

# Climbing Bear

By Sequoyah Pendor  
sequoyah@charter.net

## Warning!

This story contains sexually explicit, erotic events involving alternative sexualities. Do not read the contents if they will offend you. If accessing this site causes you to break local laws (village, town, city, county, province, state, or country, etc.), please leave now or accept the consequences, should there be any.

By reading or downloading this file you implicitly declare that you accept total responsibility for your actions in regard to material intended for mature, responsible members of society capable of making decisions about the content of documents they wish to read. You are accessing this story of your own free volition. You have been warned!

## Disclaimer

This is a work of fiction; any coincidence is just that, a coincidence.

## Copyright Notice

This story is copyright by the author and the author retains all rights. You may distribute, copy, or print one copy of this story however you like, PROVIDED this copyright notice remains intact and you do not change the story in any way. Also you may not post this story to any website or charge any fee to anyone to distribute or access this story.

© 2000 - 2003 Sequoyah Pendor. All rights reserved.

## Chapter One

I woke up and realized I was not alone in my sleeping bag. I raised up on an elbow and looked into the face of an Indian, an Indian no-one except his mother would call handsome--and I wasn't sure about her. Hell, I loved the man with all my Indian heart and even I would have difficulty calling him handsome if I were objective, but objective I was not. He might not be "pretty" handsome, but his face was one which clearly showed his strength, his character--all the things which make handsome very low on the totem pole! He could have been ugly enough to frighten kids and I wouldn't have cared. He loved me and I loved him and that was all--absolutely all--that counted. I smiled as I looked into his sleeping face and thought of the long journey which had brought me to a sleeping bag in the Colorado Mountains beside the light of my life.

I, too, am an Indian--Native American, American Indian, American Aborigine, you get the picture. Being politically correct gets more complicated all the time. Call me an Indian without the extra, if you

like, or call me Apache or Ndee because that's who I am. I began the journey which led to my being beside the first man--and the last--I ever loved, thirty-two years ago.

My journey began on a frosty January morning in 1963 on the Jicarilla Reservation. It was there that my mom gave birth to me in the shack my father's parents called home. My grandmother told me, when I was nine or ten, my mom had a difficult pregnancy. When her time came, there was no-one to help her except my grandmother. Shortly after I was born, my mother died as a result of my birth so I never knew her. I know several people whose father resented them because their mother had died in childbirth. Not me. My father adored me and I him.

I didn't get to spend much time with my dad since he was in the army. He came home for mom's burial but, of course, I don't remember that. Over the next twelve years, he came when he could get leave. As soon as I could walk I spent all my waking hours with him when he came home, exploring the mountains, hunting, listening to stories, including the story of his winning my mother's hand. Even as a very young boy, I knew he had worshipped my mom and missed her even though they had very little time together.

He was on the reservation for my eleventh birthday. Looking back, I know it was a pretty sparse celebration, but for me it was a birthday fit for a king. While he was on the reservation that time, he was inducted into a warrior society and I was so very proud of him.

Each time he was home, he told me how long it would be before he could get out of the army and never leave me again. On my eleventh birthday, he reminded me he would soon be coming back to stay. "We will have a wonderful life, Climbing Bear," he had said. "We will be real Apache, living in the old way and you will become a great warrior." Well, he did come back, soon, and he came back to stay. During the very last days of the Vietnam War, he was killed--shot by a sniper. So he came back to stay, in a box.

He was buried with full military honors under a gnarled cedar near the shack, his grave beside my mom's. Their graves became a place where I spilled out my anger, hurt, pain. I often sat beside my dad's grave and asked why he had abandoned me. I got no answer. When I asked my grandmother, she just said it was the way of the warrior, of a brave man. I didn't think it was brave to get killed when I was waiting for him. I hated him for abandoning me and wept bitter tears at his grave because I loved him.

I was hurt, angry, and grieving but, I guess, not grieving as deeply as my grandmother and grandfather. My grandfather's heart was broken, not only because his only son had been killed--he had, after all, died a warrior's death--but also because he and my grandmother both thought he had been killed in a useless, senseless war.

Over the next two years I saw my grandfather grow smaller and weaker. It didn't help that I became increasingly rebellious and disrespectful. I laughed at the very idea of school and was absent more than I was present. Two years to the day after my dad was killed, my grandfather, who had suddenly become very ill a few days before, died.

I became even more bitter and rebellious. I forgot about school entirely and cared little or nothing for anything or anyone, including my grandmother and myself. At fourteen, I discovered alcohol and how to get it. My grandmother warned me of its dangers and I laughed at her. She talked of my becoming a brave warrior and I answered, bitterly, "So I can get killed while I am young and have a military funeral? I don't think so."

The winter I turned sixteen, I was completely wild, totally out-of-hand. Grandmother tried to talk to me, reason with me, but it didn't do any good. When I should have been in school, when I should have been helping my grandmother, I was out somewhere drunk or finding a way to get booze. My life was about alcohol and nothing else.

The spring after I turned seventeen, I was invited to an all-night party. It wasn't a real party, just a

bunch of Indians with enough money to buy cheap booze and get drunk. I don't know when I passed out, but the sun told me it was afternoon when I came to. I was alone in an abandoned shack, lying in a pool of vomit, my head splitting and my mouth feeling as though birds had used it for roosting.

I dragged myself to the door, pulled my body upright and staggered the two or three miles to my grandmother's place. When I staggered in, I saw my grandmother lying on the floor in front of her battered cook stove. When I got to her, I reached down to pick her up. As I took her hand, it was cold and I knew at once she was dead.

Her cause of death was ruled the result of a heart attack. Sure it was from a heart problem. She was heartbroken by her son's death and while I may not have been the cause of her death, I had certainly contributed to it. In spite of all I had done to them through my behavior, I loved my grandparents dearly. They had, in reality, been the only parents I had known. When my grandmother was laid to rest between her husband and son, I realized I had no family, no place to go. I was adrift in a world that seemed to hate me.

I really don't remember too much about the next two years. I took any odd job I could find to buy alcohol. By the time I was nineteen I was a full-blown alcoholic. The spring after I turned nineteen, I finally drifted into Denver.

Not only was I without family, I was also fighting another battle. I had known I was gay since I knew about anything, but I was so far back in the closet I was often able to deny it to myself. Being an Indian, and a drunk Indian at that, was enough--without adding being a drunk, gay Indian.

One night, after I had picked up a day job and gotten paid, a fellow drunk and I were drinking cheap wine. When we both were too drunk to give a shit about anything or anybody, we started playing around with each other. We were not only two drunk Indians, but also two very stupid Indians. We had wandered into a Denver park which was, I later learned, known for gay activity. Half-dressed, we were giving each other blowjobs or trying to. We were so drunk we couldn't even do that worth a shit. We were paying attention to no-one and nothing. Two policemen made their necessary drive through the park, spotted us and, before I knew what was happening, had us cuffed and in their patrol car.

They took us downtown and hauled us before the night court. We got tossed in jail for ten days for indecent exposure. You can imagine what happened when the jailer said, as he closed and locked the door behind us, "Fresh meat guys. These ladies like to suck cock." It was not a pleasant or romantic ten days. I wasn't sure my mouth or ass would ever be normal again.

Before the ten days were up, Running Water, the guy I had been with, was bailed out and left Denver with his father. I was not so lucky. When my ten days were up, I was turned loose--back on the street with no place to stay, no job, no skills, nothing. Knowing nothing else, I went back to day jobs and alcohol, sleeping under a bridge, in a doorway, anywhere.

A few weeks after I was released, I got picked up by a contractor to do grunt work--digging a ditch. He cared nothing for me or anyone else. You either worked or he gave you a kick in the ass and sent you packing. The ditch was almost five feet deep and he was not using side guards. As a result, one minute I was digging away and the next I was buried up to my neck when the sides caved in. Fearing what would happen if it was discovered he had not been taking the required safety precautions, the boss set the crew to digging me out. They couldn't work as fast as I was being crushed to death, so finally he called for help, after I had been buried for what seemed like days, and I was finally dug out.

I was rushed to the hospital--by that time I was unconscious--where I stayed two weeks. The first week I don't remember too well, but I was told it was nip-and-tuck as to whether I would make it or not.

I was in a semi-private room and shortly after I regained consciousness, my roommate introduced himself. He, too, was Apache--Ndee--but from the White Mountain tribe, and had grown up on the Fort

Apache Reservation. His name was Little Raven. We talked about growing up on a reservation, all the problems we faced, that sort of thing. He had Indian and white friends who came to visit and he introduced them to me. I think it was the first time I realized Indians could live like anyone else. When I said that, he replied, "Yea, sometimes, but try to rent an apartment in a decent complex or go to a nice club. There are still signs around, maybe not in plain sight, maybe even invisible, which say, 'No Dogs or Indians Allowed', but things are changing, slowly."

The day before I was released, an Apache came to see my roommate. Little Raven introduced him as Crazy Coyote, "my tribe's medicine man". Crazy Coyote lit something in a bowl, waved the smoke over Little Raven, chanted a while and shook rattles over him.

When he finished, he came over to my bed and said, "I think it's time you got rid of the bad spirits eating you. You need to get rid of the hate in your heart and the anger."

He reached into the bag hanging over his shoulder and, as he did, I said, "I ain't interested in any Indian hocus-pocus bullshit. Take your shit and get out. Leave me alone."

"Guess I was wrong. Guess it's not time yet. Maybe I'm not the one to make a decent Indian and human being out of you. Tough shit for you," he said as he put the things back in his bag and left.

I got sober enough while I was in the hospital to realize I had spent two and a half years in Denver--all in a drunken haze. I had turned twenty-one in January, three months before.

I got out of the hospital the day after the Indian had wanted to do some mumbo-jumbo over me, right back where I started--back on the street with no place to stay, no job, no skills, nothing. It was about mid-afternoon when I walked out of the hospital. I had no money and no way to pick up a job this late in the day and I sure needed a drink. I tried panhandling with absolutely no luck-- one guy flipped me a quarter and that was it. Damn, I needed a drink.

