

I leaned back in the seat of my old Ford Pinto, listening to the sounds coming from the Depot, the reservation's only tavern. There was a stream of Indians and white ranchers going inside. I knew Guv Yellowhawk was there with his buddies, pounding beers and drinking shots. Guv taught gym at the local school—football, basketball, soccer. But, word was, he sometimes got a little too involved with his students, both boys and girls. I was going to let him get good and drunk, then the real party would start. I had brass knuckles and a baseball bat stowed in my trunk, but those wouldn't be necessary. Guv was a fat-ass piece of shit, with a frybread gut as big as a buffalo's ass.

I'd been hired to beat the hell out of Guv by the father of a little girl at the school. Guv had sneaked up on the girl in the bathroom, held her down, and raped her. The girl's parents had confronted the school's principal, but Guv came from one of the most powerful families on the rez, and the school refused to take any action. The principal had even threatened a lawsuit against the parents for making a false accusation. The tribal police couldn't do anything. The feds prosecuted all felony crimes on the rez, and they didn't mess with any crime short of murder. Now the little girl was too scared to go back to her class, and he was free to molest other kids.

I'd waived my fee for this job. Usually I charged a hundred bucks for each tooth I knocked out and each bone I broke, but I decided to kick Guv's ass for free. I'd hated him for years—even as a teenager, he was a mean asshole who'd terrorized other kids, especially iyeskas like me. Of course, Guv had always been accompanied by his gang; I couldn't remember him ever fighting solo. But tonight was his time. The Stones' "Gimme Shelter" drifted through the door of the bar to the parking lot, leaving little melodic ripples like ghosts in my head. I lit a cigarette and waited for Guv. He'd come out, sooner or later.

An hour later, I spotted him walking out of the bar. He was singing an off-key tune and stumbling. I slipped out of the Pinto and crouched behind his shiny new pickup. He'd parked at the far end of the lot so that no one would ding his expensive ride. That suited me just fine—I could enact some Indian justice away from any of Guv's drinking buddies.

I moved out from the shadows. He wore faded jeans and a T-shirt with a Fighting Sioux mascot. His eyes were foggy and he stank of beer. I could see the birthmark on his forehead that looked like a little tomahawk.

"Hey, Guv."

"The fuck?" He squinted into the darkness, unable to pinpoint who was speaking to him.

"It's Virgil."

"Who?"

"Virgil Wounded Horse."

"Oh. Are you drinking, or what? The bar just closed."

“Yeah, I know. I was waiting for you.”

“What for?”

“Grace Little Thunder.”

Guv’s face darkened. “Ain’t seen her.”

“That’s not what I hear.”

“I take care of the wakanheja. Show ’em how to be Lakota. Sometimes the parents don’t appreciate it.”

“The way of the world, huh?” I moved between Guv and the truck.

“I teach the kids, help their families. Sometimes they want more than I can give.”

“Saint Guv.”

“Just a guy.”

“A guy who likes to cornhole the boys and finger the girls.”

“You know how kids are, they want attention. They make shit up, people make a fuss over them.”

“The other kids making shit up too? I heard about you and little Joey Dupree.”

Guv tried to move past me.

“I don’t need this bullshit. I ain’t seen you out there, helping the oyate. From what I hear, you don’t do nothing. You got shit to say, take it up with Principal Smith. I’m getting outta here.”

“Don’t think so.”

“Look, asshole, Grace Little Thunder’s family is nothing but trash. Her mom’s a drunk, and her dad ain’t worked in ten years.”

“That girl is only nine years old.”

“Eat shit. What business is it of yours—”

I landed a hard body shot to Guv’s midsection. The punch would have knocked most men over, but his massive stomach absorbed most of the blow.

“Iyeska motherfucker!” Guv snarled, and lunged at me.

I saw the move coming, sidestepped it, and smashed him in the jaw. Guv shook his head like a wet dog. How the fuck was he still standing up? I thought about grabbing the baseball bat, then felt a blinding pain in my side. A blow to the kidney, then another, this

one worse than the first. Waves of electricity. Neural impulses. Gotta stay up, don't go down, or it's finished. Reeling, dizzy, I tried to puzzle out a strategy, but my mind was like an iceberg, slowly bobbing in the waters.

"You half-breed bastard!" he roared.

I felt Guv's spittle on my face, and then I was on the ground. Shit. He kicked me in the back, over and over, each blow a jackhammer. I tried to maneuver through the cloud in my brain. Guv panted, out of breath, running out of gas. Grab his feet, I thought. I snaked out my arm and yanked his legs. He went down with a thud, and I saw my opening. I stood up, grabbed his right arm, and twisted it behind his back until I met some resistance. Then I twisted some more.

"How you like that, you son of a bitch?" I said.

Guv looked up at me and hissed, "Fuck you, halfie."

I had to hand it to him, he had some balls. I flashed back to high school when I'd been much smaller, not the big guy I was now. I remembered all the times I'd been held down and beaten by Guv and the other full-bloods, my angry tears, the humiliation still with me. I wondered if I should let Guv go, show him the mercy I'd never been given. That was the Lakota way, wasn't it?

Wacantognaka, one of the seven Lakota values—it meant compassion, generosity, kindness, forgiveness. I remembered the lessons from my teachers back at school. They'd taught that the greatest honor, the greatest bravery, came when a warrior chose to let his enemy go free and touched him with the coup stick. Legend was that even Crazy Horse had shown his courage by counting coup on a Pawnee warrior once, chasing him across the river, but deciding not to kill him, to honor his bravery and grant him his freedom. I knew that the honorable thing to do—the Lakota way—was to set Guv free without any more punishment.

Fuck that.

I twisted his arm until it came loose from the socket with a sickening crunch. Then I stepped back and kicked him in the cheek with all my force, snapping his head back violently. I took my boot heel and smashed it down on his face, teeth snapping like stale potato chips. I kneeled down and grabbed Guv's hair.

"Listen to me, you goddamn scumbag. You ever touch another kid at that school, I'll cut your dick off and shove it down your throat. Hear me, skin?"

He didn't say anything. His left eye was swollen and bloody, and his nose seemingly gone, pounded back into his face. Blood streamed from the black hole of his former nose and mouth.

"How's that for counting coup, asshole?"

I leaned over to see if he was still breathing. A few faint breaths. I saw some teeth lying on the concrete. They looked like little yellow tombstones. I scooped them up and stuck them in my pocket.