn't crash, he would make it through to the spring. Amy suggested he might come back and teach a summer class and slowly work his way back into the department. David thought that what he really needed was a few quiet, snowed-in months where he could think. Think and write poetry and decide if the life he had picked out for himself was the one he really wanted to live.

He got rid of the cheap furniture from his apartment by dragging it to the curb and putting a sign out that said FREE TO A GOOD HOME. He packed a set of flannel sheets and a down quilt and a couple of Pendleton blankets, the pots and pans, cardboard boxes full of clothes suitable for the woods. He felt like he was walking a couple of inches above the ground, strangely free and happy to have been semifired in a quasi sex scandal, ready to go live his mountain-man dreams. He would be strong and tough, chopping wood for the woodstove, the air cold and piney smelling, the logs defenseless under the sharp edge of his ax. He would develop some self-respect, some muscles, learn the ways of solitude and self-reliance. Maybe one of those little hydroponics deals to grow lettuce, and he could lay in the essentials for the winter. At night he would write—the old-fashioned way, with a pen, on paper—his journals open on the battered old pine table. He would use a candle for light, or maybe an oil lamp. Maybe Quannah Parker would be roaming the woods, looking for white settlers to take hostage.

He decided to take a trip to the cabin before he made a final run by Sam's Club. He was finding holes in his memory. For instance, he could remember how the air smelled along the Salmon River in late October, but he couldn't remember if the cabin had electricity. He wondered how the stovepipe from the old woodstove was holding up, and the old woodstove itself. Stovepipe was critical to his picture of himself warm and cozy and writing poetry. If there was a problem with the stove, he needed to get it fixed before the first big snow fell. He drove out from Boise into the mountains and never looked back in the rearview mirror.

He took the mountain road through Idaho City, twisted and climbed among the pines and through the tall Sitka spruce that lined the narrow roads, and the ragged, sharp edges of the Sawtooths came into view in front of him, the tops already dusted with snow. He climbed out of his truck next to the post office in Stanley three hours later, stretched, and took a deep breath of air that was twenty degrees cooler than it had been in Boise.

Inside he asked for a post office box, and the woman behind the counter asked him why.

"So I can get mail?"

"Son, do you live here? How long are you planning to stay?"

"I'm David Miller," he said. "My grandpa had a place down on the Salmon."

"Oh, I remember now," the woman said, looking him over carefully. "You came at Christmas, right? And the summers when you were a little boy? What are you doing back after all this time?"

"I'm going to spend the winter in the cabin. I'm a writer. A poet."

She stared at him blankly. "You're going to stay the winter?"

He nodded. She kept looking at him, her mouth trying to frame the words. "Son, you know how many people actually make it through the winter in Stanley every year?"

David thought about this. The sign had said the population of Stanley was one hundred. "Fifty?"

"Maybe thirty. And they're squirrely as all get-out by April. Why don't you just give it a try first? A couple of weeks, then see how you feel."

He shook his head and pushed the application for a post office box across the counter to her. "It's a done deal. I've given up my place in Boise. Oh, I need a change-of-address form."

She shook her head slowly. "You're going to need a lot more than that."

He remembered the turnoff to the cabin and was happy to see the road was mowed and in good repair. It looked like someone had kept it bladed. He thought there was only his grandpa's cabin and the Running Bears' cabin along this road. Maybe the county was doing maintenance. He pulled in behind the cabin, his heart pounding loudly with excitement.

When he climbed out of the pickup, the wind was blowing up the banks from the river, and he recognized the smell—fresh cold water, frost in the air, pine needles. Home. It smelled like home. He turned to the cabin. It was tiny, of course, smaller than he remembered, and someone had shut it up for the winter, nailed plywood over the windows as rough storm windows. He walked around it, studying the roof and the foundation—both looked sturdy and in good shape. He thought the old logs could use chinking, but they remained solid and massive, a weathered gray. A pile of leaves and pine needles had blown up against the cabin door. He brushed them away with his foot, squirted graphite into the old lock, and fitted the key into the keyhole. With a very little wiggling back and forth, the lock turned, and he was able to push the door open.

It was dusty inside, and dark, so David propped the door open and let the cold autumn air blow through the cabin. The floor was unglazed Mexican tile, and the same ratty-looking sheepskins were lying next to the bed and the couch as when he was a kid. The mattress was stripped of bedding and covered in plastic, and the couch had an old sheet draped across the leather cushions. The table was still there, as thick and battered as he remembered, along with a couple of handmade chairs. The kitchen was an old fridge with a rounded top, a sink, and some shelves bolted to the wall to hold dishes. There was a pot-bellied iron stove that functioned for both cooking and heating. He studied the stovepipe carefully, noted rust in a couple of places. He looked around the cabin for electrical plugs. None. Under the sink there was an oil lamp and a bucket.

He brought a couple of boxes in from the truck, found his toolbox, and started pulling the plywood off the windows. Light flooded in; dust floated lazily in the quiet air. Out back he found a propane tank and what appeared to be an ancient generator. The woodpile was less than half a cord. The door to the outhouse was sticky, but he could get it open and closed, and he was pleased to note that the outhouse was so old the contents had turned into sweet-smelling compost. He had read about putting sawdust or peat moss into outhouses and thought he might try it.

David pulled a bottle of water from his cooler and surveyed the cabin. What to do first? He still had that floaty feeling, like his feet weren't quite touching the ground. It felt like happiness, like the first day of Christmas vacation. What to do? Water. He remembered the old hand pump in the side yard, but there was also water to the kitchen sink. He went inside and turned the handle. Nothing. He went to the hand pump.

Twenty minutes later, he was covered in sweat, water gushing out onto the toes of his boots, and he gave a whoop of victory. He filled up one of the clean buckets he'd brought and carried it into the cabin. He could feel the pleasant strain of muscles between his shoulder blades. Between the water pump and the wood, he would be a hard body before winter hit!

Next the windows. He got each one opened and moving, then cleaned them all. The bright afternoon light was softening by the time he was done, so he finished

carrying the boxes and the candles. He pulled the mattress cover off, made up the bed with the clean sheets, and spread the down quilt over the top. Then he pulled the sheet off the old leather couch and set the Pendleton blankets on the end. There. Done. Oh, wood. Back to the woodpile and a couple of armloads of ancient cut timber, and he hunted for the matches as the light fell quickly into autumn dusk.

He got a tiny fire going in the woodstove, and the stovepipe held. He walked outside to watch the smoke curl up from his chimney. He lit a candle and put it next to his bed, got a book of poetry to read, fell back into sheets that were sweet-smelling and warm, and slid under a down quilt that was as soft as a lover's touch on his cheek. He fell asleep with Quannah Parker's buckskin bag between his fingers.

In the morning, the little cabin was icy, and he stayed under the quilt, staring up into rafters made from hand-peeled lodgepole pine. It was all going to work out fine. He would do a couple of things to get the cabin up to speed, and he needed to figure out where to access the electricity he needed to teach online poetry classes, but he knew this morning that living in the old cabin for the winter was a challenge he was up to.

He filled a pot with water and set it on the stove, then built up the fire. It was warm enough for a bath in minutes, and David stripped down and scrubbed over his arms and legs with a rough washcloth. He had heard about cedar hot tubs that had some sort of underwater wood-fired heater with a snorkel that came out the top. He should investigate. A wood-fired hot tub would be a luxury beyond luxuries when the snow started to fall. He pulled on some work clothes, then hunted around for a coffeepot. David pulled out a small notebook and started a list. Coffeepot. What kind? He had seen some camping coffeepots that were designed to plug into the cigarette lighter in the truck, but that was no kind of long-term solution. What about one of those speckled enamel percolators that went on top of the stove? That would work. Okay, coffeepot. That propane tank outside—what was that for? It looked like there was a gas pipe that was plugged off along the kitchen wall. What about the fridge? He looked between the cabin wall and the back of the fridge. Okay, that's what the propane was for. He better get some in the tank. He opened the fridge door gingerly, but the inside was cleaned out. It looked like the knob was turned to On, so maybe it would work with some propane in the tank. And if that didn't work, he would haul the fridge outside and let Mother Nature turn it into a frozen food storage.

Water and coffee grounds were bubbling in a small saucepan on the stove, and David let the grounds settle to the bottom of the pot, then poured himself a cup. He ate a couple of bananas and drank the coffee, then looked around the cabin for his boots. He thought he'd left them next to the bed, but he found them parked neatly next to the door. He tucked his small notebook in his pocket and opened the door to a beautiful autumn day.

David found places to put everything away. He sat on top of the old redwood picnic table that was in the yard. He studied the list. Coffeepot, propane tank filled. He looked over at the woodpile. In town the houses had wood stacked nearly up to their rooflines already. Chainsaw and ax. What about food? He needed to lay in provisions for...how many months? Six months. He shivered suddenly. He knew in a theoretical way that sometimes the roads were closed up to April or May. Not that they were closed every day, but much of the time. To be safe, he would need enough food for the winter.

He had a sudden picture of himself in the supermarket in Boise, standing in front of rows and rows of bright, jewel-colored fruit. He was filling his basket without a thought with food that could be heated and eaten in five minutes. He thought about the two bananas he had just eaten for breakfast. How long would bananas last? He felt a sudden panicky urge to go to town and start buying supplies. What had the lady in the post office said? Squirrely by March?

At the Stanley General Store, he spotted an enameled camping coffeepot with blue speckles, then asked the man behind the counter where he could get propane.

"For a camper? You mean those little tanks that come on an RV?"

David shook his head. "I'm David Miller. I'm at my grandpa's place—Caleb Miller? He has a propane tank out back, and I think it runs the fridge. I wondered about getting it filled up."

The man pushed the hat back on his head. He looked like an old cowboy—sweeping blond mustache that was turning gray, black leather vest over a snap-front western shirt, silver-belly Stetson. "It's already the end of October. How long are you planning to stay? You might want to just wait until next summer."

"I'm staying the winter."

The man studied David's coffeepot, then his pale, elegant poet's hands. "You're staying the winter. In your grandpa's old cabin?"

David nodded. The man let out a long sigh. He pointed to a rack against the back wall of the store. "You need to get you some decent gloves, boy. The ones with leather doubled in the palms. Nothing else will last till Christmas."

When David got back to the counter with the gloves, the old man studied him with eyes that were the wintery blue of a Stanley sky when snow was coming on. "You running from something? The law after you?"

Mouth hanging open, David stared at him. "No! Good grief. I'm just... I'm sort of having a midlife crisis."

The old man laughed. "Aren't you a little young for that?"

"Apparently not."

"So what do you do, David Miller?"

"I'm a poet."

That stopped the old man in his tracks. "You written any books of poetry?" David nodded. "You bring one into town for me the next time you're here."

David smiled at him in surprise. "Okay."

"I knew your grandpa lots of years. People here remember him. And you'll find that in Stanley, people have time to read once the snows fall."

Chapter Three

He put off the trip to Sam's Club when he realized he could get toilet paper and cornbread mix and cans of chili at the grocery store. The woman behind the counter warned him to stock up because she was closing the store for the season in a couple of weeks. He made a quick trip to the library, logged on to the computer, and recklessly ordered a wood-fired hot tub to be delivered, maxing out his lone credit card. It would be worth it, he thought, catching sight of himself in the glass window. His hair was a messy tangle of brown curls, and his chin was rough with unshaved whiskers. The thought of letting himself go, turning into a real mountain man, was strangely appealing. But he noticed that the other men in town were perfectly dressed and groomed and quite a bit cleaner than he was. Maybe that was part of not going squirrely, to keep yourself up. But he'd grow a beard for sure.

When he got back to the cabin, he put on the new gloves and went around to study the woodpile. Maybe three days' worth of wood. Over at the chopping block, someone had dragged a big, downed tree, already cut into pieces with a chainsaw, and there was a long-handled ax stuck in the bark. The note attached to the

There was no signature. Was Quannah Parker Running Bear slinking around in the woods? It could be anyone, he supposed. News of his arrival seemed to have spread among the one hundred people who lived in Stanley, and like the old man had said at the store, they had all known his grandpa. He gingerly pulled the ax from the tree. The blade looked old and sharp. If he remembered correctly, the logs were cut into pieces off the length of the tree, then set up crosswise on the chopping block and split into several pieces lengthwise, the size to fit into the stove. He hauled a piece of the tree to the chopping block and got started.

There was a learning curve to this, he decided at lunchtime. He started a small campfire in a ring of rocks outside and settled a frying pan of chili down among the coals. He heated water in the new coffeepot and made himself a cup of tea, wondering if he should get the water checked or if it was okay to drink from the hand pump. To be safe, he would boil the drinking water at first. Just till he toughened up a bit.

He pulled out his poetry notebook and took some time to record the images that were flooding his mind—the way the woods sounded, the smell of the air, the rocks with the river flowing over them. He made some notes about the old man at the store. He worked for an hour and felt better, grounded. This was something he knew how to do. He was good at it, writing poetry. Maybe his routine here would be to work until noon around the cabin, eat lunch and write, and then take a short nap. He cleaned the frying pan and carefully wiped off the blade of the ax, then settled down on the couch for an afternoon nap.

It was quiet, and he let his mind drift back a couple of weeks to the man in the Top Hat. It had probably been a setup, some nasty, jealous little betrayal, but he couldn't help thinking about the man.

He'd been older, confident as he slid an arm around David's shoulder and pulled him into his chest. "I'm Michael," he'd said, his mouth warm against David's ear. "You want to party?"

David hadn't been really sure what this meant, and he was afraid his lack of experience was obvious on his face. "Come on," the man had said, his warm mouth working its way down David's neck. "Drink up and let's dance. I'll show you everything you need to know. Okay? Trust me?"

And David had nodded up into his face, let the man pull him by the hand out to the dance floor. He'd smelled musky, and David pressed his face into Michael's damp neck—sweat and Brut. Hands wandered over his back, down to his waist, and Michael pulled him up close, held David's body against him. "Hey, let's cut out of here. You ready? Ready for someplace quiet?"

David let Michael pull him by the hand from the dance floor, and they walked outside and climbed into the backseat of Michael's car. Michael pulled him down, unzipped his own jeans, and pressed David's face close between his legs. *Whoa! What the heck?* Things were going a little quicker than David had been expecting, but he wasn't sure what to do. Was "*You want to party?*" secret gay code for *I want a blowjob*? It would be undeniably rude at this point to pull away like a squeamish girl, refuse, and run back inside. What to do?