I hadn't been paying attention to where I was walking and when I looked around, I was a block from the park where I had been picked up. I was sober--dammit!--so I figured I could watch out for cops. The guys who had forced me to have sex in the jail had talked about how much I could get for the blowjobs I have been forced to give them. "Hell, you are a shithead, fucking no-good Indian and you need a drink. What's sucking a cock or two if it gets you a drink?" I asked myself. I never got that drink.

I was headed toward the center of the park when a carload of rednecks drove by slowly, turned around and came back. One of them leaned out of the car window and shouted, "Hey, Chief, how about a blowjob? Come on, Chief, don't you want this white cock up your Indian ass?" The car stopped and the driver said, "Men, don't we want to teach this fucking faggot Indian a lesson?". They piled out of the car and dragged me into some bushes at the edge of the park. I expected to be raped but, instead, they started beating me. When I collapsed, they kicked me. Shortly afterward, I lost consciousness.

I don't know how long I was out, but it was dark when I came to. I was lying in a drainage ditch. I would have drowned in the dirty, stagnant water had I been dumped face down. As it was, I was barely alive. I started the very painful and slow process of dragging myself out of the ditch and finding help. I was half-way across the park when I passed out again. I don't know whether it was the pain or the injuries.

I might not have been found, I was told later, had I not passed out in the middle of a park path where a couple of patrolling policemen found me.

I woke up in a bed, I thought in a hospital until I looked around. I realized I was naked when I looked under the sheet and saw someone had cleaned me up and dressed my wounds before putting me to bed. I really needed to piss, but when I tried to get out of bed, I couldn't. As I struggled to get out of bed and to keep from pissing myself, an Indian I had never seen came in.

"I see you are awake," he said. "Seems to me you are one Indian who has a helluva time staying out of trouble."

"I'm going to be in more trouble soon unless I piss, and I can't get up." The Indian put his arms under me and easily lifted me from the bed and carried me to the bathroom. He gently stood me on my feet. I tried to piss, but couldn't. "I can't piss," I said. "It hurts."

"Just relax and you'll make water," he said. "Everything about you has been bruised, so it's not surprising you can't piss without pain."

I stood, relaxing as much as I could, and finally was able to pee. As I stood there, I said, "I'm Climbing Bear, Ndee."

"I'm Wounded Hawk, Lakota."

"My grandfather once told me a tale about a Lakota named Red Hawk. Know him?"

The Lakota started laughing so hard he almost dropped me. "That old buzzard will never leave me alone so long as I'm alive," he said, when he had stopped laughing enough to speak. "Red Hawk is my old man. I guess he's getting even with me for all the shit I gave him by giving me screwed-up Indians like you." I had finished, so Wounded Hawk carried me--literally--back to bed. When I was back in bed, he disappeared for a few minutes and came back with a steaming bowl of liquid. "Drink this."

While I was drinking, Wounded Hawk told me I had been found by an Indian policeman and his partner who respected Indians. "They took you to Crazy Coyote's house. You remember him from the hospital?" I nodded. "He already had a full house, so he sent them here with you."

I finished drinking the liquid from the bowl and was surprised when I started feeling better almost immediately. Wounded Hawk propped me up on pillows and asked why I kept getting my ass kicked. I didn't know what I should--or wanted to--tell him, so I was pretty vague. Occasionally he asked me a question. I never felt he was prying, just interested in understanding me. Before it was over I had told him everything, everything, including the fact that I was gay. I suddenly felt myself weeping bitterly--for the pain I had caused my grandparents, for my father's death, for all the life and opportunities I had wasted. When I ran out of tears and could cry no more, Wounded Hawk wiped my face with a cool, wet cloth and gave me another bowl, cool this time, to drink. Almost by the time I had finished drinking it, I was asleep.

For two weeks, Wounded Hawk brought me medicine and food, cleaned and dressed my wounds and listened to me talk. It was only after I was better and on my feet that I realized he had said little. He had asked questions and occasionally said something, but mostly he listened. One night as I lay thinking about the strange turn of events in my life, I realized I hadn't had a drink for several weeks and this time hadn't gone through the shakes. I was even more surprised by the fact that I wasn't craving a drink.

At the end of two weeks, I was able to get up and walk, so long as I wasn't in a hurry. When Wounded Hawk came in late one afternoon, he was carrying a bundle. "Get dressed," he said. "I suspect you are tired of wearing nothing but your underdrawers." When I was dressed, he said, "Ok, let's go". I didn't even ask him where.

Outside was a four-wheel-drive pickup, its load covered by the ever-present blue tarp. We left Denver at sunset, headed north. I was, perhaps, well, but had very little strength. I managed to stay awake until the last bit of sunset color had faded from the evening sky, then I was lulled to sleep by the steady drone of the truck motor.

Sometime later--I have no idea how long--I woke up when the truck stopped. "I need a piss break," Wounded Hawk said. I was very stiff, but able to leave the truck and follow the Lakota a short distance off the road where we stood, in the bright moonlight, pissing. When we finished, Wounded Hawk started walking away from the truck, following a path I had not noticed before. We had walked a hundred

yards or so when I heard the faint gurgling of running water. The path ended at a pool formed by water trickling out of rocks above it. Wounded Hawk walked to the rocks, cupped his hands under a small trickle and drank. When he finished, I did the same. The water was icy cold and very sweet. I hadn't realized I was thirsty until I started drinking, but I must have been for I kept drinking, seeming unable to get enough water. When my thirst was finally satisfied, I rejoined Wounded Hawk who had gone back up the path a short distance.

"Water as good and pure as this is hard to find because we have shit in our nest so long and so often we have poisoned Mother Earth. But there are other springs as good where we are going," Wounded Hawk said.

"Where are we going?" I finally asked.

"I am taking you into the Black Hills where you will meet my mentor, Black Horse. I hope he will take you on as a project, as he did me years ago. He is a very old and very powerful Lakota medicine man. I think he might be able to make something out of you.

"Do you think he came make me straight?"

"Why would he want to do that? He's no fool. He's not going to try to make a rabbit out of a buffalo. Why would he try to undo what the Great Spirit has done? The Great Spirit knew what he was doing when he made you. He makes no mistakes. He made you gay because he needed you to be gay just like he needed me to be straight. Only a proud, vain, self-centered ass would claim to know better what a person should be than the Great Spirit who created him. No, it would be one damn stupid fool who thinks he can change what the Great Spirit created into something else. IF Black Horse thinks you are worth the effort, and IF he decides he can make something out of you, he will only enable you to become fully who you are. He will start with what the Great Spirit has made you--a gay male who is a pretty sad physical specimen, an emotional wreck, a spiritual cripple and an intellectual wasteland. But the physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual are all there to be developed. That is a given and a part of that givenness is your being gay. Well, we need to move."

We got back in the truck and, once again, I fell asleep very quickly, still thinking about what Wounded Hawk had said about being gay. I wasn't sure I understood it, but he seemed to think being gay was ok.

The next time I woke up, the moon was setting over a distant mountain. We had left the interstate highway and were no longer on a regular paved road, driving along a trail that was barely visible. After an hour or so more, the trail disappeared, and how Wounded Hawk found his way I'll never know. Suddenly I pitched forward as the truck went over the crest of a hill and we started a very steep descent into a deep, narrow canyon. At the bottom of the canyon there was a small stream which we followed. Finally Wounded Hawk stopped the truck before a small, one-room log-and-mud cabin with a sod roof.

"We have arrived, Climbing Bear. If you are lucky, this will be your home for the next year," Wounded Hawk said, as he opened the door and hopped out after blowing the horn several times. As I got out of the truck, I saw the silhouette of an old man in the cabin door. "Black Horse, Wounded Hawk," the Lakota shouted, and ran to embrace the silhouette. I was really stiff, so it took me a while to reach the cabin.

"Black Horse, this is a very poor specimen of mankind called Climbing Bear. I hope you will find it in your heart to teach him the way."

"Two weeks ago, I had decided it was a great day to die. I did a sweat, went to my vision place and sat down to die. Well, damned if I didn't have a vision about a two-spirits-blessed one who had been beaten. It was you, Climbing Bear," Black Horse said. "I had a pretty ferocious argument with some spirits and I lost. I didn't want to take on someone, since I had decided to die, but I'll have to put that off

for another year. I sometimes think this old Indian is doomed to live forever with my aches and pains. Welcome as always, Wounded Hawk, my son, and welcome Climbing Bear, two-spirits-blessed. Now that you have got me awake, I guess we can have breakfast and sleep again later. I'll fix breakfast while you two get cleaned up.

Wounded Hawk took a bundle from the truck, threw it over his shoulder and said, "Follow me". We walked along a grassy path toward the small stream running behind the cabin. As we approached the stream, I saw someone had used rocks to dam the stream, creating a small pool. Wounded Hawk put down his bundle and started stripping. "Climbing Bear, we are bathing, so I suggest you get undressed."

When I was undressed I found the late spring night chilly. While I was thinking about that, Wounded Hawk ran and jumped into the pool. I followed suit. The water was so cold it took my breath away. "Damn! This water is cold!" I managed to say between chattering teeth.

"Not nearly as cold as it will be when you have to break the ice to get to the water. Get washed up," he said as he tossed me a bar of strange soap. I quickly lathered up and rinsed off. By then I was so cold I didn't feel the cold any longer. I finished quickly and got out of the water as did Wounded Hawk, who pitched me a towel and I started rubbing my body to get my circulation going. When I was dry, Wounded Hawk tossed me new jeans, shirt and briefs. When I had them on, he tossed me a pair of the softest moccasins I had ever felt. I slipped them on my feet, gathered up the clothes I had taken off and my towel, and Wounded Hawk and I walked to the cabin.

Black Horse had coffee waiting and as he poured mine asked, "Did that sly Indian tell you you'd have to break the ice on the pond to bathe this winter?"

"Yes, he did."

"Don't believe all he says. He has never had to break the ice to bathe." I was giving a sigh of relief when Black Horse continued, "He has never been up before me, so I am the one that has always broken the ice." He then gave an absolutely marvelous belly laugh which I soon came to love. Black Horse served some kind of delicious stew and flat bread, cooked on top of the small stove he used for heat and cooking--when he cooked inside. I ate as if I hadn't eaten in days.