Michael had groaned, taken hold of David's head with both hands, and pressed his cock up. The wet tip touched David's cheek, and he'd turned his head, let Michael press into his mouth. It hadn't taken him long to finish, and when they'd climbed out of the car, David hadn't been surprised when Michael gave him a kiss and squeezed his ass, said it had been fun and to take care. David had walked home alone, a little queasy and sad, afraid he had drunk too much, wondering what he had done, what he had not done, and if that night was going to be the pattern for all the nights of his long life.

Thinking about the man during his nap had been a mistake, and the rest of the afternoon, while David wrestled with the ax and the tree, gray memories of romantic and sexual failures dogged his mind. He didn't seem to have the knack for easy intimacy. David suspected he just didn't get it. The secret language of love and sex that people used was in some code he didn't have the key for. Men wanted to sleep with him, but they didn't want to fall in love with him. Didn't want to talk to him, curl up in a shared blanket, whisper secrets into his willing ear. He didn't know if he came off as too eager, too desperate, or too boring. He wasn't good at love, and he wasn't really good at sex, either. He could follow the leader, but he didn't seem to have the knack for making original and memorable love.

He still believed in love, though. He believed there was someone out there who was a good fit for him. Someone who would like him. Someone who wanted a man who was exactly the man he was. He was sure of it. His thoughts roamed back to Quanah Parker Running Bear. They had been a perfect fit as boys and playmates, a Cheyenne looking for white settlers to capture and a white settler who liked being captured and tied to a tree. David smiled down at the small pile of wood. Having once known Quanah Parker, he knew in his heart that he would find that fit again with someone, or he would live alone all the days of his life. Lately he had been thinking that alone would be okay. Some days he wondered if loneliness would kill him, like a cold gray arrow through his heart, but more and more he thought he might just be okay.

He stacked some of the cut firewood against the cabin and brought in enough for the night. Then he took a stroll down to the riverbank, wandered to the edge, and looked at the water bubbling and rushing over the rocks. He stared down at the river rocks, at their colors and sounds, at the soft, wet, round edges. He made a little pile of the ones he could reach easily, noticed their music changed. The wind was blowing from upriver, and he thought he smelled smoke, a tiny smudge of smoke coming from someone's chimney, but he couldn't see anything, and he headed back to the cabin before dusk fell. Sam's Club tomorrow, he thought to himself. Get the last of the provisions; then he wouldn't have to leave again.

David managed to wash his hair the next morning by pouring warm water from the pot on the stove over his head in the sink, soaping up, then rinsing the same way. The water drained from a stub of pipe under the sink into a bucket. He would have to do something about that, he knew, but decided for now to just concentrate on food and the woodpile. He had used almost all the wood he'd managed to cut yesterday. He needed to step up productivity significantly, or come late December he would be chopping wood from morning to night and never getting ahead of the stove. He remembered the note stuck on the ax—chainsaw. Did they plug in? Run on gas? He also remembered a hammer and chisel his grandpa had used to split logs. He would try to find them in the shed.

The drive back into town seemed to take forever, and he found himself irritated by the traffic and the busy clusters of houses and the billboards and even the rows and rows of food at Sam's Club. After the beautiful and empty landscape around Stanley, driving into the city felt like riding into Gomorrah on the back of a donkey. It was ridiculous, he knew; Boise was the state capital least likely to get the nickname Sin City, but even so he felt slightly guilty going through the drive-through at Mickey D's and getting a bag of one-dollar burgers.

He nearly quailed at the chainsaw display, but something about his three-day beard, mess of sink-washed curls, flannel shirt, and jeans seemed to give him some Stanley street cred. He told the older man working in the chainsaw department he was spending the winter in Stanley, in an old cabin, and the man's eyes had widened in respect. "I've always dreamed about doing that," he said and hefted the biggest and meanest chainsaw off the wall. He helped David pick out a spare chain, engine oil, a gas can, and gave a convincing argument for a gas-fired generator. David might have pulled out the credit card for that, but then he remembered the purchase of the wood-fired hot tub and the likely balance.

He wasn't sure what to think about food, and the huge volumes and different choices nearly defeated him. He decided to go with a couple of cases of canned chili, beans, and beef stew, plus some evaporated milk and a huge box of Honey Nut Cheerios. The problem he could already see while loading the cases was that after the twenty-fourth can of stew, he would not want another bowl of stew for a year, at least. He needed to get supplies so he could cook, proper mountain-man cooking. So he also loaded up on flour, sugar, Crisco, baking powder, salt, and cornmeal. He wasn't sure what he would be doing with all of them, but they looked right. He threw a couple of hefty sacks of apples into the cart; oranges, not sure how long he could keep them; and potatoes, carrots, and onions, in case he wanted to make more

stew. Faced with the produce department, he realized he should have made some menus and a list. Well, too late. Today was for provisions, and then he wouldn't be leaving again. He ended up roaming from aisle to aisle, putting everything he could imagine eating or drinking into the cart. At least, he thought, tugging the overloaded cart into the checkout aisle, he would not run out of coffee, tea, or hot chocolate. Maybe for years. By the time he pulled his heavily laden truck into the clearing next to the cabin, dusk had fallen, and he was so exhausted he left everything where it was and staggered in to bed.

Chapter Four

The chainsaw was a monster. It seemed to have grown overnight, like it had been fed magic beans, and his shoulders were sore just hefting it out to the chopping block. David studied the instruction book carefully, filled the proper orifices with oil and gas, and then tried to turn it on. It had a rip cord that had to be tugged hard at the same time a bright red safety button of some kind was held down with a thumb. He didn't have the shoulders to do it, and his coordination left a bit to be desired as well. The propane truck came while he was fighting with the chainsaw, and after the tank was filled, the driver stepped up and showed him how to do it.

The driver was a big, good-looking guy with grimy nails and shoulders that had never had problems pulling the starter on a chainsaw. He was nice, polite the way people up in the mountains were, but David saw some dislike drift across his face when he handed the buzzing saw over, thought he saw the word *fag* in the man's eyes. David thanked him politely. If he had to guess, he would say that the last book this guy had read was probably *Green Eggs and Ham*.

With the stink of the truck's exhaust in his face, he determined to use the chainsaw until it ran out of gas or until he dropped it, severing a limb. He could picture himself watching the bright arc of arterial blood pulsing slower and slower in the cool autumn air—no, wait, faster and faster, his heart desperate to pump blood that was spilling, lost, onto the ground. Would anyone find him? He was cheered suddenly by this unlikely death, the romance and drama of it, and he attacked the tree with the monster saw. He thought he would name the saw Viktor, after Viktor Krum from the Harry Potter books. He had developed a bit of a crush on the brooding young Seeker.

Viktor lasted for nearly an hour, and David felt something like triumph at the pile of wood he had cut. He was making progress. The buzzing vibration in his shoulders was still there long after he set Viktor down, but he had worn his new gloves, and the ax felt good when he stretched it high over his head and sent it sailing down onto the rounds of tree trunk. Late afternoon, a new truck came rumbling down the dirt road to the cabin, and David saw with delight that his new wood-fired hot tub had arrived.

The flatbed was unloaded and the hot tub put together in less than an hour. The driver showed him how the underwater woodstove worked and complimented him on living in Stanley in a cabin. He had lived in a yurt for a couple of years, he explained, and then he got married and the girls came and now he lived in a little house and he sure missed his yurt. After he pulled out, David set about filling the tub with the hand pump and bucket, wondering about this desire to live in the woods. Did all men want this? Was it the challenge or the isolation? Seemed like everyone he spoke to told him how much they wanted to be living his life. Ha. If only they knew! It sounded good, David knew, living in the woods, but he suspected that most people would not feel very comfortable with the current state of his finances or with the current state of his plumbing. Or outhouse. Filling the hot tub was slow going, but David was cheered by the success of Viktor and the woodpile and looked forward to bobbing lazily in steamy water. By nightfall, he had the tub about half-filled. Why had he bought the hot tub big enough for two? He pondered this a bit, filling it bucket by bucket.

Later, looking out the cabin windows from his bed, he saw a couple of young deer wander near in the moonlight, checking out the new tub and taking a drink of water.

He woke early, with dawn still an hour away, and he was toasty warm under his down quilt. The cabin was cold, though, so he got up to put some wood in the stove and start a pot of coffee. The first thing he saw was his boots, parked neatly by the door. They had been moved for sure. No question this time. He thought about that old fairy tale, something about a cobbler and the mice that made shoes for him while he slept. Then he thought about the other people who lived on this road and how one of them had loved to sneak stealthily through the night when he was a boy. Today he would go visit Quannah Parker.

He read for a while by candlelight, while the cabin filled with the smell of coffee perking. He looked at the mountain of foodstuffs, extracted a box of Bisquick big enough for Paul Bunyan, and made himself a panful of biscuits in the iron skillet on top of the woodstove. There was a learning curve to this too, he thought. It was while he was heating the water for his bath that the idea came to him for his next book of poetry.

He liked linked books, where the poems were all related to each other. His first book, *Sand Creek*, was all poems of Native American massacres, and he thought that the poems being connected to each other made the whole greater than the sum of the individual poems. Now he thought about the flood of new experiences in the last few weeks and decided on the shape of the new book. His year in Stanley, in linked poems. Cool. He'd use the Sawtooths in the title—that was such a strong word, so evocative and dangerous. Maybe just *Sawtooth Wilderness*. Or he could go with *A Year on the Salmon River*.

He looked around the cabin and pulled out one of his copies of *Sand Creek*. On the acknowledgements page was written: *For my boyhood friend Quannah Parker Running Bear*. Had he seen it? Would anyone have shown it to him? David shook his head. Next to his acknowledgment he wrote, *Thank You*. He would walk up the road and see if Quannah Parker was still around. And if he wasn't home, David could leave it in the mailbox. Or just inside the door, stuck in a pair of boots.

He walked downriver, his ears alert for sounds of tracking natives armed with bows and arrows, but he saw no one as he made his way down to the Running Bears' cabin. He pulled up short when it came into view—what had been a small cabin, like his own, was now two cabins and a workshop with a large corral behind. The lights were on in the smaller cabin, so David walked over and knocked on the door.

Quannah Parker's father opened the door, looking so much like he had looked when David had been a child that he was struck dumb, sudden tears for his grandpa filling his eyes. Mr. Running Bear looked at him a long moment, eyes narrowed, then pulled him into his chest in a big one-armed hug. "David! You look so much like your grandfather when I first met him. For a moment I thought he had come to take me with him back to heaven. Come inside! I was just getting ready to cook breakfast."

The cabin was bright and warm, and there was a package of bacon lying on the kitchen counter. "I think your grandpa was twenty-eight when he started work on the cabin. Seems like just yesterday to me. Bacon and eggs sound good to you?"

David nodded, deciding not to mention the iron skillet of biscuits he had left outside for the birds. "I brought something for Quannah Parker," he said, and he held out the little book. Mr. Running Bear took it, went over to an old recliner covered in a plaid blanket, and sat down. The chair had a good reading lamp next to it and a stack of books on the floor. He opened the cover, scanned the note, and read through the list of poems, his eyebrows climbing nearly up into his hair. "David! These are your poems? Quannah Parker will be very happy to read them."

"My first book of poetry," David explained. He felt the color creep up in his cheeks. "I got some good reviews."

"Of course you did! I feel very proud of you. Your grandpa, he always thought you would be a writer. A writer or a librarian." He set the book of poems carefully down on the table. "The book is very nice! Quannah Parker isn't here. He's gone into Sun Valley for the day." The old man snorted. "Playing a cigar-store Indian for money."

Mr. Running Bear kept up a gentle interrogation while he plied David with bacon and scrambled eggs, and it didn't take too long before David was pouring out the whole story of his humiliating and unceremonious exit from the world of academia. Mr. Running Bear nodded, poured coffee, listened like a grandpa would listen. David

felt a sudden surge of affection for him, for all the old men who listened to the young men without chewing them out for being idiots. Mr. Running Bear did not seem startled at the idea of David dancing with a man in a gay bar.

"David, why did you decide to just let it go? I mean, you could have stayed there, fought it."

David shrugged. "I've been thinking about that myself. I think I must not have cared that much, or I would have stayed. I love being a writer, but... I don't know. I'm thinking about looking for another way."

"Do books of poetry make enough money you can live?"

David shook his head. "I don't think so. But I have a year to figure it out. I'm teaching a couple of those Internet classes. I'm going in to the library a couple of days a week to use the Wi-Fi, and I'll see how that goes."

"You can come down here and use the Internet if you want. Quanah Parker has a good generator and Internet to his workshop."

"His workshop? What is he doing? Is he an artist? He told me he was going to be an artist."

Mr. Running Bear rolled his eyes, studied the ceiling. "I'll let him explain it. He'll be back today or tomorrow. He knows you're here."

And David felt the same tingle of excitement and dread at those words that he used to feel when Quanah Parker would take him captive in the woods and shove him up against a tree. "*He knows you're here.*"

* * *

Before he left, Mr. Running Bear showed him the animals bouncing around the paddock. David wasn't sure quite what they were—not miniature horses, not goats—but some animal with long legs and thick fur. "Are those alpacas?"

"Yep. Not your fanciest alpacas. These are Quanah Parker's pets."

They were the strangest animals, with silly faces and wild, soft hair hanging over their eyes and impossibly thin legs. They were curious, with a high startle reflex, and David sent them gamboling around the corral a couple of times when he tried to pet them. They moved in a pack, two brown alpacas that looked like twins, a very furry white one with a strange, limping run, like he had one leg shorter than the others, and a black one with one eye missing and scars across his face.

"They look...well, they look like they came from the alpaca shelter."

Mr. Running Bear grinned down at him. "This is the alpaca shelter. He's got names for them—the two brown ones are Fred and George, and the black one with one eye, he's Crazy Horse. The white one is new. I think Quanah Parker is going to call him Jerry Rice. Oh, you see that one over in the corner, chewing on the fence? He's Jerry Garcia. Quanah Parker thinks somebody gave him LSD when he was a baby. He's never been right. He gives good fleece, though."

"Huh. Fred and George? I named my chainsaw Viktor. After Viktor Krum," he explained.

Mr. Running Bear nodded, a pained expression on his face. He gave David a pat on the shoulder. "Of course you did. Quanah Parker will be happy to see you." He put an arm around David, gave him another little hug. "And so am I."