We finished before sunrise and Black Horse suggested we take a nap before we talked. He barely had the words out of his mouth before he rolled himself up in a buffalo robe on the floor and was sound asleep. Wounded Hawk went to the truck and returned with two air mattresses and sleeping bags. I expected to lie awake, since I had slept most of the night while we were traveling, but I didn't. I was asleep in seconds.

When I woke up, neither Wounded Hawk nor Black Horse was in the cabin. It took a while for me to get up. I guess the long trip had allowed me to get very stiff, and I had done little moving since I reached the cabin. I finally was standing and, after I got my balance, walked outside. The two Indians were near the stream stoking a large fire. When I reached them, I saw they were preparing a sweat lodge. I had seen one only once before when a Kiowa friend of my grandfather had held one. "Sweat lodge?" I asked.

"Yes, we are doing a sweat tonight," Wounded Hawk said without additional comment.

When the fire was ready, the two added large stones to it and more wood. I would have helped, but I knew I was too weak to lift anything. Having finished their task, the two walked back to the cabin. Black Horse sat on an old beat-up chair near the front door. Wounded Hawk went inside and brought out two more chairs.

When Wounded Hawk and I sat down, Black Horse said, "Climbing Bear, you have wasted much of the time you have been given. Your life has almost been cut short twice and still you didn't get the message. Wounded Hawk found you and brought you here for the same reason his father brought

him--to see if something could be made out of you. I don't know. When Red Hawk brought Wounded Hawk, he was a mess too--drinking anything that he could find, screwing any old slut, everything he did was aimed at making his life a bigger pile of crap. He was filled with lazy, crazy, good-for-nothing spirits. Well after I got him sober, he was willing to work to make something of himself, to chase out the rotten spirits living in him. It took a while and there were times... there were times... but that's past and he's done good. He's a decent human being and a good Indian. He's working hard to make up for the crap he did before."

"Now you... I don't know. You've done enough shit to keep your good-for-nothing spirits alive and happy for a long time, and they are going to fight like hell to stay where they are. I can look at you and tell that. Look at the rotten spirits inside you. No respect for your elders. That's a dangerous rotten spirit. When elders don't get respected, the young screw up--drinking, putting poison in your body, going to a park where two spirits disgrace both. Yep, you are a piece of rotten work right now. You are a big job, but I guess this old man can help you get rid of the shit and see if there's not some good in there somewhere. Wounded Hawk tells me you are from good Indians. A brave warrior and a gentle woman. Well, you are going to have to work like a bear and you are going to have to climb out of the shit you have been living in. I cannot do that for you but, if you are willing to work at it, I will help."

I didn't know what to say. Black Horse was right, of course, but I didn't know whether I had the guts to change. I wanted to, at least I thought I did, but I didn't know if I could. Black Horse asked nothing of me--no promises, nothing. As I thought about that, I realized he had meant what he said. He would help--he made that promise--but he couldn't do it for me.

"Let's eat," Black Horse said, very abruptly. We went into the cabin and Black Horse set out three bowls and spoons, went to the stove and brought back a pot of something--I guess it was stew. I wondered if I would have to live on the same stew for... suddenly I realized I didn't know how long I would be in this place, and that kinda panicked me. I put a spoon of stew in my mouth after making sure it wasn't too hot to handle. It was stew all right but not the same as we had last night. Maybe stew three meals a day wouldn't be as bad as I thought.

When we finished, Wounded Hawk said, "We need to get the truck unloaded. I have to leave early tomorrow morning. Supposed to be in Atlanta next Monday for a conference on civil rights. Guess that will be interesting because there will be a group demanding more welfare. Hell, handouts have almost killed us Indians because we have forgotten how to make it on our own and you can't depend on whites respecting any treaty they have ever made, so the handouts have just about stopped. Of course, they really weren't handouts to start with since they were a pittance paid for lands taken by good old Uncle Sam." He walked to the truck and removed the tarp. The truck was filled with bags and boxes. "Climbing Bear, some of these will be too heavy for you in your present condition, so I'll have to select what you carry."

As we emptied the truck, I saw cases of coffee, bags of sugar, plastic bags covering sacks of flour and cornmeal, grocery staples in general, all well-packaged. These were stacked inside the cabin. There were new blankets as well as several pairs of jeans--some Black Horse's size, some mine, and others which would fit neither of us--shirts and heavy jackets and, for heaven's sake, long johns! There seemed to be supplies enough for a year or more piled in the cabin, on the table and the wide shelves which had served as beds for Wounded Hawk and me.

When the truck was empty, Wounded Hawk said, "Hop in". Black Horse was already in the truck, so I hopped in the back. Bad move I discovered as we started bouncing along where there was absolutely no path. Eventually we reached our destination, which was a huge pile of short logs. I couldn't manage many of them, but there were enough small logs to keep me busy for a while. When we got back to the house, the logs were neatly stacked near the cabin and we made three more trips then went back

for a load of what Black Horse called fat pine, the resin-filled pieces from trees which had fallen and decayed leaving only the heart wood. I was to learn to be very thankful for the pieces we carried back, when I had to get up to a cold cabin in the dead of winter and start the fire.

Shortly after we had finished emptying the truck, Black Horse said we needed to get ready for the sweat. That meant another bath in the cold pond. Little did I realize how much I would have welcomed the cold water when we started the sweat, a new experience for me.

I'll admit I approached the sweat as a kind of cheap Indian sauna. So when we were inside and Black Horse started talking spirit guides, it sounded kinda spooky--like some religious stuff. I was embarrassed. I remembered being embarrassed when my grandparents had talked of spirits and religious stuff. I was shocked when Black Horse introduced me to the spirits as if they were sitting beside him. When he introduced me he added, "He's going to be a hard nut to crack, so I need your help and he does too." He spoke as if he were holding a conference with spirits in the sweat lodge with us. Pure nonsense.

The lodge became very, very hot, and the darkness seemed to be closing in on me. I felt as though I was trapped, so when Black Horse opened the flap to bring in more stones, I was relieved, my panic decreased, but not for long. When the flap was closed and Black Horse started pouring water on the stones again and speaking of endurance, cleanliness, strength and purity, I really panicked. Black Horse and Wounded Hawk had both told me it was no dishonor to leave the sweat lodge, but I wasn't sure I believed them. Soon it didn't make any difference. If this sweat lodge business was a test, I was about to fail! I jumped up so quickly I bumped my head on the top of the lodge, bent over and shot out of the lodge. Outside, I collapsed on the cool grass and sucked in great breaths of cool air.

A couple of times, Black Horse came out of the sweat lodge for hot stones and water. Then an hour or so after I left the lodge, Wounded Hawk and Black Horse came out of the sweat lodge and went to the pond, where they splashed around in the water, dried themselves and got dressed. I guess I expected them to have something to say about my leaving, but they didn't--either then or later.

We ate and went to bed. Morning came early, but since we had gone to bed as soon as it was dark, I had slept enough by sunrise. I woke up when I heard Wounded Hawk and Black Horse moving about. I got up, went outside to piss and then washed up at a shelf beside the door which held a bucket of water and a metal pan. Inside, breakfast was ready and the three of us ate in silence. When we finished, I took care of washing up the tin plates and spoons we had used, while Black Horse and Wounded Hawk loaded boxes into the truck. Later I would learn that these were things Black Horse had made for the tourist trade--his means of livelihood, since he would not accept anything for his work as a medicine man.

After Wounded Hawk left, I guess I expected Black Horse to sit me down and lay out a program, in his words, to get rid of "lazy, crazy, no-good spirits". Of course he didn't. He simply said, "We need to get things put away. I know you can't lift much, but some of this stuff is not heavy." Most of the boxes and bags Black Horse had to take up a ladder to a half-loft. I helped stack them and took up the things I could handle.

When we finished, it was time for lunch and we ate the stew left from breakfast, cold. It wasn't bad, but I again wondered if this was to be my diet for God only knew how long. When we finished, I washed up our plates and spoons, using cold water. Black Horse was waiting for me outside. "We need to get some things planted today," he said and he handed me a hoe. He was carrying one as well, and had a bag slung over his shoulder. We walked along the stream, away from the cabin, for a mile or so. We reached a place where the canyon widened dramatically and the stream flooding its floor over the years had created a wide, fertile field.

Black Horse started digging a furrow and indicated I should do the same. He, of course, worked much faster than I did, but together we soon had half the field furrowed. I had helped my grandparents plant corn and told Black Horse, so he had me drop the seed in the furrows and he covered it. When we finished, we walked back to the cabin.

When we got back, Black Horse set me to building a fire in the stove while he cut some dried meat into strips. He took things from shelves on the wall and added them to a pot of water. The smell quickly filled the small cabin and it made my mouth water. While the pot boiled, Black Horse made coffee and, when it was done, he handed me a cup and said, "Let's sit outside".

We took our coffee outside and sat in chairs beside the cabin door, watching the changing colors of the sunset. We were both silent, just watching the changing sky, when Black Horse asked, "Climbing Bear, why have you decided you are no good?".

I didn't know how to answer. If I really looked at myself, I had to admit that I didn't think much of myself. But why did I feel that way? I wanted to blame someone. After all, why would I think I was rotten unless someone made me that way? I was silent for a long time and then said, "Black Horse, I am a dumb, ignorant, gay, [delete as CB says he hasn't mentioned this to BH when they are in the sweat.] drunk Indian. I have been blaming that on my dad's death and the death of my grandparents, leaving me alone in the world. But, if I'm honest, I let the events in my life become excuses for doing nothing, then complaining because I had nothing. I know I have really screwed up, but I don't see how I can change that."

Black Horse was silent, just staring into space for a long time. Then he said, "Climbing Bear, you need to have time and space to sort yourself out. I don't think you are ready for that yet. Let's eat." That concluded any discussion of me and my situation for a month. During the month, I helped Black Horse with planting and caring for his plants. I went with him to gather herbs and other things for food and medicine. Only after a week or more of such treks did I realize I was learning about herbs, medicines, and such.

I was getting up with the sun and going to bed with it and that made for a long day, even going to bed that early. There were things which needed doing, and I was getting stronger every day so I could do more. When I was not helping Black Horse, I started taking long walks, often trying to identify the plants I saw. I added more rocks to the dam in the stream until I had a pool deep enough for swimming if I was careful. Then, I guess, I had been in the Black Hills a month when I just ran out of things to do.