* * *

Back to the cabin and back to work filling the hot tub. Something about the rhythm of it appealed to his poet's mind, and he spent a couple of happy hours hauling buckets of water and thinking up new cadences. He wondered if he could write a decent poem to the rhythms of rap and played around with phrases and words. It was a perfect Indian summer day—the air full of sun, cold rising from the earth, the smell of falling leaves, the wind off the river. He thought of that rhythm, the slow, rounded rhythm of the wind, and then he considered the possibility that he would end up a raving lunatic before the year was up. No, not a raving lunatic. *Squirrelly*.

What if he kept walking down the poetical path and fell so deeply into his own mind that he could not find his way back? He was cheered, somehow, by the romance of this idea—the mad poet. He would be wandering lost in the woods, snatches of imagery dancing on his tongue like fire, and...and Quanah Parker would find him. Would bring him home before he froze to death. Would listen to the poems.

The darkness was falling early. He filled up the wood-fired stove, carefully put it down into the water, and was rewarded by the puffs of smoke emerging from the snorkel. He checked the temperature about every thirty seconds, and when he realized he was driving himself crazy, he went back into the cabin, determined to not check on the water for at least a half hour. He studied the mountains of food, nearly felt defeated, then wrestled a can of beef stew from a tall stack and heated it up on the woodstove. He made a list while he ate:

Trash

Laundry

Fridge

Freezer

Propane stove

How to start Viktor without help.

Okay. When he went into town to use the library, he could check out the Laundromat. Was there a Laundromat? He thought so. He would ask the man at the general store about trash when he brought him a copy of the book. Was it time yet? He went outside, felt the water. Not hot-tub hot, but warm enough, and there were still puffs of smoke coming from the snorkel, so it would keep getting warmer. David raced back into the cabin, stripped as quickly as he could, grabbed a towel, and ran back outside. He didn't make it to the hot tub.

Chapter Five

A long, hard arm wrapped around his waist from behind, and another snaked around his chest. He was lifted off his feet, pressed against the chest and belly of

Quanah Parker. David knew it was him. He could smell the fresh mountain air and wood-smoke smell on his wild hair, and his hands were the same—huge, hard, and pressed down over David's heart. "I've got you," said softly in his ear, and Quanah Parker held him there, his bare feet dangling above the ground, his body pressed against Quanah Parker's long length. "Ready to get tied to a tree?"

"Eek!"

Quanah Parker laughed, and David felt like biting down on his traitor tongue. What had he done, squealed like a piglet? "I was going into the hot tub."

Hands were roaming over his naked chest and belly. "Really? I thought you were going to streak naked through the woods. You don't want to do that barefoot. You'll hurt your little tootsies." And Quanah Parker lifted him higher and dumped him into the water.

The water wasn't warm enough. David went under, screamed, came up, and pushed his wet hair out of his eyes. "Shit! It's cold. It's very cold. It's not even lukewarm." Quanah Parker looked the same, exactly the same, only bigger and older and more beautiful and sexier. David felt something contract in his chest. He would have known his old friend anywhere. Quanah Parker was pulling the sweatshirt over his head, skinning out of his sweatpants, and David stared at his broad brown chest, his narrow hips and flat belly, the dark patch of hair between his legs, and the cock as straight and long as an arrow. Quanah Parker let him take a long look before he climbed into the hot tub.

"Jesus! The water's cold." Quanah Parker pushed over to the little fence that separated the woodstove from the rest of the tub. "How long's that thing been going?"

"Maybe forty-five minutes." David had his arms wrapped around his chest, trying to curl himself into a ball.

Quanah Parker turned to him, eyes narrowed in his dark face, pulled David into his arms, and tugged until David's back was pressed up against his chest. He wrapped David up tight. "We need to share a little body heat here. I've got one of these down at my place. I usually let the water heat up for a couple of hours before I get in."

"I just got it filled up tonight." His teeth were starting to chatter.

"How come it took so long? I thought I saw the flatbed yesterday."

"The plumbing? It's not really hooked up yet. Like, to pipes." Quanah Parker was silent, and David felt the warmth of his broad chest. "I did it with a bucket and the hand pump," David confessed.

"You filled the hot tub with a bucket." Quanah Parker moved his arms down, and David let out a faint yelp. "No wonder you couldn't wait to jump in. It's warming up."

It was warmer, but maybe some of the warmth was gratitude at not being laughed at or made to feel like a fool. "The plumbing is on my list of things to do."

"Did you get a chainsaw, David?" Quanah Parker was nuzzling his neck, running his face over the wet curls plastered against David's skin. "I'm worried about your woodpile."

"I did. I might have a problem, though. I need some practice pulling that rip cord deal and getting it started."

"Did you get your propane tank filled?"

"Yes, but the problem is, I'm not sure if the propane actually runs to the house."

"No stove? How have you been cooking?"

"The woodstove."

"Water?"

"The woodstove."

"David, this isn't going to work come January."

"I know. I'm working on it. I've got a list." He rested his head back on Quanah Parker's shoulder, and they stared up through the trees at a night sky so close and so thick with stars, David felt like he could reach up and snatch a handful. The water was warmer now, and Quanah Parker had loosened his bonds, was running his big hand down across David's stomach. He reached for David's cock and curled his fingers around him, and David could feel himself stiffen and swell. *Holy shit. Ho-ly shit!*

"Are you mine?" Quanah Parker was whispering in his ear. David could feel him, every inch of beautiful, warm, smooth brown skin, plastered against his own. "Tell me you belong to me."

David turned in his arms until they were chest to chest and stared into Quanah Parker's fierce face. "When you say, 'Are you mine?' do you mean in the metaphorical sense? Because..."

Quanah Parker gave him a little shake. "Let's try that again. Are you mine? There's only one right answer, David."

"I've always been yours." And he reached up and pressed his mouth against the smiling lips in front of him.

* * *

It didn't take David long to realize that Quanah Parker knew exactly what he was doing. That he was, in fact, significantly more experienced in lovemaking. All David could do was hold on and try to control the hyperventilation while Quanah Parker used his mouth and hands and cock to bring him to screaming delight. A panic attack, David thought, would not be out of order. Not only had he clutched Quanah Parker's body like they were floating in the North Atlantic and sharks were circling, but he had taken about forty-five seconds to have his first orgasm, and he had humped Quanah Parker's leg, and when he came the second time, he had shrieked like a pig getting its throat cut. It was a shameful display of sexual neediness, and there was no way to put a good face on it. Quanah Parker looked both satisfied and as if he had expected nothing else. They were bobbing gently next to each other, the water steaming in the cool night air, and David confessed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get so hysterical. I don't know what I'm doing."

"About what? Woodcutting?"

"No, sex. I mean, I'm not exactly..." David didn't even know if Quanah Parker had had an orgasm during the preceding hour. Shouldn't a thoughtful lover know that? Sort of...keep count? Make sure they were even?

Quanah Parker opened lazy dark eyes and surveyed him. "I don't think it's a standard skill set, David."

"It seems like it is. I mean, you seem pretty skilled."

Quanah Parker dipped his head back, dunking his long hair. He raised his hand and drew circles in the water. "It's like this—friendship, sex, happiness, satisfaction, they're all part of the same thing. You're strong in yourself, so you can be strong in your relationships. You're happy being you. Then you can let your heart and your imagination free. You can play."

Play? "I don't get it."

"Don't think so much, David. You need me. You've always needed me, so why should this be any different? And in case you didn't notice, I'm quite satisfied. Can I stay with you tonight? I don't want to walk home with wet hair."

You can stay with me forever. "Sure."

Inside the cabin, David lit the candles next to the bed and on the table, and in the soft golden light Quanah Parker took a slow look around, taking in the mountains of foodstuffs, the woodstove, the bed with its thick down quilt. David pulled a towel out of a stack next to the pile of his clothes. Quanah Parker pulled his sweatpants on, and David sat him down in a chair and set about drying his long black hair. It was nearly to his waist, and heavy, but David refrained from burying his face in it, just combed it out and rubbed it with the towel. He threw some more wood into the stove because the cabin was chilly, and Quanah Parker took the towel out of his hands. "Now let me dry you off."

His head was scrubbed, and Quanah Parker combed his brown curls, rubbed them again with the towel, buried his face in them, and stroked softly down David's neck with rough fingertips. The towel was gentle on his chest and back, down each of his legs, and then Quanah Parker pulled him over to the bed and laid him down on top of the quilt.

"I brought you something," he said, and David noticed the gym bag just inside the cabin door. Quanah Parker reached in and took out a jar of pink cream that smelled like rose petals. He pulled David's feet into his lap. "This is my favorite foot cream," he said and started working the cream into David's skin. His fingers were rough, and he stroked the soles of David's feet over and over, rubbing the cream in between the toes, circling his thumb over the balls, knuckling the heels. He reached down and sucked David's toes into his mouth, one by one, nipping on the tips with his strong teeth, and David fell back against the pillows, his cock straining fit to burst.

"Oh, my God, that feels so good. What are you doing?"

Quanah Parker slid one hand up inside his thigh, fingertips against his tender skin driving him mad. "Not yet." He took a pair of moccasins out of the bag, soft, pale yellow hide, and pulled them onto David's feet. They fit him like they were made for him, and he grinned, remembering his strangely moving boots.

"Wow, how did you get them to fit so good?"

Quanah Parker slapped him on the ass, and David held his feet up, looking at the moccasins. They had a decoration on the toes and the sides, colored leather stitched like an appliqué. It was olive green and scarlet, a sockeye salmon. David had never seen anything as beautiful, and the feel of the hide against his rosy, tender toes was unbelievable. "What kind of leather is it?"

"Elk." Quanah Parker climbed up next to him, pulled David into his arms. His brown throat was warm and silky, as thick as a tree trunk, and David pressed his mouth to the pulse, felt Quanah Parker's strong heart beating against his lips. "They don't last as long outside, but elk is the softest skin for bedroom moccasins."

"Bedroom moccasins?"

"Yeah. I want you to sleep with them on. Nothing else. So when I climb into your bed, you're naked and waiting for me. And your sweet little tootsies are wrapped up in my moccasins."

David felt his cock give a thump and a lurch, and he pressed himself hard against Quanah Parker's thigh. "I don't know what's going on here," he said when he could breathe again.

"Just you and me, David. This is just you and me. I've been waiting a long time to make love to you." He nuzzled a bit, mouth moving along David's throat, along the curve of his collarbone. "You taste like sweet cream. When we were boys, I used to wonder if your mouth would taste like chocolate. Your eyes were the color of chocolate, you know, and you were always looking at me, your eyes so big and startled. I thought if I kissed you on the mouth, your tongue would taste like chocolate."

"You smell the same to me," David said, pushing back a waterfall of black hair and pressing his mouth to the side of Quanah Parker's neck. "This is what I remember, the way your neck smells underneath your hair. When I would ride behind you, I used to put my face against your hair so I could smell you."

"I know." He nudged David over onto his back. "Tell me what you like when you're making love."

David opened his mouth, couldn't think of anything to say, closed it again. He studied the ceiling a bit. "Well, I suppose what I like the best is actually knowing the other person. And I guess I would say that when no alcohol is involved, that's better than when there is a lot of tequila in the mix."

Quanah Parker bit his lip, obviously trying not to smile. "Okay. Well. I can see I got here just in time." His mouth moved down David's chest, down his belly, and his black hair slid across David's skin, pooled between his thighs. "I'll show you everything, David." He turned his head, let David's cock kiss his cheek, a damp, sticky kiss. "You can trust me. I'll keep you safe."

It was almost too romantic, like Quanah Parker knew the very words to turn his belly hot and fill his heart to bursting. For the first time in his life, words seemed to desert him, and when Quanah Parker opened his mouth, licked a rough tongue across the head of David's cock, then sucked him down deep, his mind seemed to fracture. He reached down, held two thick fistfuls of Quanah Parker's black hair, and the only poetry he could remember were the lines by DH Lawrence about the great passionate lovemaking of the whales.

Quanah Parker laughed at him when he started reciting the lines. When David splashed the back of his throat moments—seconds, even—into the first truly romantic blowjob of his life, Quanah Parker swallowed and swallowed and swallowed, his fingertips gentle against David's skin. Then he rested his head in the curve of David's hip, held his softening cock between his lips, and closed his eyes.

Quanah Parker crawled up the bed, pulled David into his arms, wrapped him up tight, chest to chest, belly to belly. "Now," he said. "Now you're mine."

David drifted off to sleep with a handful of hair in his fist.

Chapter Six

David awoke, and the candle was lit on the bedside table. The coffeepot was perking on the woodstove, and Quanah Parker was sitting up, back against the

headboard, reading *Sand Creek*. "It's good, David," he said, and David could see that he was really reading, paying attention, poring over the words and images and lines. "Did you get an MFA?"

David nodded. "How about you?"

Quanah Parker shook his head. "I went to school back east, studied art, but I left after my BFA."

"What school?"

"Dartmouth. They have a special program for Native American students."

"So what was your BFA in? What concentration?"

"Printmaking. You?"

"Poetry."

"So what have you been doing?"

David pulled the covers up over his face. It seemed like a lifetime ago, at least. Did he have to explain to Quanah Parker what an utter, easily manipulated fool he was? He thought about this, under the dark and warm quilt, and he fell asleep again.

When he woke up the next time, Quanah Parker was drinking coffee out of a mug and was nearly halfway through *Sand Creek*.

"I don't want you to think I'm a fool."

Quanah Parker studied him, then climbed off the bed and filled a second coffee cup. "I meant it when I said you belonged to me. You've always belonged to me." David felt the breath catch in his chest. "Don't you? Tell me you're mine. Tell me in the light, while you're looking at my face."

David stared at his harsh, dark face. "Okay, I'm yours. And no, I don't understand you. I mean, I haven't even brushed my teeth!"

"Do you think I'll toss you back, like you're a skinny little fish under the weight limit?"

"I don't know. You might be tempted to when you find out what I'm really like. Who I am."

"I already know who you really are. So, what happened?"

David explained about the publication, dancing at the Top Hat, the blowjob, the pictures, the meeting with the dean. "So I decided to come up here, spend some time alone, write some poetry, and think things over."

"Do you know who did it?"

David shook his head. "It could be any of them."

"Is it important to you? To know which one?"

"I don't think so. I just want to...to stay up here."

"To hide up here."

"It doesn't seem like hiding to me. It's more like I want to spend some quiet time with myself."

"Is that all, David? Is that the only reason you came?"

"Maybe I was hoping to run into an old friend," he admitted. Quanah Parker reached for him, ruffled the brown curls.