I had intended to rearrange the things in the half-loft, to make getting what we needed easier, and one afternoon, out of boredom, I started. I had just about finished when I noticed some large boxes over to one side. I opened one to see what was inside, and discovered it was full of books. I had never done any more reading than I had to and, since I had skipped school the last two years, reading was not easy. But one book caught my eye. It was about the Lakota. I took it down with me and asked Black Horse if I could read it. "Read 'em all," he replied. I started reading the book and had to ask Black Horse a lot of the words. I was afraid he would grow impatient with me, but he never did.

Summer came and I really enjoyed the cool water in the pond. Every morning I got up, went to the latrine and then hit the water. It was too shallow for diving, so I just jumped in. After breakfast--which I fixed as often as Black Horse--we went out to gather food, tend our plantings and do any other chores which needed doing. When we finished, I took the book I was reading and found a place to read. Sometimes I just sat by the cabin door, other times I went into the woods, sometimes I sat by the stream. I could go where I pleased to read, because I no longer needed Black Horse's help.

I was growing stronger every day and my body showed that. I had never been in such good shape. My hair was pretty long before I came and now it was long enough to braid. One afternoon when I

was complaining about the heat, Black Horse went into the cabin and returned with a soft buckskin breech cloth, and that became my wardrobe--except when we were working and I needed more protection. As a result, I became a very dark Redman. In June, Black Horse said he needed a sweat and asked if I'd like to join him. "I'll try, but I may get freaked out again," I replied.

"If you do, you can leave," he said.

I set to work preparing the fire pit, and got the fire going. Black Horse told me when it was ready for the rocks, and I put those in the pit and added more wood. Meanwhile, Black Horse had repaired the framework, which had come untied in a few places, then the two of us covered it with two layers of tarp, one blue and the other silver. When we finished, Black Horse said, "Climbing Bear, you might like to go into the woods and prepare yourself for a sweat". I didn't know what he meant, but didn't ask. Instead I just went walking and, when I found a pleasant spot in the woods, sat down. I wasn't really thinking, just letting the sights and sounds around me hold my attention. I'm not sure how long I sat, but finally I got up and walked back to the sweat lodge.

The stones in the pit were glowing red and orange. I stood looking at them and didn't hear Black Horse walk up behind me. "Sometimes the stones tell you something important," he said very softly, so softly that I wasn't startled. He walked to the edge of the pond, stripped and waded in. I followed him. We both scrubbed ourselves well and then walked back to the sweat lodge, which Black Hawk opened.

Instead of feeling hemmed in, smothered as I did before, as soon as the sweat started, I felt as though my world expanded, taking in the whole universe. It was a good feeling. I introduced myself to the spirit world and asked my dad to be my spirit guide for this sweat. After pouring water over the glowing rocks, Black Horse started singing very quietly to the beat of a small hand drum he held.

Black Horse opened the flap, went outside and brought back a very large rock. It was so hot its bright red glow lit up the lodge. When the flap was closed and more water poured over the stones, Black Horse spoke of endurance, cleanliness, strength and purity. I thought back over my life and how none of those characteristics had been mine. But now? A little over two months with Black Horse and I was definitely stronger than I had ever been. Purity? I really hadn't had any opportunity to be impure! But, yes, it was more than lack of opportunity. I had gained enough respect for myself that alcohol and screwing around had no appeal. Cleanliness? Certainly that was true physically, as Black Horse insisted on us bathing in the pond every morning, and usually every evening if we had been working. But, more than that, my spirit was growing clean. Endurance? That was a biggie because I could definitely stay away from alcohol and the life I had led before while I was here. As I said, I had little choice. But what about when I left? Could I endure then? I didn't know, but prayed that I could.

Once again, Black Horse opened the lodge and brought in more stones. He also brought in a new bucket of water and when he returned to his place, poured a dipper of the cold water over his head and bid me do the same. It was a great feeling. Black Horse instructed me in the sweat lodge as we went through the ceremony. At first I thought it would ruin his sweat, but he seemed perfectly capable of being both teacher and participant at the same time. So when he said we were in the third endurance and it was a time for individual prayers, I had gotten over some of my embarrassment and while prayer was not something I did often, I felt at home doing it here. I prayed for myself, for Black Horse and for Wounded Hawk. I also prayed for Running Water and, as I did, wondered where he was and what he was doing. Finally, I prayed that I would accept who I was, including being gay. It was the first time I had mentioned that in front of Black Horse.

Finally, Black Horse said we were at the endurance of healing, not just healing of bodies, but of hearts and minds. As he chanted softly, and for the last time poured water over the stones, I felt the sweat pouring from my body was taking with it much of the anger, hate, and fear which had been eating away at my heart, mind and soul. As the sweat soaked into Mother Earth, I felt her taking from me some

of those lazy, crazy, no-good spirits which had plagued me so long.

The weeks following the sweat were very happy ones for me. There was not a lot of work to do, the fields were providing some fresh vegetables, I had finished one box of books and was reading very well. One evening as we were sitting watching the sunset, Black Horse said, "Climbing Bear, you have very little use for it here with me but, when you are ready, you have to return to the white man's world. I have watched your progress reading and you are smart. I think it's time you started working on math."

"How can I do that, Black Horse? I know I will be lost very quickly and that will be the end of it."

"Not if you have a tutor."

"Where am I going to find a tutor in this wilderness?"

"I thought you might be willing to have me tutor you," he responded.

"You? You can tutor me in math?"

"Sure. I was good at math in school before I ran away, and after that I studied it on my own. Can't get very far in calculus but, up to that, I'm here. You'll find some books in a box in the loft."

I was kinda embarrassed when I opened the box Black Horse had indicated and found math workbooks starting at third grade. I started just to skip ahead, but when I said something to Black Horse, he asked why I was afraid of doing something easy. "If you are finding nothing new, you can just whip through a workbook, but if there's something you have missed, don't be ashamed to learn it."

We never had any light in the cabin because we went to bed at dark and got up with the sun. Some evenings I was reading or working on something and didn't want to stop, but I didn't want to disturb Black Horse by having a lamp burning. One evening I was struggling with a math problem and just couldn't seem to get it. I sighed, put my workbook down and said, "I guess that will have to wait until tomorrow. It's getting too dark to see."

"Go inside and light the lamp," Black Horse said.

"I don't want to disturb your sleep," I answered.

"You won't," he said. We both went inside and he asked if I needed help.

When I said I did, he pulled his chair up to the table where I was working, looked at the problem and had me try again while he watched. At one point he asked, "Why did you do that?"

When I told him, he didn't tell me I was dumb or not thinking. Instead he grunted and said, "I guess that's why that problem's there, to trick you. Look at it again. Try to see it from a different angle."

When I did, it was immediately obvious to me what I had been doing wrong. "I guess I'm just too dense," I said.

"No, you just looked at the situation wrong. We all do that much of the time. We all need to learn to stop and try to see things from a different place. Like you need to see being gay. Most think it's wrong, but it's not. It's just different. Two spirits blessed, my medicine man called it. You have the spirit of both man and woman. You can do much. Well, if you don't need me, I'm going to sleep." Before I could offer to blow out the lamp, Black Horse was rolled up in his buffalo robe on the floor and sound asleep. Since he had gotten me over the hump, I continued to work for a while longer, finishing another workbook, this one eighth grade math.

The summer moved on and I loved every day of it. Every day I grew browner, stronger and happier. Black Horse told me how the Navajo greeted the morning by running and shouting, and I asked if I could. He simply shrugged and said, "Why not?". I started running the next morning and ran every day, rain or shine. Before long I was running a mile or two without really breathing too hard. And I loved it.

When fall came, we gathered the corn and beans, other things we had grown, and stored them. I noticed we were running low on some supplies but, since there was nothing I could do about it and Black Horse seemed unconcerned, I didn't mention it.

We did a sweat about once a month. Sometimes Black Horse asked me to do one, and I had learned how to conduct a sweat almost as well as he. He was right, the stones often told a story as I gazed at them during a sweat. One time I saw my grandmother's face in the dancing glow of the stones. I started weeping because of how I had treated her and the face seemed to change from just a face on a stone to my grandmother, and she said, "Climbing Bear, you are dear to my heart. I understand your rebellion and I forgive you. Grow into the mighty warrior you are." Having said that, the figure disappeared. In other sweats I was visited by the spirits of my father and grandfather, both forgiving me and telling me to become who I was intended to be.

In early October, fall came with its glorious colors--the reds, yellows and golds of the trees against the blue, blue sky. The days were warm but the nights were becoming cool. One early evening, as I was returning from a walk in the woods, I saw Wounded Hawk's truck coming toward the cabin. We arrived about the same time and I embraced him as he got out of the truck.

"It's sure hard to believe the beat-up Indian I left here last spring is standing before me," he said as he held me in a bear hug. "You are one good-looking Indian," he laughed. "Well filled-out, Climbing Bear, since I saw you last. Black Horse, you need to bottle and sell your medicine to all those scrawny white folks."

"I have done little. Climbing Bear has worked hard becoming who he is," Black Horse replied. The two Indians sat in the chairs beside the front door, talking, while I prepared supper. When it was ready, I called them in. Wounded Hawk was pleased with the meal and said so. He told us some of the things going on in the outside world, but not much--I guess because we weren't really interested.

The next morning, Wounded Hawk said we needed to unload the supplies, which we did. This time I carried them to the loft. When I was carrying the first load up, Wounded Hawk laughed and said, "Damn good-looking legs I see from down here". I looked over my shoulder and smiled. I'd have been lying if I said I didn't like his comment.

After we had the supplies stored, Wounded Hawk asked if I'd like to go with him in search of some medicine plants he wanted. Of course I did. I had learned just about all the plants from Black Horse, and surprised Wounded Hawk when I asked what he needed and took him directly to the plants. We talked as we walked through the forest[s] and it was only later that I realized I had done most of the talking. Wounded Hawk had asked questions from time to time, but had said very little.

When we returned, Black Horse had started a fire in the fire pit and was ready to put the rocks on. I did that, added wood and then the three of us had dinner. "The boy has done well with his reading and math," Black Horse said. "I hope you brought more books."

"Two boxes," Wounded Hawk answered. "Climbing Bear, years ago Harvard had what it called the Harvard shelf of books, books that every educated person should know. You've read most of them if you have read what I brought. The others I brought this time. I also brought something else. Don't know whether you will be interested or not, but I brought the whole University of Chicago Great Books program. If you use it, ok. If not, that's ok too. Of course, if you are ready to go back, you can bring them with you."

My heart sank. I hadn't thought about leaving Black Horse and this hidden corner of the Black Hills. I got a huge lump in my throat and couldn't speak. Finally I looked up and Wounded Hawk had to see the tears in my eyes. "What's the matter, Climbing Bear?"

When I was finally able to speak, I said, "Wounded Hawk, I haven't thought about leaving this very

special place, a place where I have finally found peace, peace like I haven't known since I was last with my dad. I guess somewhere in my mind I knew I couldn't stay here forever, but I'm not ready to leave yet."

"Is it because you are afraid of facing the world out there?" he asked.

"Maybe. I don't think so. I just think I am not ready. Weeks ago Black Horse mentioned a vision quest and I have thought a lot about that, but haven't done it. I think there is still much I need to learn and understand."

"No-one will make you go, Climbing Bear," Black Horse said.

"No, no-one will ask you to go. I only mentioned it because I will be leaving tomorrow. Soon it will be impossible for me to get back and, to tell the truth, I don't plan on coming back until spring. If you want to stay, you can stay. I only warn you that the winter can be bitter. You will be in this cabin with little possibility of leaving for days at a time. It will be bitterly cold, but if you want to stay..."

"I do! I want to stay. I think I will know when it is time to leave and this is not it. Please!"

"Whoa! Hold everything, Climbing Bear, no-one's pushing for you to leave. You want to stay, you stay. I just want to be sure you understand that if you choose to stay, you are here until the spring thaw," Wounded Hawk said.

"I'm here until the thaw," I said.

"Good, I'm glad you made that decision," Wounded Hawk said.

"I knew he would," Black Horse said. "He will know when he's ready."

Just as the sun started setting, I opened the sweat lodge and started the ceremony. I think Wounded Hawk was surprised when I was the one conducting the sweat. During the sweat, the spirits of my mom and dad appeared and smiled at me. Neither said anything, but I knew they were proud of me. I was glad because I had been sure they would never have any reason to be proud of their son. While I still saw my parents, the faces of my grandmother and grandfather appeared in the hot stones and they, too, smiled.

When we were in the pond after the sweat, Wounded Hawk said, "You make me proud, Climbing Bear. You make me proud."

The night was very cool and I welcomed my sleeping bag for the first time since I abandoned it last summer for just a blanket. As I lay on the hard shelf, which had served as my bed for months now, I was very happy. It seemed that all who were important to me were proud of me. Even more than that was the fact that I knew I was a decent human being, something I had never dreamed would be true.

When I got up the next morning, Black Horse handed me a new pair of jeans and a new shirt. "Breech cloth weather is gone," he said as he handed them to me. When I pulled on the jeans, I realized why Wounded Hawk had brought some which fit neither me nor Black Hawk. My old ones would have fallen off. I had lost at least four inches of pot belly and replaced it with a hard stomach. I had gained a whole shirt size because hard work had developed my chest and arms. When Wounded Hawk saw me in the new clothes he smiled slowly and said quietly, "Damn, you are going to drive some men wild". I just smiled back.

Wounded Hawk left mid-morning, after assuring us he would be back in the spring. He carried with him carvings Black Horse had done during the summer and, along with them, some I had done after Black Horse had taught me to carve.

The remainder of the autumn passed quickly and we awoke to a snow-covered world one morning--I didn't even know what month it was, much less what day. When I asked Black Horse he said it was sometime in November. After that first snow, I did not see the ground until spring. During the long

winter there was little to do. Black Horse and I did some hunting in early winter, but we had stored enough meat to last until spring and there was no hunting for sport, just for food. The logs we had hauled to the cabin when I first arrived, I cut into lengths to fit the stove, providing both exercise and warmth. Except on the bitterest of cold days, I continued to run--face, ears and hands carefully covered to avoid frostbite. So we stayed warm. At night the fire went out and each morning I awoke to a cold cabin. I used the fat pine to start a fire and as soon as it was burning well and warming the cabin, I rushed to the pond, cracked the ice and bathed--very quickly. On some mornings it was so cold Black Horse told me not to go because I might get frostbite. On those mornings I dressed warmly and went to the stream and brought back buckets of water. Black Horse told me that Indians often did not bathe in the winter, but he liked the white man custom so we bathed every day, either in the cold, cold pond or in the warm cabin.

One morning when I got up, Black Horse had already started a fire and the cabin was warm. The wind outside made venturing out dangerous, so we bathed in the warm cabin. There was a pile of wood in the cabin for just such days, so I didn't have to go out even for firewood. As we were eating breakfast, Black Horse said, "Do you know what day this is?"

I laughed and replied, "Black Horse, I haven't known what day it was since I came here."

"It's January," he said, "January 20th, your birthday. You are twenty-two. Tell me about your twenty-two years."

I wasn't sure what Black Horse meant, so I just started with my earliest memories and told him whatever I could remember. I talked for ages. It was almost time for lunch when I said, "And my twenty-second birthday came without my knowing it and it found me happier, wiser, more at peace than I have ever been."

"Good," Black Horse said. He then got up, walked to an old trunk I had never seen opened, opened it and took out a bundle. "Happy birthday, warrior," he said as he handed me the bundle.

I opened it slowly and inside found beautifully decorated leggings, breech cloth, vest, head and arm bands. Only when I looked at what had covered the bundle did I realize it was a buffalo robe. I got tears in my eyes as I grabbed the old Indian and hugged him to myself. "I am so honored, Black Horse," I said.

"You honor me," was all he said.

## **Chapter Two**

One day, weeks later, I realized there was the feel of spring in the air. Black Horse stood in the cabin doorway, looked around, looked at the sky and said, "Spring is here. We need to get rid of the winter." I didn't know what he meant until he started hauling everything in the cabin outside. The only thing he left in the cabin were the things stored in the loft and the stove. As soon as everything was out, he started cleaning, with my help of course. When everything was replaced, he took plants dried from last summer and spread them on the floor. "Now it smells of spring," he said, and it did.

The next day we went on a long walk, gathering plants, some added to a stew, others eaten raw. They had the taste of spring. A week or so later, spring was definitely with us. There were plants blooming everywhere, we had started bathing in the pond every day and some mornings we didn't bother with a fire until time to cook.

I was becoming very restless and didn't know why. I felt that there was something important I needed to do and couldn't figure out what. I guess Black Horse noticed it, but he said nothing until one day he say, "We have allowed spring to come without a sweat".

We prepared for a sweat, which Black Horse conducted. The only thing unusual which happened

during the sweat left me puzzled. When I was seeking guidance, I looked at the stones and saw the image of a bear looking directly at me. He seemed to be waiting for me to do something, but I didn't know what. After the sweat, when Black Horse and I had turned in for the night, he said, "What did you see in the sweat, Climbing Bear?"

When I told him of seeing the bear and that the bear seemed to be waiting for me to do something, he grunted. "Black Horse, I don't know what it means."

"What do you think it means?" He asked.

"I don't know. I have been restless lately and I can't explain that either. It's like I am supposed to be doing something, but I have no idea what. Sometimes I think I need to be looking for something, but when I think about it, I don't know what I am supposed to be looking for, where to look for it, or even how."

Black Horse grunted again and then said, "Well let's sleep on it. Maybe we'll have a vision." With those words, I could hear him turn over and soon I heard snoring. I lay awake for much longer than usual, trying to figure out what was going on with me. Finally I drifted off to sleep. Sometime in the night, I got up and walked outside. The night was very clear and the stars seemed to be so close I could reach out and touch them. As I watched, a shooting star streaked across the sky and seemed to point to the Big Dipper--the Big Bear to most of us Indians. A bear in the sweat lodge, a shooting star pointing the way to the bear. Someone was definitely trying to tell me something, but the message wasn't getting through.

I went back inside, crawled in my sleeping bag and went to sleep. I wasn't sure whether I was awake or dreaming when I found myself in a moonlit glade. I was dressed in a breech cloth, nothing else. I looked around slowly and couldn't recognize where I was. Suddenly I heard the savage roar of a bear. I was very frightened, but unable to move. The underbrush at the edge of the glade directly in front of me parted and an enormous black bear came crashing through, headed directly toward me. I was speechless and paralyzed. The bear was only feet from me when he raised himself on his hind legs, towering above me, his front paws upraised. I expected to be crushed, but he took me into his great arms, turned and approached a very tall pine. Holding me under one arm, he used the other and started climbing the pine. When he reached the top, he turned me around until I was looking out over a vast landscape. I had the definite feeling that somewhere out there was something I needed, but I didn't know what.

While I was trying to discover what I needed and where to find it, I found myself in a place I did know. It was a spot beneath an overhanging rock beside a small stream, a place where I had spent many hours reading, thinking and observing. I was sitting very still, just observing all going on around me. I was at peace. The next thing I knew I was awake. The sun coming in a window had fallen across my face, telling me it was time to be up.

I started a fire and prepared breakfast, then ran to the pond for my morning dip. I hadn't seen Black Horse but that wasn't unusual, he was often gone when I got up. When I got back to the cabin, he was finishing breakfast. When we sat down he asked, "Climbing Bear, did you have a vision last night?"

"Black Horse, I really don't know. I think I might have, but I'm not sure and I don't know what it means if I did." I then told Black Horse about my dreams. All the time I was talking, he was nodding. "So that's it. If I had visions, that's what they were, but I still don't have a clue as to what they are all about."

Black Horse grunted again, then asked, "Why is the place you dreamed about, the overhanging rock, special?"

"I guess it's because it is the one place I can point to where I learn much, so very much. It's kinda like a private classroom."

"Black Horse nodded while I was speaking. When I finished, he said, "We know about the bear. It's your spirit guide."

"Well, I wish he did more guiding and less making riddles."

"Climbing Bear, last spring Wounded Hawk mentioned a vision quest. You know about vision quests?" I nodded. "You were not ready then. Now you are. Your totem animal has called you to it and your special place has called you. Don't think there is a puzzle. It's pretty clear."