"It'll be good for us to spend some time together, getting to know each other." He leaned over and pulled David close to him. "But don't...think too much about all of this, David. You and me, we're not like other people. We're not guys starting a relationship. We've belonged to each other since we were kids. A blood bond." He brushed a thumb across David's left palm, rubbed the little scar. "It doesn't matter if it makes sense. You know and I know." He stood up and put his coffee cup in the sink. "I've got to get to work. Maybe later you can come down the road and I'll show you my workshop."

"I met your boys yesterday. Fred and George, Crazy Horse, Jerry Rice. Jerry Garcia wouldn't come to the fence to get petted, though."

"Have you ever worn alpaca socks?"

David shook his head.

"Just you wait. I've got a pair from Crazy Horse that will fit you perfectly."

"Hey, before you go? Can you help me fire up the chainsaw?"

* * *

David was a basket case all morning. His head felt like it was full of bees swarming, and his body was acting like a giant erotic compass, his aching cock rising and pointing north whenever he turned toward Quanah Parker's house. Well, what had he been expecting? Nothing. Hoping for? Maybe he had been hoping for something, a shooting star across the night sky, and instead he had watched a star go supernova and turn his bed into the black hole of erotic sex. What was with Quanah Parker? Was it all...bedroom talk? He didn't talk like that to everyone, did he? How did Quanah Parker know that being so bossy and overbearing would cause David to melt in his arms like pink taffy left out on a summer sidewalk?

David and Viktor worked all morning on the woodpile, and when Viktor ran out of gas, David didn't even take a break, just took up the ax and started chopping. Maybe there was something left over from their boyhood relationship. Innocent as it had always been, there had never been any question that David would be the one tied up. It was inconceivable that he would ever master Quanah Parker. But was all this "you belong to me" stuff some weirdo prelude to more tying up? Masks, gags, masters and slaves, spankings, and who the hell knew what else? Oh, hell no. Surely they weren't ambling together down that path, with Quanah Parker holding his leash? He was a man, for crying out loud, a man and a poet, and there was a limit to how far he would be pushed. Then he turned toward Quanah Parker's house, and his insides felt like melting cotton candy, and it was all he could do to put his tools away properly and not run up the road like a lovesick fool.

The workshop had a sign outside. TOOTSIES: MOCS AND SOCS. WORLD HEADQUARTERS. STANLEY, KETCHUM, SUN VALLEY. David pushed the door open.

Quanah Parker was working at a strange machine with a round handle on the side. Yarn was going into the top, and out the bottom—David bent and looked—was a pair of socks.

"What is that thing?"

"It's an antique circular sock-knitting machine," Quanah Parker said. "This is a Legare, made in 1901."

"You make socks? And moccasins?"

"This is a genuine Native American enterprise," Quanah Parker said. "Plus I get my jollies measuring people's feet."

David froze, and Quanah Parker stood up and came around the other side of his sock machine. "Feeling a little freaked out?" David nodded, and Quanah Parker opened his arms and pulled David in against his chest. "We're okay. I always feel good making socks. It really calms the mind. You can look around if you want."

David studied the spinning wheel set next to baskets of fleece—roving, Quanah Parker called it—and the long workbench where moccasin designs were sketched out on paper and pinned up to a long corkboard. Quanah Parker was going with Northwestern native designs, like totems—eagle, raven, bear, salmon. David could see the different leathers, some soft as silk, others thick and dark, cut out as soles. There was music on a little CD player in the corner, a lonesome wooden flute. The floor was hardwood, the curtains were checked yellow gingham, the woodstove was warm, and the light was bright. And electric. David pulled a chair up next to Quanah Parker. "Can I watch?"

"Sure. These are simple socks. The design is already dyed into the alpaca. See the colors, all those shades of purple? So when it knits, the design is sort of abstract. Each one is slightly different, but they're clearly a pair."

David sat quietly, watching Quanah Parker's big hands move quickly and delicately over the sock-knitting machine. When the second purple sock was finished, he knit a few rows of white, then started another pair with the purple yarn. "I want to have lots of purple on hand. They're very popular at Christmas."

"You sell them in Ketchum and Sun Valley?"

"Yeah. I have tiny little shops, but they're in really good locations for foot traffic." He looked up at David and winked. "Foot traffic—get it? I know lots of foot jokes. I make some of the stock myself, and I have some ladies on the rez knitting socks for me and sewing moccasins. I have a couple of ladies who work as clerks in the stores, and I go up there a couple of times a week. I used to have the knitting machine set up in the Sun Valley store, but I never got any work done. People were so interested in watching and talking to me about how it worked. Coming into Christmas, I'm going to work on baby moccasins, which are really quick and popular, and lots of brightly colored socks. They look good in the window. I'm thinking about trying some shearling slippers for babies this year. I've got some shearling that feels like curly lamb; that might be a good fit for baby mocs." David had the feeling Quanah Parker was talking out loud, mulling over plans, while his busy fingers knit purple alpaca socks. "Hey, you want to cut out some leather?"

"Sure. Just show me what to do."

Quanah Parker showed him some thin black and green and red leather pieces on the workbench. "See the templates? These are for the designs on the vamp. All of them have a couple of layers. Black usually on the bottom, then red and green on top." He handed David the small templates made out of thick plastic. "Trace the designs on the back of the leather; then cut them out with the shears. Don't worry if you mess them up—I've got bags and bags of leather scraps I use for designs."

David settled at the workbench and pulled a light over so he could see what he was doing. He traced the raven first and cut it out carefully, using a pair of heavy shears. He set the pieces aside in a stack and cut out a couple more. It got easier with practice, and he could feel his mind settle down, feel the warmth of the room, the light, the music, the calming, strong presence of Quanah Parker, and before he knew it, some lines were drifting into his mind, some lines of poetry, and he reached out and wrote the words on a piece of elk in front of him: *Marble lips don't warm with a kiss, but Pygmalion toes bunch and flare in ticklish delight, scrabbling in soft mud...*

Quanah Parker smiled at him. "I've got a spare notebook," he said, rummaging in the drawer and then holding out a little memo book.

"Sorry." David took the notebook and wrote for a while.

Quanah Parker took the little piece of elk and slipped it into his pocket.

"That's not a poem," David warned. "I just collect scraps, images and lines, and while I'm doing that, the poem takes shape in my mind. It's a lot more work than it looks."

"I like watching you work, David."

"I like watching you work too, Quanah Parker. Maybe some haiku," David mused. "Toe haiku."

* * *

Mr. Running Bear called them for dinner, and they followed the smells of spaghetti and meatballs with garlic bread to his cabin. After dinner, David walked to the paddock with Quanah Parker, watched the alpacas race around, flee in delight, reach their fuzzy heads to Quanah Parker for a pet. They filled the water troughs and put out some hay, and then he and Quanah Parker walked back down the road to his cabin. "I've got to go tuck the poet into bed," Quanah Parker told his father, and James Running Bear winced and held up a hand.

"You don't have to tell me every detail, boys," he said. "In fact, I'd much rather you didn't." And Quanah Parker laughed out loud. "I'll expect you two for breakfast."

At the cabin, they didn't head for the hot tub or the bed. Quanah Parker pointed with his chin to the woodpile. "You're making good progress," he said, then went to study the propane tank. David set about emptying and filling the woodstove for the hot tub, thinking there was no way he would be able to wait two hours for it to heat up. Quanah Parker studied the hand pump next, stuck his head under the sink, and walked slowly around the outhouse.

David hauled some wood into the cabin and cleaned out the stove, then took the ashes outside.

"You want to make sure there aren't too many coals before you dump the ash in the outhouse," Quanah Parker said. "I would hate to see this thing burn down." David stared at him in surprise. "It's not that great an outhouse, but a fire would spread to the cabin, and it's made out of dry twigs, my friend. It would be gone in ten minutes."

"I guess there isn't a fire department out here," David said, and Quanah Parker silently pointed to the hand pump and dangling bucket.

Quanah Parker took up the ax and started splitting wood. "I've been sitting on my ass too long today," he explained. "There are only so many pairs of purple alpaca socks a man can knit before he has to gut a deer or set something on fire."

"I'm too used to sitting," David said. "I've only been finished with school and started teaching for a year, but seems like my work is all done sitting down. Then for fun I get up and go running. I'm not sure how healthy that is. I was already starting to get a cramp in my neck from too many hours staring at the computer."

"Not healthy," Quanah Parker agreed. "When I decided to find a business instead of doing graphic art, which is all done on the computer these days, I looked around for something that I could make with my hands. It's...good. It feels real and honest." He shrugged. "Maybe I won't be in love with it forever, but for now I love making socks and moccasins."

David got up the nerve to ask Quanah Parker something he had been wondering about. "Listen, do you...I mean, do you have a foot thing going? Like, what do they call it..."

"A foot fetish? I don't know. I'm not sure what that means, really. But I love feet. I love to rub sweet-smelling cream into feet and suck on toes, and I really love a soft foot on my dick. Is that a foot fetish?"

"*A soft foot on my dick*"? David tried to phrase his next question carefully. "Is there other foot...stuff that you would like? I mean, what do you want me to do?"

Quanah Parker put down the ax, and when he wrapped David up in his sweaty arms, the curtain of his black hair fell over David's face like a shield, like a magical shield. David clung to him, his knees suddenly shaking. "Just be yourself. Just be with me. I like you, David. I like being with you." And Quanah Parker didn't say another word when David's tears fell hot against his neck.

Quanah Parker enjoyed his own beautiful body very much, David thought later, watching him pull his clothes off. He was a man who was happy in himself, and he enjoyed the effect his body had on men. Probably on women too, David thought. "Have you ever been with a girl?"

Quanah Parker stopped for a moment, his sweatshirt half-pulled over his head. "Um, I would have to say not successfully."

David wasn't sure if he wanted to pursue this line of conversation further. Maybe he would just watch Quanah Parker get undressed.

The sweatshirt got tossed toward the end of the bed, where David's clothes were piled up in a cardboard box. Then Quanah Parker unsnapped the button at the waistband of his jeans, slid the zipper down. His belly was flat and brown, with a few sparse black hairs that David suddenly wanted urgently to touch. Quanah Parker skinned his jeans over his hips, stepped out of them, then slid his boxers off and kicked both toward the end of the bed. He leaned over to open up the gym bag.

Quanah Parker's bedroom moccasins were soft white buckskin, and the design on the toe was a giant red and black leaping whale. David felt himself flush from the chest up, watching him walk to the woodstove, dressed in moccasins and long hair and nothing else. Quanah Parker opened the door, put a piece of fragrant wood on the fire, and blew out the candle on the pine plank table. "Get undressed, David," he said. "I'm cold."

Quanah Parker stretched out on the bed, and David could see the whole beautiful length of him—broad chest, black hair, long legs. His penis nestled against his thigh, and David was fascinated at the rich brown color, the length of it, the coarse hair it nestled in. Quanah Parker lifted his arms over his head, sighed, and snuggled into the down quilt. "This is soft, David," he said. "You can touch me if you want."

David slipped out of his jeans and flannel shirt, got his bedroom mocs, and put them on, his toes stretching against the soft elkskin. He could touch Quanah Parker anywhere he wanted. He moved up the bed until he was settled between Quanah Parker's longer legs. His belly was hard with muscle. How did he manage to stay in such good shape making socks all day? He was hard, but the skin was so velvet soft, David had to lean over and taste it with his lips, touch the warm skin with the tip of his tongue. He moved down just a bit, let the black hair that led down Quanah Parker's belly tickle his nose. He smelled musky and warm, and David suddenly wanted, more than anything in the world, to bury his face deep between Quanah Parker's legs, to nudge his balls with his nose, to rub his face against the stirring heavy, long cock that belonged to Quanah Parker, and let it kiss his cheek. He took a shaky breath, felt a big hand settle gently over the back of his neck.

"Go ahead," Quanah Parker said. "Anything you want."

Later, David drowsed against Quanah Parker's large brown shoulder, thinking in five and seven syllables. Toe haiku. He would write some beautiful and erotic poetry as a gift for Quanah Parker. The Pygmalion idea came back into his mind. He could picture himself hard and cold as marble. Then Quanah Parker was there, running his big hands down David's marble sides, the cold flanks turning warm and pink under his hands. No feet in this picture, and David wondered for a moment what it meant—"a soft foot on my dick." They would be in the hot tub, and Quanah Parker would be sprawled out opposite him, long arms along the wooden edge, long legs relaxed and spread. And David would reach out with his toes, walk them up the inside of Quanah Parker's thigh, roll the ball of his foot until Quanah Parker's dick was snuggled up against his arch. Then he would just roll his foot back and forth until Quanah Parker got whatever he was going to get from it. David smiled and shook the sleeping shoulders underneath him. "Wake up! We need to get in the hot tub."

Toe Haiku #1
toes flare in delight
a spasm and arch moving
up the lovely foot.

Chapter Seven

David awoke with Quanah Parker curled warmly around him, fingers stroking his scalp and combing his curls. "Hey. Let's get up and go fishing. Have you been on the river since you've been back?"

David stretched a little, turned into his arms. "I've been down to the river to hang around, you know, looking at the rocks and stuff."

"Do you have any gear?"

David shook his head. He wanted to curl up and be a pet rock and live in Quanah Parker's pocket. "Your turn to make the coffee."

"No, it's not," Quanah Parker said, hand sneaking around to pinch David on the ass. "It's your turn. I've already gotten up to put more wood on the fire."

David wiggled his toes inside his bedroom moccasins. His feet felt softer and warmer and somehow more pampered than the rest of his body. Like they belonged to a king. David wondered about this while he climbed out of bed and pulled on his jeans. Was this feeling the result of being cherished? Flooded with attention? Would this

royal foot feeling gradually creep up his legs and his head until he wouldn't even recognize himself?

He pulled the door of the cabin open and carried the bucket to the pump. It was stiff this morning, hard to move, and there was a fine dusty sprinkling of snow on everything. The snow had started while they were in the hot tub, the tiniest, driest flakes David had ever seen. He thought it looked like powdered sugar drifting down to frost a cake.

Being cherished, he decided, was the deal. It was transforming. Maybe even physically transforming. His face felt changed, like it was falling into lines more relaxed and tender than it had been used to the last few years. He rubbed his chin. His beard was coming along—a bit scraggly, but coming along nicely. Was there a difference, he thought, his mind wandering along a meandering path while his hands made the coffee, between being temporarily cherished and being permanently cherished? Was it simply a function of time, or was there a difference right from the beginning? And why was Quanah Parker cherishing him? What was the deal? If he, David, was so precious and cherishable, why had the entire rest of mankind treated him—he was forced to acknowledge the truth of this—as if he was forgettable and not very interesting and not really lovable at all? Was there something Quanah Parker would discover in time to make him realize that he had been wrong? David suspected that he was not strong enough to survive being cherished, then having it taken away. But Quanah Parker had known him since he was a child. Didn't that argue that Quanah Parker knew him best?

"What are you thinking about, David? Your face looks like you're having a debate with yourself."

"I was, I guess. Thinking about what causes one person to cherish another."

Quanah Parker studied him some more. "Did you reach any conclusions?"

"Nope." David smiled at him. "Just enjoying the debate."

"I would enjoy some breakfast, a hot shower, and a day on the river," Quanah Parker said, throwing back the covers. "All of which we can get down at my place. When we built it, we put a nice bathroom in. And I have some waders that'll fit you, I think. I don't want you to wear your bedroom moccasins into the river, though." He was pulling on his sweats. "We need some fishing moccasins. As luck would have it, I was working on a pair for you before you came down yesterday. Just in case I could talk you into going fishing."

"I don't think you'll have to talk very hard," David said. "I can fix us some breakfast here." He gestured toward the mountain of food, and Quanah Parker laughed.

"Um, no, thanks, Jeremiah Johnson. My dad loves to cook. He said he would see us at breakfast, remember?"

David filled a coffee cup and passed it to him. "That's right. I forgot."

Quanah Parker dug through David's clothes and dressed him in layers, with a promise of appropriate footgear back at his place. They walked together down the dirt road separating their houses, and Quanah Parker scuffed his boots in the snow. "I feel like we've been playing in the woods again, and now we've got to get ready for school. Something about your cabin reminds me of the forts and villages we used to build along the river when we were kids."

"I wonder if that's the feeling I've been working toward," David said. Their cups of coffee were steaming in the cold morning air. "Maybe I'm trying to recreate that feeling. Is it safety? Or is it the familiar I'm trying to recapture? Seems like most people who try to recreate some time from their past end up failing."

Quanah Parker shrugged. "Does it matter why you're here? I notice this about you, that you think things through until you discover the why behind the things you do. Is that important to you?"

David was surprised. "I don't know. Doesn't everyone do that?"

Quanah Parker shook his head. "I don't. I'm not sure I know anyone but you who does."

"Can I ask you something?"

Quanah Parker set his coffee cup down. Then he pulled his hair back behind him, twisted it into a ponytail, and wrapped an elastic holder around it. "Sure."

"What have you been doing all these years? I mean, with men?"

They studied each other, and Quanah Parker took a sip of coffee, his eyes narrowed.

"You know you do this thing, David. One question leads to another down some twisty paths. You sure you want to walk down this path?"

"You don't have to answer."

He sighed. "I'll answer anything that does not get in the way of a shower, breakfast, and fishing in peace all day. What have I been doing? I've been sleeping with men I wanted to sleep with. I've been mildly infatuated a couple of times. I screwed around drunk a couple of times when I was a teenager. I was in love once with someone who didn't want to live in my world. Is that what you meant?"

"Yeah." David studied the snow.

"No, it's not. You want to know where you were in all of this screwing around with other men. Was I thinking about you? Was I waiting for you? And why didn't I come and find you, take you captive, and tie you to a tree if I've loved you for years and years? And if I haven't loved you for years and years, why am I acting like I have?"

David stopped in the road, staring at him.

"You were always there, David. You're a happy memory of a time when...when I loved someone as a friend. And that memory was always a little possibility, you know? I kept you like a possibility in my mind. But I wasn't going to come find you. I knew where you were. I was waiting for you to come back here." Quanah Parker spread his arms wide and gestured around. "I can go hang in Sun Valley and sell socks to the beautiful people, but I come home, here, when I'm done playing in town. I've been waiting for you to come home."

David felt his throat get thick. "You've loved me for years and years?"

"So maybe I need to ask why you haven't been back to find me, David."

I didn't think I was good enough. I never thought you'd be waiting for me.

"You can take your time to answer," Quanah Parker said, slinging an arm around David's shoulders. "No rush. Think it through. You're not going anywhere, right? I'm not going to be happy if you just tell me you wandered in here. Like you landed in my bed by accident."

"I'm not going anywhere," David agreed.

“That reminds me. You better start your truck every couple of days, or you really won’t be going anywhere.” He looked up at the frosty gray sky. “Winter’s coming.”

* * *

David sat at Mr. Running Bear’s kitchen table, his feet toasty warm in the thickest, softest socks he had ever worn. They were, Quanah Parker had explained, made from the fleece of Crazy Horse, his first rescued alpaca. He and his father were reviewing their schedule for the rest of the week.

“I’ve got wood to take into town,” Mr. Running Bear said. “Then I’ve got a doctor’s appointment in Boise this afternoon.”

“Dad, you want me to drive you?”

He shook his head and dished some more sausage gravy onto David’s plate. “When are you going back to the shop?”

“Tomorrow. David and I are going fishing today; then I need to go into town tomorrow and check on the stores. I’ve got a couple pair of special-order mocs to deliver,” Quanah Parker said. “David, you want to come into Sun Valley with me? I’ll need to stay a couple of days. You can bring your computer and do your classes from the coffee shop.”

“Maybe I will,” David said, tugging on his beard. “I thought twice a week would be okay, but the kids taking this class, they seem very needy. They’ve gotten used to people answering e-mails in an hour or less, and they can’t seem to handle twice a week check-ins by the teacher. I mean, sometimes they sound almost hysterical by the time I actually respond to their questions.”

“What are you teaching?”

“Intro to American Poetry and a poetry-writing workshop.”

Mr. Running Bear raised his eyebrows. “That sounds very exciting!” David and Quanah Parker both looked at him until he laughed and threw up his hands. “Maybe you’ll have a few minutes to help me load that wood into my truck.”

“Of course,” David said, pulling his new gloves out of his pocket. “I got some good work gloves down at the general store.”

“The man in the store, did he look like an old cowboy? Silver-belly Stetson?”

David nodded. “He asked for a copy of *Sand Creek*.”

“You ought to give him one, David.” Mr. Running Bear pushed the plate away and sighed. “I shouldn’t have eaten this right before I have to go see the doctor about my cholesterol. I always think he can smell sausage on my clothes. That man in the store, he’s a poet too. A cowboy poet. You know they have those cowboy poet roundups around these parts, into Wyoming and Colorado, down into Texas. If he said he wanted to read your book, he might be able to help you get the word out. You want me to take him a copy when I bring the wood?”

“That would be great, Mr. Running Bear. I have some copies down at my cabin. I’ll run back and get one.”

“You can tell me where they are, and I’ll get one. If you don’t mind my going into your cabin.”

“Of course not. They’re in a box by the foot of my bed. Under some clothes.”

Quanah Parker stood up and started picking up the plates. “Take a look under the sink when you’re there, Dad.” He looked over at David. “If I remember right, my dad and your grandpa put the pipes in that cabin—what, fifteen years ago? Twenty?”

“So where are they now?”

Mr. Running Bear looked at him. “What do you mean? You don’t have any pipes?”

David shook his head.

“Your mom had somebody from Boise come up and winterize the cabin about five years ago,” Mr. Running Bear said. “They should have drained the pipes. Maybe they were cracked or something so they just pulled them out.” He exchanged a long look with Quanah Parker.

David stood up and started helping clear the table. “What? What’s wrong?”

Quanah Parker was rinsing plates in the sink.

“David, the thing is, that hand pump in your yard? By January it’ll be frozen solid. Son, you won’t have any water,” Mr. Running Bear said.

Quanah Parker waved them out of the kitchen, and David went around back and helped load split firewood into the back of Mr. Running Bear’s old Silverado. He had an automatic splitter that used hydraulic force to split the rounds of wood, and David studied it with a longing that was almost physical.

“I’m a professional,” Mr. Running Bear explained. “Axes and chainsaws are a young man’s game.”

“You aren’t sick, are you? Your heart’s okay?”

He leaned over the back of the pickup, wearing the same battered plaid jacket he had worn when David was a kid. “I’m fine, David. Nothing for you boys to worry about.”

An hour later, and David was standing in the Salmon River, the rushing water up to his knees, watching Quanah Parker swing a fly rod over his head. David was wearing Mr. Running Bear’s waders, and they were too big for him, but he could maneuver fairly well, and his tootsies were cozy and warm thanks to Crazy Horse’s socks and his new buffalo fishing moccasins. His tootsies were warm, but the rest of him was settling in for a long day of miserable cold, which he was willing to put up with so he could watch Quanah Parker looking so happy.

“What are we fishing for? Salmon? Is this the right time of year?”

Quanah Parker shook his head. “No more salmon in the Salmon River. The wild salmon have been gone for years. All that’s left are the little fishery salmon the Fish and Wildlife people hatch and put back into the waters every year. But we might find a rainbow trout. This may be the last fishing for this year. I’ll be busy between now and Christmas.”

“Can I help?”

At first David thought Quanah Parker hadn't heard him. Then he turned around and gave David a long look. "Yes, if you want to. But don't you have your own things you need to do?"

"I can write poetry anytime. In fact, I do write poetry anytime. All the time. You have to work on it, but you can't push it, either."

"Poetry? I'm not talking about poetry. Why did you come up here?"

Quanah Parker cast his line again, trying to hit next to a little tangle of rocks and tree roots he had pointed out earlier. David stared at his broad shoulders, the way his strong back disappeared into his waders. "What? I told you already, remember?"

"No, that's why you left Boise. That's why you ran. You said you wanted to spend the winter in your grandpa's cabin. What did you think was going to be different at the end of the winter?"

David scratched his beard. He was really starting to dislike it. It felt itchy and tangled, and he was constantly messing with it, which was driving him crazy. "Everything. I thought I would be different. Stronger. But I'm not really sure I thought it out carefully," he said. "I thought I would have some time to think about my plans. I've been working toward teaching and writing in an academic setting for years now, and I don't really like it much. I wanted to think if this was really what I wanted to do. But there was something else too. I felt like I wanted to test myself. You know, see what I could do on my own."

"So what do you think so far?"

David felt his shoulders sag. Did Quanah Parker want him to admit he was a screwup, a failure, as likely to freeze to death as burn his cabin down by putting hot coals in the shitter? David fumbled with his borrowed flies, retied one on the end of his line. "I think maybe I overestimated my skills. And underestimated the money I would need to get the cabin prepared for the winter. And I wasn't expecting you."

Quanah Parker jerked his line, then cursed under his breath. "What do you mean, you weren't expecting me? Did you forget I lived here?"

"Of course not. I just... I was afraid to hope you still wanted to be friends. I wasn't expecting to..." David felt his face turn bright red. "I wasn't expecting the whole foot deal; that's for sure."

Quanah Parker cast his line again, and David thought he could detect some annoyance in the lines of his shoulders. "So are you still determined to go through with this? This testing yourself against the wilderness deal? Or are you ready to come to your senses?"

"Why would I not go through with it?" David's cast caught on the edge of Quanah Parker's waders, and Quanah Parker reached down and pulled the hook free, then flung it into the water with an irritable flick of his wrist.

"You don't have water or an adequate source of heat come winter. It's still autumn, David. What are you going to do when it's fifty below and the snow covers the windows and that little woodstove can't keep up? Those woodstoves pull air in to burn, and when it drops much below zero, they can't keep up. You don't have plumbing. You don't have a shower. Are you going to shovel a path to the outhouse? You've had time to look around now. It's not doable. You can't..."

"I can't what?"

Quanah Parker turned around and stared at him. "You aren't a mountain man. You're a poet. It's fun to go camping, David, but you can't live the winter in your grandpa's cabin without killing yourself."

His tone of voice suggested that the subject was closed. David felt his eyes fill with tears, but he didn't know if he was more hurt or mad. He wasn't expecting to be perfect at everything, but he was getting better. He could chop wood. He could cook biscuits on top of the stove. And why was Quanah Parker yelling at him? What was the point of forcing him to admit he was a failure?

Well, he wasn't going to do it. He wasn't going to give up and run back to Boise. Or anywhere. He wasn't going anywhere. He had made a commitment, and he was going to stick to it. He waded back to shore, climbed up on the bank, and started working his way out of the waders.

Quanah Parker looked at him. "Where are you going?"

"Home."

"David, you don't understand—"

"Yes, I do. You were speaking English. I understood you perfectly."

"I was trying to tell you that you could come live with me. That I know who you are. You don't have to keep beating your head against this wall, trying to prove something to me."

"I was trying to prove something to myself, not to you."

"Oh, right. This is about you, not me. You didn't know I was here. You weren't expecting the whole foot thing."

David felt the wet riverbank soaking through his jeans. Laundry. That was another thing he hadn't figured out. "Quanah Parker..."

"What?"

"Speaking of you and me, can you tell me even one reason that someone like you would want to live with someone like me?"

"No. Figure it out for yourself."

David was sure that once again he had failed to pick up his cue. He had missed something, the conversation had gone awry, and he had spoiled Quanah Parker's fishing. "I'm sorry I ruined your day fishing," he said.

There was no response from the stiff back standing in the middle of the river. David remembered a time when he and Quanah Parker had stood back to back, waiting for the soldiers to come. Now he was sitting in the freezing mud, and Quanah Parker was standing alone in the river, his back unprotected.

David could see three big rocks jutting out of the river. They were a perfect path from him to Quanah Parker. But what did they mean? What did they symbolize in the bigger picture? David wondered if they were like three challenges he would have to face before he would be worthy to live with Quanah Parker and be his love. He was obviously not up to that challenge right now. Because he was an idiot with no pipes and an outhouse full of frozen shit. Okay, the first rock was coming here, giving up everything and coming here. Because he'd known Quanah Parker was here. Of course he'd known. But he had been secretly hoping for a miracle, a savior to come tie him to a tree, and that wasn't fair. That was not the way a man should behave. Okay, so he had two more challenges. David suspected this was number two. Which way to go? He needed to think. He stood up, maneuvered to the first rock, then stepped gingerly to rock number two. "Are you still talking to me? Please don't be mad."

Quanah Parker turned around, alarm in his face, threw down his rod, and reached out to David with both arms. “David, what are you doing? It’s wet. Those moccasins are too slippery—”

And it was like a self-fulfilling prophesy, David thought, feeling himself start a cartwheeling slip and slide. He wasn’t ready for rock number two, and rock number two was about to toss his ass into the river. He crashed over backward, and a nasty little hidden rock was waiting just about where his head landed.

Chapter Eight

“Don’t yell at me, Quanah Parker.”

His head was pounding, and he was lying on his back in the river.

Quanah Parker brushed the curls from his forehead, ran his hands over David’s skull. “You’ve got a goose egg,” he said, pressing the tender spot on the back of David’s head. “Was I yelling at you?”