"Now that you explain it, it is. So when do I do a vision quest?"

"When you are ready. There'll have to be a sweat, and you need to prepare yourself physically because it is a long fast."

The next few days, Black Horse spent most of our waking hours telling me about Indian ways, having me eat and drink until I was ready to burst, getting the tobacco pouches ready for me to mark my questing place, and telling me stories. One morning he sat looking out across the canyon, his thoughts seemingly far away. Finally he asked, "Climbing Bear, you told me of your parents and grandparents being buried and that is good for that is their way. It is not our way, the Lakota way." He then told me the Lakota custom. A scaffold is erected, the body wrapped in a buffalo robe and placed on top of the scaffold. "Guess you can't do that if you are near other human beings, but it's the Lakota way." He went on to talk about the giving of eagle feathers, the sun dance and all seven of the Lakota ceremonies.

The next morning I told him I was ready to make my vision quest. We prepared the sweat lodge and Black Horse conducted a sweat at noon. When we came out, he handed me the four pouches of tobacco and embraced me. I turned and walked to my questing place.

Black Horse told me to take my buffalo robe with me and I was glad I did. It was still early enough in the spring for the nights to get chilly. The first night I rolled up in the robe and slept--no dreams, no visions. The next day, I was watching the forest around me when I got very sleepy. I curled up on the robe and slept. Still no visions, no dreams I could remember. The second night I was sitting on the robe, looking across the stream, watching the foxfire, strings of light in the darkness. As I watched, I saw a woman walking toward me from across the stream. When she reached me, she smiled and said, "Climbing Bear, my son, I have longed to be with you, to guide you, but I was taken to the spirit world as you came into this world. I have wept for you many days, but now I am filled with joy. You are a man, a proud Ndee, my son." With those words, she reached out and touched my head and my chest. "Be wise my son, be loving." As she spoke those words, she disappeared. I curled up on the robe and slept.

I don't know whether it was the same night or if I had slept all day and woke up the following night, but once again I was sitting looking across the stream. I had been very hungry the last time I was awake, but this time I was not hungry, just thirsty. I debated going to the stream and drinking--it was not forbidden, just seldom done. As I debated with myself, I saw another figure crossing the stream, walking toward me. When it was a few feet in front of me, I still could not recognize it because it has been mutilated, its face all torn and bloody. As it stood in front of me, I was frightened, then felt tremendous pity and heartache. As I did, the figure's wounds began disappearing until the face was whole and it was the face of my dad.

I reached out for him, but I couldn't touch him. "Climbing Bear, my beloved son, I watch over you and I have suffered because you have lacked my guidance and have made some very bad choices. Now you have been healed. Now you are whole. And because you are whole, I am whole. There are many ways to be a warrior in this world. The least worthwhile, the least proud is the way I chose, the way of death. You have not chosen that way, but you will be a mighty warrior and I am proud of you, brave Climbing Bear." I again reached out, trying to embrace my dad, but he was gone.

I slept again, waking up in late afternoon according to the sun. All around me were the sounds of

the many creatures sharing my world. As I watched, a mother bear and her two cubs came to the stream, drank and then crossed the stream. The two cubs came to where I was sitting, sniffed me and then started playing. The mother bear watched all three of us and then turned and walked away, followed by her cubs.

As the bears were drinking, I was aware that I was no longer thirsty.

Later, as I watched the sunset through the trees, I thought about what my parents had said to me. I found myself weeping both because of all the shame I had brought to them and my grandparents and because of the love they had made known to me, even from the spirit world.

Long after the sunset, I fell asleep. As I slept, I dreamed. I dreamed of becoming a real man, responsible for myself, and of a great love. I knew the great love of my life was a man, a man who understood me and who loved me in spite of what I had been. He loved me for what I was. I could see his shadow, but not the man himself. My heart swelled with love for someone I did not know and had never known, I knew that. But I was comforted knowing that I would not spend my life alone.

When I awoke, Black Horse was standing beside me, holding out a bowl filled with a liquid. "Drink this," he said and when he did, I started laughing. When I regained control, I said, "I feel like Alice in Wonderland who kept finding things to drink".

Black Horse laughed with me and then said, "Don't think this will make you grow small or tall, but it will make you feel great".

"I feel great already, Black Horse," I said as I drank from the bowl. Black Horse told me I had been gone for five days. I was surprised.

When we got back to the cabin, Black Horse gave me things to drink until he felt I could have solid food. I was weak, but regained my strength quickly.

It was almost time to begin planting and I was surprised when I suggested we get started that Black Horse said, "It can wait". We spent very lazy days walking in the woods, talking and even discussing some of the things I had read. It was a wonderful time. I was really alive, spring had gotten into my blood. I was often as playful as a little boy. When I was, Black Horse watched and smiled.

Two weeks, I guess, after my vision quest, Black Horse said we needed to do a sweat. He let me do all the preparations and conduct the ceremony. That he wanted to do the sweat at noon was kinda strange. We had done one at noon, the sweat before my vision quest, but usually we started at sunset.

During the sweat as I was staring into the glowing rocks, I saw a face, a face I did not know, but one which caused a strange feeling in me. I said nothing to Black Horse about it, without knowing why I chose not to mention it.

When the sweat was over, Black Horse was sitting beside the cabin door and I was romping around in front of him. Finally I settled down and sat at his feet. "It has been a good year, Climbing Bear, a very good year. We are both ready to get on with what we need to do."

"It has been a very good year, indeed, Black Horse. I will never forget it or you, but you are right. It is time I got on with my life and what I need to do." I sat still for a very long time, thinking about the year and about the wise old Indian who put off dying so he could straighten me out. As soon as I had the thought, I looked up at Black Horse. I was not surprised to see his head resting on his chest.

I took Black Horse's body into the cabin and placed it on the table. I took a bucket and went to the stream and brought back fresh water and washed his body. I suspected I knew where I would find what I needed to dress him so I opened his old trunk, the one from which he had taken my birthday clothing. Sure enough, in the bottom of the trunk was another bundle containing leggings, breech cloth and vest. As I lifted the bundle, an envelope fell to the floor. It was addressed to me. I opened it and inside was an

eagle feather. It was wrapped in a note which read simply, "For a true warrior, Climbing Bear, from his spirit father, Black Horse". Until I saw that, I had managed to hold back the tears, but no longer.

When I was finally able to contain my grief, I dressed Black Horse, covered him with his buffalo robe and sat beside him. I guess I slept, I'm not sure, but all through the night, spirits came to be with Black Horse for a while. There were many and all spoke to me of their journey into wholeness under the gentle guidance of Black Horse.

As soon as the dawn came, I took an axe and went into the woods where I found saplings strong and straight enough to make a scaffold. It was well past noon when I had finished it. I had chosen to build it at the edge of the forest, overlooking the cabin, the sweat lodge and the pond in the stream. When it was finished, I waited until the sun was setting and then placed Black Horse's body on it. Recalling phrases from the prayers and chants I had heard from Black Horse's lips, I sent his spirit to the spirit world.

I returned to the cabin and started gathering my things together. I wasn't sure why, but I sensed it needed doing. I had just finished, made a pot of coffee and was sitting outside drinking it when I saw lights approaching. In a few minutes, Wounded Hawk's truck pulled up. I put down my coffee and walked toward the truck. Wounded Hawk stepped out of the truck just as I reached it. As soon as I saw him, I started crying again. He embraced me, held me close. He didn't have to ask what was wrong, he knew. As he held me he said, "Rejoice, Climbing Bear. You gave him one of the most wonderful years of his life, a year he would not have had without you."

It took me a while to get control of myself. When I did, we walked to the cabin, I fixed coffee for both of us and we sat at the table talking. I told Wounded Hawk how Black Horse had died, what I had done, and he was very pleased. We talked about my vision quest and my reading and thinking over the winter. I told him I knew I was ready to go and I wasn't surprised that Black Horse had decided it was time for him to go as well. "But I will miss him."

"We all will, but he will be alive and well so long as we are alive and living well." Then, abruptly, he said, "I see you are packed. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, as soon as I change." I had dressed in my Indian clothes to honor Black Horse's spirit.

"Do you want to go tonight?" Wounded Hawk asked.

I nodded, then said, "If you can drive out of here at night".

"I can. Get dressed."

I took off my Indian dress and, while I was standing naked, Wounded Hawk laughed and said, "I'm into women myself, but you have become one good-looking man".

"Thanks," I replied. "Now if I can just find a man--a real man. He doesn't have to be good-looking though I wouldn't knock that."

As soon as I was dressed, we loaded my things, including two boxes of books I especially wanted, and a couple boxes of carvings. I suggested we leave Black Horse's, but Wounded Hawk said, "No, we'll take them. He did them for you. They will provide some money which you will need once you leave here." When everything was loaded, I got in the truck with Wounded Hawk and didn't look back.

The ride out of the canyon was rough, especially so since I am sure Wounded Hawk was driving more by instinct than sight. We had very little to say until he was back on a paved road and could relax a bit with his driving. I was half-asleep, I guess, when he startled me. "Climbing Bear, you have had a good year getting yourself together, physically--and, as I said, you've done a damn good job of that--mentally, emotionally and spiritually. How do you feel about all of that?"

"Very good. I think I learned my lessons well. Yes, I think I am in great shape."

"Well, it's time to see. You had no alcohol in the Black Hills, you have had the best possible mentor, so now it's time to see if you can live in the white man's world. Maybe a few of us can live the old way, but fewer and fewer I suspect, and I don't think you are one of them. How did your studying and reading go?"

"Very good, I think. There was not a whole lot to do during the winter, so I read a lot. Did the whole Great Books thing. Wish I had someone to discuss them with, although sometimes Black Horse would talk with me about them."

"I think the next step is to get you in a situation where you can get your GED and then decide where you go from there. I have made arrangements for you to live with a good Indian family in Winnemucca, Nevada. The husband has a great Indian name, John Taylor. His wife is Betsy Taylor. They are a middle-aged couple who have never been able to have children, so they take in strays I pick up here and there. Right now they are without and I reserved a place for you. I think you will like them--love them. Can't get you there right away, so you'll have to hang with me a few days."