“It felt like it.”

“I’m sorry, David. I’ll have to remember you’re a tender boy.” Quanah Parker’s face was very close, and he reached down and kissed him, mouth warm against David’s freezing skin. “You ready to get up?”

“I guess so.” He reached a hand up, and Quanah Parker grabbed his wrist and pulled. He rocked a little on his feet and clutched Quanah Parker’s shirt. “Okay, I’m not right. I need to sit down.”

“It’s too cold to stay in the river.” Quanah Parker picked him up and waded out of the river, then set him down gently on the riverbank and stared into his face. “You’re looking a little shocky. Let me get you to my place and warmed up, okay? Then we’ll see if we need to go in to the clinic.”

Quanah Parker carried him home and put him into the hot shower, climbed in with him, and held him against his chest. David rested back against him, then turned in his arms and put his head down, hiding his face. “I’m so stupid. I mean, I never get it right. I always screw it up and make people mad, and I don’t know what I do or what I don’t do, but it’s something.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Men. I just don’t get this whole relationship thing. So I’m not blaming you. It’s me, not you. I wouldn’t be surprised…”

“Settle down. Nobody’s leaving. You just got here. You think I’m going to let you leave?” His mouth was warm against David’s ear. “I’ll tie you to a tree if you try to leave.”

* * *

They had a quiet, warm afternoon in the workshop. David was wearing Quanah Parker’s thick old bathrobe while his clothes went through the washer and dryer. Quanah Parker put Neil Young on the CD player, and he made socks while David learned to use the spinning wheel. Every hour or so he pulled David’s face around and let the afternoon light fall into his eyes to check him for concussion.

“You don’t understand about the foot thing, David.”

“I’m okay with it, though. I’m having a good time thinking up erotic toe haiku.”

There was a long silence. “Well. Good. I’m glad. But what I wanted to explain to you is, I have a loyalty to inappropriate longings. They fill my life with surprise. It’s not an obsession. It’s a choice.”

David thought about this. “Do you mind if I borrow that sentence? The one about loyalty and inappropriate longings. It’s so wild and unexpected.”

“Sure.” His voice sounded a little tart. “Maybe you can even think about what this means and if it has anything to do with you.” Quanah Parker had switched yarn to a brilliant Christmas red. Socks were rolling out the bottom on his Legare. “Don’t forget we’re going to Sun Valley tomorrow. You have any…other clothes? I just saw flannel shirts and sweats.”

“Not really,” David said, fingering the beard. “I’m thinking about shaving,” he said. “What do you think?”

“I’ve got rug burn on my chin.”

“If I shave, will I be presentable for Sun Valley?”

“How about this?” Quanah Parker parried. “You shave, and I’ll buy you a nice shirt to go with your jeans. And I’ll flip you for a haircut. I have a rep to maintain.”

“What kind of rep?”

“I’m a difficult man full of inappropriate longings. Don’t you want to make all my old boyfriends jealous?”

David stared up at the ceiling. Did he? He wasn’t sure. Most likely he would just start feeling inadequate if he came face-to-face with Quanah Parker’s old boyfriends. He didn’t think he could make anyone jealous, not even with a shave and a haircut and a new shirt. Unless, he thought with some small satisfaction, they were half-assed poets. In which case he would be happy to shove a couple of rhymed couplets up their inadequate—

Quanah Parker sighed. “David, don’t think much.”

* * *

Toe Haiku #2

pink as a berry

blushing hot against my tongue

David was beginning to understand Quanah Parker's fascination with inappropriate longings. Quanah Parker had draped himself down the length of his bed, and David had sat on the end, cross-legged, and pulled Quanah Parker's feet into his lap. Quanah Parker's toes were lovely studied up close, soft and curvy and brown, and David thought they tasted like some rare wood. Anyone, he decided, would embrace inappropriate longings if they were attached to the elegant feet and long legs and huge chest of Quanah Parker. He lifted Quanah Parker's foot, pressed a kiss to the arch, moved up, and took the big toe between his teeth.

It was kisses and his soft mouth—lips and tongue—that made Quanah Parker start to wiggle, and when David started sucking on that toe, lovely slow sucks, he had a perfect view of Quanah Parker getting turned on, stretching and moving his hips, his cock rising dark between his legs, touching his belly. He arched his back, the long line of his neck thrown back, his hand reaching for his cock, then stroking up and down to the rhythm of David's mouth against his toe. David watched his breath come faster, chest rising and falling, a delicate flush of color rising on his neck, and he reached for David's chest with his other foot, toes pressed hard against David's heart. Quanah Parker started to come, moans from his throat in rhythm with his hand, and David's mouth on his toe. David held Quanah Parker's foot tightly against his chest so he could feel the excited beating of Quanah Parker's heart all the way down in his beautiful brown toes.

* * *

David woke to the smell of bacon frying and coffee perking. Mr. Running Bear had brought a gigantic bottle of flaxseed oil capsules home from Boise and explained to David that he was going to save the beloved bacon and sausage in his diet by overwhelming the saturated fats with omega-3s. David learned quite a bit about DHA and EPA, and he tried a couple of the flaxseed capsules with his coffee. Mr. Running Bear patted him on the shoulder, teased him about the mountain of food in his cabin, and told him he was a good boy.

After a breakfast of bacon and scrambled eggs with green chilies, David repaired to Quanah Parker's bathroom. He put a couple of paper towels down on the edge of the sink so he wouldn't plug up the drain, and he shaved himself for nearly half an hour before he thought he was fit for Sun Valley. His new alpaca socks were dry again after their dunking in the river and so were his fishing mocs. Quanah Parker set his boots next to the bed, but David told him he wanted to wear his mocs, and he shoved his elkskin bedroom mocs into Quanah Parker's overnight bag. David could tell he was pleased. Something about wearing Quanah Parker's moccasins made him feel like he was grounded. His feet gripped the earth in a different way. David thought he would never wear anything on his feet except moccasins again.

Quanah Parker looked over at him from behind the steering wheel of his big pickup truck. He had an empty stock trailer hooked up behind; he'd told David they had an alpaca to bring home on this trip. David felt himself color slightly at the approving look on Quanah Parker's dark face. Quanah Parker was dressed in jeans, fancy moccasin boots, and a beaded buckskin shirt laced up the front with leather.

"Is this what your dad calls your cigar-store-Indian look? You look like something out of the movies."

"It helps me sell moccasins for considerably more than imitation Indian moccasins," Quanah Parker assured him. "They're good mocs, though. Most of the mocs on the market are just cheap slippers. Paired with alpaca socks, I can practically guarantee you happy feet. People always want to take a picture of me in buckskins," he continued. "Then, feeling some sort of residual white guilt, they come in and drop a wad on mocs and socks. Hey! Speaking of white guilt, why don't you sell some copies of *Sand Creek* in the store?"

"That would be great," David said. *White guilt?* "I thought I would check out the local bookstores and see if they had copies or wanted to arrange a signing or something."

Quanah Parker studied him with a critical eye. "Let's get that haircut first," he said. "And I'll go with you down to the bookstore. I know the guy who runs it."

"Is he an old boyfriend?" David wondered if this would make him more or less likely to help.

"No. But we small business owners stick together. Don't be looking for old boyfriends under every rock. I've spent most of the last few years working, David. Just like you." Quanah Parker was in a very good mood this morning, and David surmised it was because he loved the new toe haiku written in his honor and acted out with passion. "We're shopping and getting the haircut in Ketchum. Good-quality stuff there, but prices are better than Sun Valley. I've got a little studio in Ketchum for when Dad or I have to stay overnight."

Quanah Parker pulled into the parking lot of a hair shop in the bottom of an old Victorian mansion. Inside, the crystal chandeliers and plush burgundy crushed-velvet sofas were a perfect foil for the guy who came sweeping out to greet them. He hugged Quanah Parker longer than was necessary and rubbed his hands over quite a bit of soft buckskin-clad back. He looked like Adam Lambert at forty—black steampunk clothes, fat diamond earrings—and David felt a touch of alarm that this gorgeous man was about to somehow transform him into someone fashionable. He was fussed into a chair that looked like an old dentist's chair re-covered in red leather, and the man pumped him up slowly with a foot lift, staring at him with laughing eyes.

"Who *is* he?" the man asked, stroking David's cheek. "You need a facial, baby. Did you shave with a pocketknife?"

"He's a poet," Quanah Parker said. "And my best friend when we were kids."

"You look good in love," the man commented, and Quanah Parker ignored him.

"I'm Damien," he said, bending over and staring into David's face. "Tell me what it was like being Quanah Parker's best friend when you were kids." He was beautiful up close, with perfectly applied eyeliner and pale pink lip gloss. David thought his face was kind, underneath all the makeup.

"He would stalk me through the woods and capture me," David said. "Sometimes he would let me help him put on his war paint."

"My God." Damien breathed. "Quanah Parker, you've brought your soul mate. How can I thank you?"

"Do something about that rough beard, and cut his hair, I guess." Quanah Parker put a big hand on the man's shoulder. "You want to party tonight? I thought I'd take my boy out."

"Sure," Damien said, and David was left to wonder about this secret gay code: *You want to party?* He hoped Quanah Parker had not just asked this guy with blue eyes and pink lips if he would give him a blowjob. David suspected Damien was game and was in fact prepared to drop to his knees right then.

Damien was back to studying his face. "A poet. A poet. We need to keep these brown curls, then. A little longer than I would usually recommend, but we don't have enough tumbled brown curls in the world. And what a face you have, so tender, and those wide brown eyes. No wonder Quanah Parker loves you."

David didn't know what to say and looked to Quanah Parker to rescue him, but he had been abandoned. Quanah Parker was leaning back on one of the sofas, reading a magazine, and Damien whipped the chair around and tilted David back.

"Leave everything to me. Close your eyes, young poet." And Damien dropped sweet-smelling hot towels over his face.

An hour later, David gazed up into Damien's eyes again. Quanah Parker had a lazy, satisfied smile on his face, like this was what he had been expecting, and David looked up at himself in the mirror. He looked just like himself, only...shinier. Sort of a healthy glow. His hair was definitely bouncier. He looked at Quanah Parker. "Is this okay?"

Quanah Parker nodded. Damien leaned over, and David was reminded again of the kindness in his eyes. "I am very happy to meet you, David," he said and dropped a soft kiss onto David's mouth. "A brown bomber, Quanah Parker, if you're going to shop for clothes. The color of his eyes."

"Yeah, we're going to Jo Jo's place. Thanks, Damien."

"You're very welcome, my friend." He accepted a stack of bills from Quanah Parker's hand. "I'll see you two tonight."

"What are we doing tonight?" They were back in the truck, and David turned the rearview mirror around to look at his hair. Quanah Parker moved it back so he could see.

"There's a club I know up here. Friendly sort of place."

"Thanks for the haircut and everything."

"I've known Damien a long time. He's a good guy."

"Yeah, I liked him too. What's Jo Jo's? It isn't too expensive, is it? I don't want you to buy my clothes."

"I'll get you a couple of things," Quanah Parker said, and it seemed that the subject was closed for discussion.

A couple of things turned out to be an indigo blue silk shirt, a brown leather bomber jacket with fleece inside, and a chunky fisherman's turtleneck sweater. David checked the label in the truck and nearly fainted when he read *100% cashmere*. Quanah Parker turned to him and pressed David's hand to his mouth. "Thanks for indulging me," he said. "That was fun." And there was nothing David could say to that. The cashmere sweater was the softest and warmest thing he had ever held in his arms, other than Quanah Parker, and he pulled it on over his T-shirt from Opium's Literary Death Match. He had been the clear winner of the LDM, and it felt good to have that remembered triumph next to his skin.

David spent the drive up to Sun Valley thinking about his planned book of poetry. He did enjoy about five minutes of uninterrupted bliss when Quanah Parker put his big hand down on David's thigh in a way that was both possessive and tender. Haiku leapt from David's tongue with happiness, and Quanah Parker was grinning through the windshield by the time David settled back down to think. His original plan to write about his year in Stanley was being superseded by the image from the river—three rocks, a path from himself to Quanah Parker. He wondered again about the second rock. Would it be something he could work toward, or would he just have to be prepared, and the test would swoop down on him unexpectedly, and he would either fail or move on to the third rock?

Maybe it would be some combination of both. He still loved the titles he had picked out, though. Sawtooth was such a beautiful word for a mountain range, so fierce. But he pulled out his memo book and pen and made a note of a couple of other possibilities—*Three Rocks in the Salmon River*. No, too obvious. How about something simple that still had the meaning he was looking for? *A Year in Stanley*. Would anyone recognize Stanley? He had chosen *Sand Creek* for the title of the first book because it was not one of the better-known massacres. *A Year in the Sawtooths*. No, that wasn't right. He wasn't a mountain man, as Quanah Parker had reminded him. No need to pretend. He was...he was just himself. A poet. Trying to live in Stanley for a year without catastrophe. Okay, *A Year in Stanley*.

How would Quanah Parker feel if he wrote about him? If he wrote truthfully about what was happening between them?

"Would you be uncomfortable if I wrote poetry about us? And it was published?"

Quanah Parker thought about this for a long moment, rubbing his chin. "No, I would not be uncomfortable."

"Thanks." Okay, so he could write about his year in Stanley using the framework of the three rocks. He had never considered writing erotic poetry before, mainly because what he knew about erotic love and the joys of another man's body were, up until very recently, small, gray, damp ideas, not the wild, blushing, rose-brown heat of making love to Quanah Parker's toes. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat and adjusted the seat belt to ride looser across his lap. Quanah Parker, Quanah Parker—what wonderful sounds and rhythms in his name. David could say his name all day. There had never been a more perfect name for the lover of a poet.

Quanah Parker pulled his truck around to the back of an old brick building in downtown Sun Valley. He was right—his store had a perfect location. Everyone in town would walk right by the doors. The bricks looked soft, an old rose color, and the wooden door and window trim were painted dark green. The windows were full of socks in every color.

The young woman behind the counter was lovely, native, with a chunky turquoise necklace against her brown throat. She smiled at Quanah Parker and turned back to the woman at the counter. "I think your moccasins just walked through the door!"

Quanah Parker went into cigar-store-Indian mode. In two minutes he had the customer sitting in a comfortable chair and was kneeling in front of her and slipping the moccasins on over her feet. Ravens on the toes, white buckskin. Quanah Parker was giving the ball of her foot a little massage. David put the rest of the boxes and the bag of socks on the counter and held out his hand. "Hi, I'm David."