We got to Denver mid-morning after stopping for breakfast. I found everything too salty or too sweet. Wounded Hawk noticed I wasn't eating much as asked why, then before I could answer, said, "Right, too sweet and too salty. I should have remembered. It takes me a long time to get used to all the salt and sugar when I get back from time in the spirit places." He called the waitress over and ordered fresh fruit for me. It tasted very good.

Wounded Hawk checked my clothes and discovered I had only one pair of jeans and a couple shirts, so he took me shopping. He finally convinced me I would have to learn to wear sneakers and maybe dress shoes. I felt like my feet were in prison. He got me outfitted and then we went to a drugstore for toothbrush, toothpaste, that sort of thing. Thank goodness I didn't need a razor.

Wounded Hawk said we needed to take the carvings to the shop which had always handled them. "They sell only things made by Indians, none of the Chinese-made 'real Indian' crap and they pay a fair price." We took the two boxes of carvings to the shop. The owner, a misplaced Hopi, looked at each piece carefully and wrote a price for it on a pad. "Less than half of these I recognize as Black Horse's. His carvings are always good and command a good price. The rest are definitely good, very fine in fact. I hate to say this, but some are better than Black Horse's. They are really good." Wounded Hawk looked at me and smiled. I blushed.

"You will get no more from Black Horse," Wounded Hawk said. "He died a few days ago. The others are by Climbing Bear, here. He may be able to supply you with a few from time to time."

"I'll buy all you carve," the owner said. "At the very least, promise me first dibs on them."

"Sure. Don't know how many there will be since I'm not sure where I am headed."

"Just promise not to forget us." He took the pad on which he had been writing prices, used a calculator and said, "I get \$3,500 for the lot. Do I need to separate them and make two checks?"

"No, Black Horse left them to Climbing Bear," Wounded Hawk said.

The owner made out a check for \$3,500 and handed it to me. It was a small fortune. When we left the shop, Wounded Hawk suggested we got to the bank on which the check was drawn, open an account and deposit most of the money. "You won't get your ATM card for a several days and your printed checks will come later. It might be wise to get a couple hundred in cash and about the same amount in travelers checks. You won't need much money, but with traveler's checks, you won't risk losing it all and they are as good as cash most places.

We took care of that and had to wait for the teller to get me a dozen checks printed to last until I got my regular ones. Wounded Hawk had given the teller my address in Winnemucca.

When we finished at the bank, I told Wounded Hawk I would like to get some carving knives. "I have been using a couple of beat-up knives Black Horse gave me, but if I'm going to get the kind of money I just got, I'd like a good set."

Wounded Hawk thought that was a good idea. "If you are going to keep carving--and I don't see why you shouldn't--you need a good set, a very good set." He took me to a fine shop which had all kinds of knives and other craft materials. I looked at the carving sets and saw a good one that would cost me \$100. As I continued to look at it, Wounded Hawk said, "Climbing Bear, your carving has made you enough money to get a good start in the white man's world. \$100 may look like a lot of money, but remember what it can earn you. I don't think you want to compromise." What he said made sense, but I was a bit floored when he selected a set of knives and proper whit stones, which cost \$700. The clerk didn't want to take a newly printed check, especially since it listed a Nevada address. I looked at the knives and hoped I could find such a set where I was headed.

"Is that Indian still manager of this place?" Wounded Hawk asked.

"Yes he is," the clerk answered.

"Is he around?" The clerk nodded. "Get him please," Wounded Hawk said.

It was clear the manager was prepared for a debate, but as soon as he saw Wounded Hawk he said to the clerk, "Why didn't you tell me you had a couple of Indians out here?". It was obvious the clerk didn't know what to do, "What's the problem, Wounded Hawk?" the manager asked, shaking hands with Wounded Hawk.

"We have a problem here. This is Climbing Bear, my godson. He has just sold a bunch of carvings to that Hopi down the street and would like to buy some carving knives. He only has those instant printed kind of checks and your clerk was reluctant to accept one. Can't blame him as Climbing Bear's address is in Nevada. I'll vouch for the check if that helps."

"Sure, no problem, Wounded Hawk. Not much lost if the check's bad," the manager smiled, but the smile disappeared when he saw the check. "Just to keep my scalp, would you put your name and address on the front," he asked with a weak smile. Wounded Hawk did and I got the knives and we left. In the truck, I opened the case they were in and looked at them again. I was pleased that I had bought the best because I knew that they could easily pay for themselves.

### **Chapter Three**

When we got back to Wounded Hawk's place, there was a message on his machine asking him to call someone in Reno. He did and as luck would have it, they wanted him to come to the University of Nevada--Reno and lead a seminar on modern Indian writers. He talked for half an hour, I guess getting the details, hung up the phone and said, "Black Horse is definitely working for us. I had been asked about doing a seminar last winter and couldn't, but said I was interested. The person they had lined up had a bad case of falsifying a resume and got booted so they were left holding the bag. The seminar starts next Wednesday. This is Thursday so we'll take our time and drive to Nevada, I'll drop you off at the Taylors and head to Reno in plenty of time for the seminar. We'll leave in the morning. Now let's find something you can eat. You can wear your moccasins if you like."

"I like," I answered then ran to my room and got them. We drove to a part of Denver I knew--vaguely since I don't think I ever saw it sober. Wounded Hawk stopped in front of a nondescript building and we went inside. Most of the people sitting at round tables were Indians, but there was a number of whites as well. When we sat down, a young Indian girl came over, took one look at Wounded Hawk and asked, "The usual?"

"The usual," he replied. She returned with glasses of water and two cups of strong coffee. Shortly after she had brought our drinks, she returned with bowls of steaming stew and wonderful corn bread. As soon as that was finished, an older woman brought us roast venison which was done to perfection. As she turned to leave, Wounded Hawk said, "No use looking Maria. You'll have to look else where for your daughter," and laughed. As Marie walked away, he said to me, "I was half joking, but you can be sure Maria was checking you out. She has a nineteen year old daughter who is a real beauty. She's at University of Colorado-Boulder and Maria is afraid she will take up with some breed or Anglo. Probably will happen, but Maria checks out every young Indian guy who comes in and tries to get her daughter to date the one if she approves." We finished the roast and Wounded Hawk asked, "Dessert?"

"Nothing sweet," I replied.

"Maybe a little sweet?"

"Maybe a little." The young girl who had waited on us first came over when Wounded Hawk caught her eye. I guess she knew what he was going to order because she brought a dish prepared with chokecherries. Delicious, but not overly sweet.

When we got back to the house, it was long past my bedtime and I was very sleepy. I went to my room, undressed and slipped into bed. Half an hour later I was still wide awake, but dreadfully sleepy. I finally realized that I felt as though I was sinking, smothering in the bed. I crawled out of bed, got my sleeping bag and lay in the floor and was asleep in seconds.

I was awake with the sun, took a shower--in cold water, hot water seemed unclean to me now--and dressed. I had very few things not packed and I had them in order when Wounded Hawk called me to breakfast. We ate, cleaned up after ourselves and loaded our things in his truck and left Denver. I had a taste of getting back into the world I hadn't known for a year and decided it might not be as easy I thought.

As we left Denver behind, Wounded Hawk said we were in no hurry and would take the scenic route. That made me happy because superhighways are made for avoiding the seeing things. They get you from one city to another with as little thought as possible.

Often we turned down roads that didn't appear on the map, but which took us into the wilderness. Thursday afternoon Wounded Hawk turned off a state highway and it appeared we were going cross country because I saw no trail, much less a road. He drove into a grove of old, gnarled trees, stopped and said, "We'll be camping here tonight." While Wounded Hawk got out a locker with food in it, I gathered pine cones and dead limbs and soon had a fire started. It was spring, but we were in the high desert and it got cold at night. When we had eaten, we wrapped ourselves in our sleeping bags and sat by the glowing embers of our fire and talked. We talked about my year with Black Horse and my future.

"Climbing Bear, I am an academic in the white man's world. It has given me a good living and I like it, but don't think I want you to follow in my footsteps. You choose your way. I will insist that you get your GED. Until you do that, many paths are closed to you. The Taylor's had already found out what you need to do to accomplish that."

"Do they know I am gay? That has been worrying me," I said.

"No, they don't know, not because it would make any difference to them, but because the question hasn't been asked and won't be asked by them. If you want to tell them, fine. That's your decision. They are simply expecting a young Indian who needs to get back into the world most all of us have to live in. They may or may not have a job lined up for you. Really doesn't matter because if you can't find a job, you can always carve. Probably make more than you could at a job.

Friday we crossed into Utah. When I mentioned that I'd like to see the dinosaur fossils at Dinosaur National Monument, we made a side trip and spent time in the park. When we left, Wounded Hawk said

we'd camp out again Friday night, but live high Saturday night. I learned what he meant when we reached Salt Lake City Friday afternoon and checked in to one of the best hotels in the city. "UN-Reno is paying my expenses and since we will be camping out over half the time, I see no reason why we shouldn't have the best the other half."

We did camp out the next two days, finally arriving in Winnemucca Tuesday afternoon. I was pretty nervous about meeting the Taylors, but I needn't have been. Betsy Taylor could best be described as pleasingly plump. It was a pity she never had children because she looked the way I thought mothers should look, but if she had, she wouldn't have been mother to so many who had none. John Taylor was wiry, tall for an Indian and thin, but very strong. Both welcomed me with open arms and I soon felt very comfortable with them.

I didn't know what arrangements Wounded Hawk had made concerning my keep so when we were having dinner the night I arrived, I told them I had money from selling my carvings and could pay for my keep if they would tell me what I owed.

"Climbing Bear, we were never able to have children which we wanted very much. The Great Spirit had other plans for us. We have had children in the house practically from the day we married. They are our children. A family does not expect the children to pay for their keep and we are a family," John laughed and said, "Of course, most new children aren't full grown as you are, but that's no never mind."

"John, Betsy, this is one child who is very thankful for your kindness and who will make you proud, that's a promise."

"I'm sure you will."

I had saved a carving for the Taylors and I got up from the table and got it and gave it to Betsy. "Climbing Bear, it is beautiful." Betsy said as she looked at the carving. I had carved it after the she-bear had brought her cubs to me when I was on my vision quest. It was a carving of the mother bear and the two cubs. "I will treasure it always, she said as she reached up and pulled my face to hers and kissed me on the cheek.