The woman behind the counter reached for his hand. "Hi, David. I'm Crystal Swan."

"What a lovely name."

"I picked it out in college. Up until then I was Ethel." They grinned at each other, and then she took the socks out of the bag and started sorting them.

"Where's the closest coffee shop, Crystal?"

"Two doors down."

"Will you tell him that's where I am?"

"Sure." She studied his sweater. "That's gorgeous. Is that cashmere?"

David felt his face turn pink, nodded, and slipped out the door. He'd better leave Quanah Parker alone to work. He must have spent five hundred bucks already today. Or more. The cashmere was so wonderfully soft. It would be hard to go back to being a poor poet after wearing cashmere.

In the virtual classroom, a couple of conversations had gotten out of hand. Things had deteriorated into snide comments about the difference between being published in e-zines and on paper, and he was sorry to see that by far most of the topics of conversation between the poets in the studio class were about publishing, not writing. He read through their submissions, then wrote a general ass kicking to the group. "*None of you have written anything worth being published. Is this your best work? You get published, and someone may read that poem and never read another poem of yours ever. That may be the only chance you get with that reader,*

to share your mind and your ideas. You need to stop thinking about what poetry can do for you and start thinking about what you owe poetry. Your best. Every time. Did anybody even do the assigned readings?"

David felt a little guilty. He couldn't just swoop in like a turkey vulture once a week and pick over their wasted bones. They needed a strong poetic voice to lead them out of the wilderness of American obsession with money and fame and into the cool blue waters of art. He spent a couple of hours reviewing poems, offering private words of encouragement to sweeten the general ass chewing. The Intro to American Poetry class was even worse. Two students submitted identical essays. Another spent his whole essay finding marks of alcoholism in each poem he read. One asked if he could do his essay on Byron, seemingly forgetting that Byron was not American. How could so many spelling errors exist in essays written in Word? They clearly weren't smart enough to turn off spell-check. Grammar, spelling, sentence structure, logical theme development—the nation was illiterate! These were college students! David refrained from tearing at his curls, since Quanah Parker had just paid for him to have a new haircut. By six o'clock, when Quanah Parker came to fetch him, he felt like he'd spent the day being beaten by sticks.

"We've got twenty minutes for supper," Quanah Parker said. "I'm keeping the shop open till eight. Then we're going dancing. How about a sandwich from Pita Pocket?"

"Sounds good," David said. "I think I'll treat you. You want a bag of Sun Chips with your pocket, big spender?"

Quanah Parker laughed and shook his head. "Get me a gyro with everything, okay? And a bottle of water. I need to get back to the shop and let Crystal go home."

Chapter Nine

Walking back to the store with a couple of gyros, David thought that spending all day talking about poetry and teaching poetry and kicking the butts of budding poets was a guaranteed way to drive the poetry totally out of a person's mind. It was solitude and peace that allowed the mind to slip its gears a bit, run off on different rails. He didn't think it was going to work. He didn't like the college students. They were lazy and self-absorbed and obsessed with money. He needed to find a different way. And he couldn't live in Quanah Parker's lap making socks. That was a recipe for disaster. They would take each other for granted, start becoming annoyed and irritable, and he would not be happy if he wasn't an equal, supportive member of the partnership. Okay, so what to do? He pushed open the door of the shop and looked up, his heart freezing in his chest.

Quanah Parker was leaning against his front counter, and a man was standing very close to him, too close to be buying socks. While David watched, the man reached for Quanah Parker's hair, pushed a long black strand of it back over his shoulder. Surely the man knew David was standing there. It was a gesture of possession, and David didn't like it. Neither did Quanah Parker.

He stepped away and took one of the bags out of David's hands. "David, this is an old friend of mine, Colton Clay. Colton, David Miller."

He was beautiful, with huge blue eyes and chestnut hair tumbling to his shoulders and a sweeping mustache. He was a cowboy, a modern-day Buffalo Bill, a real mountain man. David thought he looked familiar in that vague way of people you had seen on TV. Doing commercials. After his morning trip to Jo Jos, David also noticed the sheepskin coat and the hand-tooled Tony Lama boots. Beautiful and rich, and he was confident enough in Quanah Parker to touch his hair in public, in his place of business. David thought back to what Quanah Parker had told him. Something about a man he had loved, but who didn't want to live his life. This was him. David felt like his tongue was half frozen. He held out the plastic bag of food. "Would you like my gyro?"

The man looked surprised and turned to Quanah Parker. "He's a vegetarian," Quanah Parker said but didn't offer to run out and fetch some carrot sticks.

"You found you a little mountain man, Quanah Parker? Nice. Up from Boise for the weekend to play in the woods?" He was grinning like he'd made a joke, but David could hear the sneer behind his words. Quanah Parker put a restraining hand on his arm.

"David is a poet," he said.

"Assistant professor at Boise State," David said. "On temporary—" Quanah Parker gave him a little pinch, and David wondered, not for the first time, what made his tongue run like a river. "*Little mountain man*"? What a prick.

The man stepped back from both of them, and David thought he looked annoyed now. "I'll be in town a couple of weeks filming. Give me a call if you're free." He glanced down at David, a dismissive look on his face.

Quanah Parker nodded. "Nice to see you, Colton."

"Yeah. You too."

David stared at Quanah Parker until he stopped unwrapping his gyro. "Don't look at me like that. You've been staring at me with those brown eyes since you were five. And what are you doing, giving away your supper?" And he reached over, put his big hand against David's cheek, and held it there a moment.

David turned his face into Quanah Parker's hand, pressed a sweet kiss into the palm.

"So how were the poetry classes?"

"Grim," David admitted, unwrapping the paper from his gyro.

"Have you ever taught poetry to young kids?"

David shook his head, surprised. "How young?"

Quanah Parker shrugged. "Seems like kids are just bursting with art. I go into the school sometimes in winter, teach printmaking. The kids are so open to new ideas. You know there's a one-room schoolhouse still in Stanley. Only goes to eighth grade, though. After that they have to go to Challis and stay in the boarding school. Sometimes the teachers get squirrely and split, and they hunt around for subs."

"Old boyfriend?" David was not distracted by talk of one-room schoolhouses.

"Yep." He reached out, pulled David into his chest. "Want to fool around?"

"You need your toes sucked?"

Quanah Parker pinched his butt, hard. "You need your ass kicked?" And David was flooded with love suddenly; he wrapped his arms so tightly around Quanah Parker that he squeezed a little grunt out of him. The shop door opened with the tinkle of a silver bell, but he didn't let go until Quanah Parker said, "He's a poet," and David turned to see a group of three elderly ladies studying them with interested faces.

they changed in the back room of Quanah Parker's shop, and David was surprised and pleased at how he looked in the new blue shirt with the brown leather jacket slung over it. Quanah Parker, who already looked like a movie-star Indian, let David brush out his hair. Then Quanah Parker brushed his teeth, passed out pieces of cinnamon gum, and they were ready to party.

Quanah Parker left his truck with the alpaca trailer attached to the back in an empty lot in Ketchum, and they walked back downtown a block and pushed through the doors of a little pub with very bright windows called Henry's. The place was golden and warm inside and smelled like apple cider and cinnamon. There was a tiny dance floor in the back, but most of the space was taken up by a big horseshoe-shaped bar. Men were crowded against each other, and the mood was happy. Damien saw them from across the bar and shouted a greeting. He was wearing a rose pink sweater and jeans and had his arm flung around the waist of an older man with a blond flattop and a tattoo of a little red devil on his neck. Quanah Parker pulled David along and introduced him to all the men who came up to hug and exclaim over how long it had been.

"It's apple jack," Quanah Parker said, passing him a cup of spiced cider with a slug of apple brandy. David noticed glances, little sidelong looks out of shining eyes, and he wondered how much of it was for him, in his new haircut and shirt, and how much was envy that Quanah Parker kept him pinned close against his big body. He saw the old boyfriend, looking grim with his arms crossed over his chest, standing among a crowd of good-looking, heavy-drinking men. Colton stared back at David for a long moment, and David was shocked when he realized he had made an enemy.

When Neil Young came over the sound system, Quanah Parker pulled him out to the dance floor. His head fit perfectly in the hollow where Quanah Parker's collarbone swooped into his shoulder like a wing. One hand held him around the waist, and the other moved slowly up his back until Quanah Parker's fingers were tangled in his brown curls. The other men on the dance floor seemed to give them a little extra space, as if their happiness created a cloud around them. David turned his head, looked up into Quanah Parker's face, and yawned.

Quanah Parker laughed, pulled him even closer. "I better get you home if I'm going to see any loving tonight."

David's face flushed with heat at the idea of loving Quanah Parker, and his cock rose in his jeans and pressed up against Quanah Parker's hip. A hand slid down his back, clutched his ass. He almost moaned out loud, had to bite down on his lip and squeeze his eyes tightly shut. He wasn't going to hump anyone's leg in a gay bar, no matter how much Quanah Parker was trying to tempt him.

"Come on. Let's go. I want you. I want you bent over underneath me, David."

David stared up into his hungry dark face, shocked at how ferocious he looked, and Quanah Parker kissed him, crushed his mouth under his.

The cold air outside was a welcome shock in his face, and they held hands going down the dark street. Quanah Parker reached into his pocket for his keys, but when they got to the empty lot where they had left the truck, there were men there, five or six of them, trying to unhook the trailer.

"David," he said, and just that fast they were surrounded. David stood back-to-back with him, men in a ring around them, and a big man wearing a camo ball cap and jacket stepped inside the circle.

"Well, ain't that sweet. You boys were holding hands! You must have been dirty dancing down at Henry's, left this big old truck on my lot."

"It's not your lot," Quanah Parker said. "It's the city's lot, and I have a tag to park here with a stock trailer. Why don't you get the fuck out of my face."

The man grinned at him but didn't speak. He walked around until he was face-to-face with David. "You got your big queer Indian sidekick, huh? You let Tonto do the talking for both of you?"

David felt Quanah Parker's back stiffen at the insult. Rage and fury spread over David's chest, fueled a bit by apple jack, that this cracker with bad teeth would have the nerve—the *fuckin' gall!*—to insult Quanah Parker. To hurt his feelings? *How dare he?* And David lashed out at him, a perfect kick in the balls, gave a wild, ferocious shout as the man went down, and Quanah Parker pressed the alarm button on the keys in his hand, set the truck howling, lights flashing, and most of the men scattered into the night. David aimed another kick at the man rolling on the ground, but his toe landed with a crunch on a hipbone.

Quanah Parker pulled him back. "Whoa, cowboy."

When he looked up, Damien was there, a tiny silver derringer pressed against the temple of the last man standing. Damien looked gorgeous and dangerous, Sam Spade in rose pink cashmere. He nodded and stepped away, and the man scrambled out of his way and bolted across the parking lot. "Well, that was interesting."

David stared at him, unable to say a word.

Damien winked at him. "Hey, this is Idaho. We're all packing, baby."

They walked back up the street for some reviving apple jack, but David's foot was starting to throb, and after a bit he whispered into Quanah Parker's ear that he thought they better head for home. David was very afraid he had broken his toe.

In the truck, Quanah Parker said thanks for defending him but warned that the fishing mocs were not designed for kicking. "You think you need an X-ray?"

"Yes. I think I do. But why don't we just wait till morning?"

"We can go now."

"I just hate to waste it if you're in the mood for some loving," David said, putting a shy hand on Quanah Parker's thigh.

Quanah Parker raised his hand to his mouth. "We've got plenty of time."

Chapter Ten

David managed to talk Quanah Parker out of an X-ray. They pulled up outside a little complex of condos, and Quanah Parker opened the door to a tiny studio with a Murphy bed. "I stay here a couple of nights a week," he said. "Just when the store is particularly busy. During the summer it's hard to pry me away from Stanley."

"Most of your business is from the ski people?"

"Yeah, but business is really good year-round. The city does a lot of professional conferences during the summer, and something about this place—the best of the Wild West and the Rockies put together—people drop a bundle on my moccasins and alpaca socks, and they treasure them forever. They really are that well made, but it's the romance of the deal too."

David pulled his fishing mocs off and peeled back the sock. His toe was slightly swollen and turning purple. "Quanah Parker, will you hand me my bedroom moccasins? I put them in your bag. I think elk will feel really good against my toe."

Quanah Parker sat down on the end of the bed and pulled David's feet into his lap. He studied them and pressed a gentle kiss to the top of the injured big toe. "I think it's jammed but not broken," he said with the air of an expert in inappropriate longings. He slid a glance at David from the corner of his eye. "You've got fuzz from Crazy Horse between your toes. I think I'll get a warm washcloth and clean you up." David felt something hot moving in the pit of his stomach. "Get undressed, David."

He was shaking when he stood up and hopped on one foot to skin out of his jeans. There was something in Quanah Parker's voice that he couldn't remember hearing before, something rich and melty like dark chocolate.

Quanah Parker came out of the bathroom with a washcloth in his hand. He seemed to have lost his clothes somewhere, and David watched his cock bobbing gently, reaching for the sky. He climbed onto the bed and got nose to nose with David. "Thank you for today."

"For what? I should be thanking you."

He shook his head. "I liked spending time with you up here. It felt good introducing you to my friends. You kicked some dirtbag in the balls because you thought he had hurt my feelings." He hesitated. "You don't seem as tentative about you and me. Has something changed in your mind?"

David had a picture of three rocks in the river and Quanah Parker standing in the water, waiting for him, his back unprotected. Somehow he had made it to rock number two. He wiggled his toes in his mind. He felt steady. He was good. "I don't know how to say it."

"Because you aren't very good with words?" Quanah Parker's voice was a bit sardonic.

"I think that the time will come when I'll be worthy of you. When I'm a man you can be proud to be with. I feel... I don't know. I just hope you'll be patient with me."

Quanah Parker stared down at him. "When you're worthy of me? David, what..." Then he stopped talking. He pulled David's feet onto his lap again, ran the soft, warm washcloth between his toes, sucked on them one by one.

David felt like his body was floating a couple of inches above the bed. He reached for Quanah Parker's cock, settled it against the bottom of his foot, snug against the arch, the way Quanah Parker liked it. But Quanah Parker rolled him over onto his stomach, climbed on top of him, and David felt that shaky feeling in his stomach again because Quanah Parker was biting his neck, his hands moving roughly over David's back, down to his ass.

"I've never done this before."

Quanah Parker stopped for a moment, his big body covering David's. He didn't say anything.

"You can do it, Quanah Parker. I trust you."

Quanah Parker made a noise deep in his throat, something between a moan and a growl, and he lifted David up around the waist. "Get on your knees, then," he said, and he reached into the drawer of the bedside table and grabbed a tube of lubricant. "David, you need to relax, okay? Don't be scared. I won't hurt you." Quanah Parker's voice was deeper than David had ever heard it, his breath rasping roughly in his throat.

He stood up at the end of the bed, pulled David toward him, and David could see that when he was on his hands and knees, Quanah Parker could stand behind him and...could stand behind him and touch him. Move inside him. David felt his cock thrumming with heat against his belly, and he leaned back, let his ass rest against Quanah Parker's pelvis for just a moment. It was enough, and Quanah Parker reached for his waist, strong fingers digging into his skin, leaned over him until a sheet of wild black hair fell over David's back and shoulders. David could smell it, the smell of that hair he had loved all his life. There was an ache, something empty deep inside him, and David could feel it growing and growing until he thought he would die if Quanah Parker didn't fill it. He rocked back against him. "I want it to be you."

He felt big hands trembling against his skin, pulling him apart and seating that long, arrowlike cock against his ass. The lube was cold.

"David, press back against me."

He did, felt the tip of Quanah Parker's cock slide inside, and he rocked back harder. Quanah Parker started moving his hips, pushing gently into David's body. "More and more and more," David said. "Get as deep as you can." And then Quanah Parker hit something, some wild, sweet spot of nerves deep inside. David arched back, his semen spurting wildly over his belly, and pumped his hips, ramming himself back against Quanah Parker.

Quanah Parker grabbed him closer, saying, "Wait, wait, slow down. I can't..." But it was too late. Quanah Parker's hips moved roughly, and he lifted up, threw his head back, his black hair flying wildly around. The sound he made deep in his throat wrapped around David's heart like a fist.

Toe Haiku #3

prodding, insistent

fat purple plum of a toe

I drop to my knees

* * *

The next morning, Quanah Parker had abandoned his cigar-store Indian getup and looked more like himself—jeans tucked into fleece-lined duck boots, a red and black plaid flannel shirt with a black fleece vest. "I need to spend a couple of hours in the store doing paperwork before we head out to the farm."

"What farm?"

"This old man I know lives near here; he's just one stop along the underground railroad for alpacas in need. What are you going to do?"

"I thought I would put on my new shirt and leather jacket and go hang around the bookstore, see if I can work up the nerve to talk to someone about carrying copies of *Sand Creek*."

"Want me to go with you? I know the guy down at Sun Valley Books. He's just a half block down the road from me."

David gave him a quick hug around the waist. "Thanks, I'll go alone. You do your paperwork. I'm actually..."

"What?"

“Looking forward to getting home.”

Quanah Parker pulled his hair behind his head and secured it with a thick elastic band. “Me too. It’s always fun when we bring a new baby home, see how the herd accepts him. Oh, that reminds me.” He reached into his gym bag and threw David a pair of socks. “To match the new shirt. And try not to get hurt today. You’ve already got a goose egg on your head and a jammed big toe. One more injury and I’m taking you to the ER.”

The socks were indigo blue and soft as melting butter. David looked at the little cardboard tag. One side had a picture of a goofy-faced alpaca, and the other side had the words: *These socks brought to you by Jerry Garcia, an alpaca living in beautiful Stanley, Idaho.* There were washing instructions, and David nearly choked when he read the tiny price tag—sixty dollars. Holy Toledo.

They ate a sausage biscuit in the truck on the way into Sun Valley. Quanah Parker kissed him on the sidewalk in front of the store, fingers running through his brown curls. David thought that the tender look on Quanah Parker’s face was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Sun Valley Books was a beautiful, old-fashioned bookstore, with bright, wide front windows full of books. About half fiction and half nonfiction, he noticed. No poetry. There were a couple of people browsing the shelves, and the man behind the desk put down the telephone and leaned over the counter, smiling at him. The haircut and the new clothes and Jerry Garcia’s socks were still working their magic, and with Quanah Parker’s tender look in the back of his mind, David stepped forward and held out his hand. “Hi, I’m David Miller. I’m a poet, and I wanted to talk to you about carrying my book.”

The man looked like an old-fashioned bookkeeper, a brown rag-wool vest over a denim shirt and reading glasses perched on the end of his nose.

“Hello, David Miller. I’m Brandon Avery. I’m very happy to meet you. Who published your book?”

“Limberlost. They did a letterpress edition with woodcuts.”

“Oh, I love Limberlost. Not many presses do that quality of work anymore. Let’s pull up their Web site and take a look.”

He tapped on his keyboard, then pulled the screen around so David could look at it. “Wow, you got some monster good reviews. Is this your first book?”

“Yeah, it is. I’m working on something new. I’m living in Stanley for a year. I’m working on a cycle—season and change, I think. That’s an old tried-and-true structure, the seasons, but it has a rhythm, a cadence…”

Brandon grinned at him. “You’re a poet, all right. I’ve got a good friend who’s a poet. Edmund Rich? He only wants to talk about the new thing he’s writing.”

“I know Edmund! I met him at a conference down in Boise last year.”

“Are you excited about the nomination?”

“What nomination?”

“David, have you checked your e-mail this morning?” David shook his head. “Looks like *Sand Creek* has been nominated for the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize. That is quite an honor for a first book. Hefty prize money too.”

“Are you kidding me? Holy shit!” David knew he was standing there like a fool, his mouth hanging open, but his head was suddenly full of buzzing, like a swarm of bees was circling his head. Brandon darted around the counter, laughing, and pulled him into a chair.

“We’ve got to arrange a reading! Maybe a poetry night, several poets together doing readings.”

“Wow, that would be amazing!” David reached out and gave him a hug. “Thank you. That’s so much more than I was hoping for! I was afraid I wouldn’t get up the nerve to even be able to talk to you!”

A man standing behind him spoke. “That shy-boy act is very appealing, isn’t it, Brandon?” David turned around, and Quanah Parker’s old lover—what was his name? Colton something—was standing in the shop, a sneer on his handsome face, his arms crossed over his chest.

Brandon looked between them, his face wary. “Hi, Colton. I didn’t know you were back in town. Have you met David Miller?”

“Yeah, I have. Quanah Parker introduced us yesterday.” He turned to David. “I have a friend at Boise State. I called him last night. There is quite the scuttlebutt going around. Seems like you left under a cloud? Some sort of sex scandal?”

Shock burned in the pit of David’s stomach. He shoved his shaking hands deep in his pockets. Oh no. Just like last time, just when he was feeling happy enough to fly without wings… Quanah Parker would be so embarrassed. He had introduced David to Damien, to his friends, and then… This getting around, his stupidity, his… Wait a minute. Wait a cotton-picking minute. Did this asshole realize he was talking to the recipient of a nomination for the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize? David tried a little sneer of his own. “Well, you know Boise. Any sex is worthy of a scandal.”

Brandon laughed, took his arm, and pulled him behind the checkout counter. After Colton had left the shop, the door banging behind him, Brandon shook his head. “David, you have never seen two more miserable people than Colton and Quanah Parker when they were sleeping together.” His face was gentle. “I think you must be good for him. He seems happy.”

“Did he call you?”

Brandon nodded. “He did. I’m not sure if you’re supposed to know that. Are you in trouble? Did something happen down at Boise State?”

“Yeah, something happened, but I don’t know that I’m in trouble. Maybe just stupid and clueless. And embarrassed.”

“Maybe just young,” Brandon said. “Give me your e-mail, and I’ll drop you a line when I get the reading arranged. I’ll leave a message for you at Tootsies too, in case you’re too busy writing poetry to turn on your laptop.”

David raced back up the street and burst into Tootsies. “Quanah Parker, you are not going to believe this! The Lenore Marsh—”

He had interrupted something. Colton was standing in the shop, and he and Quanah Parker were nose to nose. They were both so beautiful. David felt a pang in his chest. Big and strong and handsome, real mountain men, both of them. No wonder they fell for each other, like two halves of some lovely mythical story about the West. Colton was wearing his sheepskin coat, had a buffalo-felt Stetson in his hand the exact golden brown of his hair.

Colton turned to him. “Believe what?”

“Nothing.” David looked from one to the other. “Quanah Parker, do you need some privacy? I can step out.”

He shook his head. "We're fine, David."

"Did you really fuck a stranger in the backseat of a car in the parking lot of the Top Hat? And let somebody get a picture of it? Jesus. I didn't know people still did that after they were eighteen. One of your students? Is that why they canned you?"

David couldn't think of anything to say. And why should he say anything? Quanah Parker was silent as well, watching David's face carefully, leaning against the front counter, and the silence lengthened until Colton turned to Quanah Parker. "You're a fucking idiot. Maybe your little Stanley life is the one for you, after all. You settled for that, and now you've settled for this."

Quanah Parker didn't move, and Colton pushed through the shop door.

David stood there, feeling like shit on a stick. Quanah Parker held out an arm to him. David walked forward blindly, let Quanah Parker pull him in. He rocked David against his big chest, and David felt lips on his hair. "So what's your big news?"

The bright white excitement filled his chest again. "*Sand Creek*! It's been nominated for the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize. Can you believe it? I mean, really! Can you believe it?"

* * *

David went to the grocery store to buy bananas and sweet clementines for Mr. Running Bear. Maybe fresh fruit in addition to his steady diet of sausage and bacon would be good for his heart. Quanah Parker waved him out, muttering about needing to get some work done before any more old boyfriends acting like drama queens burst into the shop. He was finished by lunchtime, though, and took David out to celebrate the good news. David had a lovely green chef's salad, and Quanah Parker ate a massive burger called the Duke. With hand-cut fries. "You're eating an alpaca lunch," Quanah Parker said. "You're gonna be starving by supertime."

"We'll be home for supper, right?"

"Yep."

David thought for a moment of the tiny cabin, the cold stove, the mountains of canned beef stew waiting for him, and he had a slight sinking feeling in his chest. He sipped from his crystal flute of fresh-squeezed orange juice, and the feeling passed quickly.

Quanah Parker grinned at him and folded a fry into his mouth. "Do we have anything to discuss?"

David shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Then I'm going to make a suggestion."

"Okay."

"Why don't you use your grandpa's cabin for work. To write your poetry. And come live with me. And be my love."

For a moment David remembered that feeling, standing on a rock out in the river, his moccasins starting to slip out from under him. Then he closed his eyes, took a little leap in his mind to rock number three. He wiggled his toes. He was steady. He was good. Alpaca from Jerry Garcia and buffalo-hide fishing mocs. His feet were very, very happy.

* * *

Stanley Schoolhouse, Christmas Pageant

The teacher had started getting squirrely around Halloween, and come Thanksgiving she flew home to Phoenix to see her parents and didn't come back. David was talked into subbing at the school by the persuasive cowboy poet from the Stanley General Store. Maybe the math curriculum was suffering a bit, but the reading levels were skyrocketing since David had instituted an hour of personal reading time in the afternoon and was reading *The Golden Compass* aloud to the whole school. The four kids in kindergarten mostly fell asleep in their little fleece sleeping bags. The first- and second-graders romped around the playground, pretending to be armored bears. But the older kids were getting it. Several of them had already checked out copies of *The Subtle Knife*, and the bossy girl David secretly thought of as Hermione had finished *The Amber Spyglass*. David was pleased.

They were going with a Native American theme for the Christmas pageant. Instead of a manger, they had erected a tepee on the school grounds, and Fred and George, Crazy Horse, and Jerry Rice were standing in for the more traditional animals. The fourth- and fifth-graders had drawn a map of the world and shaded the traditional lands of indigenous people in 1809 and in 2009. The eighth-graders had researched Sand Creek and drawn a pictograph of the massacre on the sides of the tepee. They were letting the little kids color in the pictures with washable markers. Mary and Joseph were wearing buckskins and moccasins, preparing to read aloud their original poems celebrating the birth. The baby Jesus was wrapped in a small Pendleton blanket. David was very proud.

Amy Prentiss came up to him, holding a cup of cider and a Christmas cookie shaped like a tepee. "David! I'm so happy to see you. Don't you ever answer your e-mails?"

David hugged her. "Only when I want to, Amy. What are you doing here?"

"I thought I would see how you felt about coming back. Things are a little thin around the department. I'm sure I could talk the dean..."

David was shaking his head. "Amy. You must be joking. Leave Stanley? Not before all the stars fall from the Idaho sky. Have another cookie. Try one of the pemmican angels. The kids made them out of an authentic recipe, real juniper berries."

She fed the last bit of her tepee cookie to Crazy Horse. "That's okay. You like it here, don't you?"

David looked around, studied the broad back of Quanah Parker. He had a couple of Native American wise men slung giggling over his shoulders. Jerry Rice was nibbling on the pocket of his jeans. "It's home."

THE END

Loose Id Titles by Sarah Black

Border Roads

Colorado Gold

Slow Fires

The Lincoln County Wars

The Three Miracles of Santos Socorro

Erotic Interludes

Cinnamon Toast and Sex

Featuring the characters from Slow Fires

“Murder at the Heartbreak Hotel”

Part of the anthology Partners in Crimee

With Josh Lanyon

Sarah Black

10 Things About Sarah Black

Sarah likes to drive around on empty, red-dirt roads on the Navajo reservation in a beat-up blue Ford Ranger pickup. Unfortunately, she still doesn't know how to change a flat tire.

Every Christmas, Sarah tries to make her grandmother’s fudge recipe, the one on the back of the Hershey’s cocoa box. So far no luck. This year she's going to break down and buy a candy thermometer.

Sarah has a secret addiction to reading books from Mother Earth News about building your own house. Right now she is reading about Cordwood and Cob.

Sarah will use any excuse to buy cashmere sweaters from Land's End. She has even been known to do it without an excuse.

When she was young, Sarah wanted to marry Barnabas Collins, the vampire from Dark Shadows.

Life goal: To visit all of America's National Parks.

Sarah has lived in: California, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Mississippi, Texas, Arizona, and Alaska. Also Italy, and one year in the Persian Gulf on the Hospital Ship USNS Comfort.

First pet: Janet, a red-eared turtle the size of a quarter. During a hurricane evacuation in 1968, Sarah's father carried Janet in his pocket wrapped in a damp washcloth, inside a plastic bag.

Sarah has a secret crush on Brett Favre, and believes that he redeems the sins of the rest of the NFL. He is one of the few remaining quarterbacks playing who is not young enough to be her son.

When she can't sleep, Sarah gets up and reads a random selection from the Oxford English Dictionary. Sometimes those words show up in her stories.