Wounded Hawk left the next morning for Reno and when I had finished breakfast, John and I talked about my plans for the future. "You can take a free GED prep course here, Climbing Bear, and take the tests as you are ready for them. You might be able to pass them now, but you will be tested to make sure what you need to study. I don't know what kind of work you would like. The only opening I know right now is with the grocery. They need someone to stock. It pays too little--everything around here does--and you will have to work nights. You can work from 4:00 until midnight or midnight until 8:00. Second shift will just about wreck any social life and third shift means you will be sleeping most of the day. Maybe later something else will open up. Of course, you don't have to go to work right away."

"I'm not worried about any social life, but I think I need to check out when I can take the GED prep course and plan around that. Wounded Hawk thinks it's important. I am not sure it is."

"It is in a kinda strange way. Of course, if you want to go on to higher education, it is an absolute essential. But even if you don't, most people look at a high school dropout and see problems. We can check on that today since I took the day off work."

I learned that the prep classes during the day were generally filled with very young dropouts who still needed teachers. The evening course was computer-based and a student could move at his own speed. I told the director of the program I would like to be in the evening group. He told me I'd have to wait until there was a vacancy since the class was full.

John and I went to meet the manager of a local grocery store and I hired on to stock from midnight until eight in the morning. "I hope you can start tonight," the manager said. "I have been without stocking

help for three weeks and having to do it myself. I am about ready to drop." I told him I could. He said he'd help me get started and then it was my ball game.

Within a couple weeks, I had settled into a routine. I worked from midnight until eight in the morning, went home, showered and had breakfast. John had long since left for work. Betsy didn't work--wrong! She didn't work at an outside job. She always had a cup of coffee and we talked while I had breakfast. After breakfast, I slept until noon, had lunch and then spent the afternoon carving and preparing for my GED using a workbook I had purchased.

The second Sunday I was in Winnemucca, John and Betsy asked if I'd like to take a ride and see some of the countryside. We had a very enjoyable day of it. Betsy had packed a picnic and we found a nice spot for a picnic. As we were relaxing afterward, I said, "I'd sure like to spend some time out here. I can just see myself enjoying the outdoors while I am carving."

"There are bike trails around. Maybe you need to get a bike and then you can explore all you care to."

"Good idea! I'll look into that tomorrow."

Monday I went into town to see about getting a bike. I found one I liked, but the price seemed steep to me, but when I talked to John about it Monday evening, he said it was reasonable. "I guess I have lost touch with the cost of things having had no money or needing any for a year. I'll pick up the bike tomorrow." I was afraid the bike shop owner wouldn't accept a check so I was prepared to go to the ATM and get cash, but when I told him that, he said since I was living with the Taylors, a check was fine. "From what I have heard, all the people the Taylors have taken in haven't been trustworthy."

"True, they have had some real cases, but that doesn't mean a check from one of them would be bad. You live with the Taylors, you obey the rules. You have about a six months trial period. After that if you haven't shaped up, you are out. Sounds harsh, I guess, but as Betsy said, 'If we can't straighten out a kid in six months, someone else needs to try.' I can't recall any who were ever asked to leave. A few had decided, on their own, to leave. Most of them were younger than you, so I guess you pretty much were straight before you arrived."

I smiled to myself when he called me straight. I know he wasn't referring to my sexuality, but it was kinda funny anyway. The owner, his name was Jerry, gave me a rough map of some places good for biking and over the summer we became good friends, often riding together.

The bike made a big change in my routine since anytime the weather permitted--and that was most of the time--I ate lunch and headed for the hills on my bike. I had my carving knives and wood in a saddlebag so I found a nice spot and sat and carved. Some of the time I just sat and observed what was going on around me.

Fourth of July the town had an arts and craft fair along with the other activities. Betsy and John urged me to exhibit some of my carvings. I had no idea what price to put on them so I wrote the shop owner in Denver for suggestions and included the letter in a box of carvings I sent him. He replied promptly. I told John and Betsy I thought the prices were high. They didn't think so, but agreed when I suggested, since I didn't have to bother packing and shipping the carvings, I could charge less. We decided on ten percent less than they would have sold for in Denver. I displayed two dozen carvings in a booth I shared with a potter friend of the Taylors.

There was a very large crowd of vacationers in Winnemucca for the Fourth and I had sold all the carving before lunch. When I went home for lunch, I looked at what I had left. There were only a dozen or so since I had shipped a large box to Denver the week before. The second group sold in no time and after I paid for half the booth rental, I had almost \$700 to deposit to my account. Since I worked in the grocery store, I kept an eye on what Betsy needed and always brought home a huge box of groceries

each payday. She and John protested the first few times, but finally I told them I needed to do it for myself and they accepted what I brought with thanks after that.

My grocery job paid little, but it was enough to take care of my needs. I even paid for the bike out of what I made there so all the money I earned for my carvings went into the bank. John learned it was all in a checking account and advised me to transfer it to savings so I could draw a little interest. Later when I was talking with him about how much I had saved, he was surprised and said I should buy CDs so I could earn more. When he said CDs I thought he was talking recordings! He finally realized I didn't know what he was talking about and gave me a lesson in banking.

In mid-August, I got a call from the GED instructor telling me I could start the first of September. I was on a Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule and the computers were available from 7:00 until 9:00 and 9:00 until 11:00. I signed up for the 9:00 until 11:00 slot. That required another change in my routine as I went directly from the class to the grocery. George, the grocery manager, said he saw no reason why I couldn't work from 11:30 until 7:30 so I wouldn't have an hour between school and work.

I knew sooner or later the question of my sexuality would probably come up, but I didn't expect it to come the way it did. Both John and Betsy had made comments from time to time about my lack of a social life. I always dismissed it as not having the time. The second Sunday in September, the Taylors had a guest for Sunday dinner, Virginia Jackson, a new high school teacher. She was a very attractive young woman, a few years younger than I was. I found out she was a biking nut and ask if she'd like to go riding some time. She said she would and we agreed to go biking the following Saturday.

Virginia was a good, strong biker and we make quite a round. I enjoyed it very much and she did as well. We decided we'd go again Sunday afternoon. After that we went most Saturdays and Sundays. She would pack a picnic or Betsy would and we'd find a place and picnic. I really enjoyed being with her and she seemed to enjoy being with me. The first Saturday in October we had planned a pretty long ride and Betsy was packing lunch for us. She was acting kinda strange and as she handed the picnic basket to me asked, "Climbing Bear, do you not find Virginia attractive?"

"Sure I do. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I was just wondering she mentioned that she felt very attracted to you, but you must not find her attractive. I think she is more than a little interested, Climbing Bear."

"Oh damn," I said without thinking. "I'm sorry, Betsy. I didn't mean to use that kind of language."

"I'm not worried about that, but I am worried that there's a problem I'm missing."

"Betsy, I guess I knew it would happen sooner or later, but I sure wanted it to be later. I can't lie to you, Betsy, but I wish I didn't have to say what I need to say. I find Virginia very attractive, I enjoy being with her tremendously. She is a great friend--at least now she is--but that's all there is and all there ever will be. I love Virginia as a sister, as a good friend, but that's it."

"I don't think I understand, Climbing Bear. I don't think I understand."

I hung my head, not out of shame, but out of fear. I didn't want to see Betsy's face when I told her the truth. "Betsy, I couldn't lie to you if I wanted to. I guess I could just pass this all off as a joke, but it's not. There can never been anything more between Virginia and me than what there is now because I am different. I am..."

"You are two spirits blessed! I should have known."

I looked up with tears in my eyes and said, "Yes, Betsy, I am gay." Betsy walked over to me and hugged me to her ample bosom, stroked my hair and said, "Climbing Bear, I should have known. You are indeed two spirits blessed. And don't worry, I will handle Virginia in a mother's way and you need tell only those whom you respect who ask. Otherwise, it's no one's business."

Virginia was coming over to my place and when it was time for her, Betsy sent me on an errand. When I got back, Virginia was ready to go. When she didn't think I was looking, I caught her looking at me very strangely, but she said nothing.

That night, while we were having dinner, I told John I was gay and he laughed and said that was going to make some women very unhappy. When he said that, I looked at Betsy and said, "Ok, Betsy, out with it. How did you handle Virginia."

"Well, I really didn't tell her anything she didn't know. I just told her I thought she might be looking at you as more than a friend and that I hated to see her brokenhearted and your friendship destroyed, but that you had already committed yourself in a way that meant you could never be more than a very good friend to any woman. She asked if that meant you had taken vows and I told her no, it was just a responsibility and obligation you were born with. She asked if it had anything to do with your being Indian and I say I guess it did since it was a part of you and you were Indian. She thanked me for preventing her from making a fool of herself and then asked if this part of you meant you couldn't continue to be friends and I told her no, that it probably meant you could be closer friends."

John and I were both laughing as Betsy told us what she had said in a very serious manner. And it worked. Virginia and I continued to be friends, very good friends. We didn't spend as much time together as we had because, in mid-term, an ancient physics teacher dropped dead and was replaced by Phil, a very attractive young man who also became a close friend. In fact, Betsy started it, but soon everyone who knew us called us the Three Musketeers.

Phil was a biker, but by the time he arrived in town, the bikes had been put away for the season. The school booster club had equipped an excellent exercise room and the school board had opened it to the town. One of the coaches was to supervise and to pay for his extra time, there was a small fee for use of the gym after school. All three of us joined and worked out Tuesday and Thursdays when I wasn't in class. In fact, there got to be a Tuesday and Thursday group of regulars who did other things together--go to the movies, ski, other physical activities and we often got together to play games. Our Monopoly games were strictly cut-throat. Betsy said we sounded like the New York Stock Exchange when we played at our place.

I had taken my GED tests as I thought I was ready for them, saving science and math for last. I aced each of the ones I had taken and took the science and math tests in early December. I did well on them, but not as well as I had done on the others. I was told I could graduate with the high school class in June, but somehow or other I didn't think it was something I needed since I had the important piece of paper.

Christmas Day John and Betsy were delivering a food basket to a family who had fallen on bad times when a drunk driver hit them head on. Fortunately neither car was moving fast, but John suffered a broken leg and internal injuries. Betsy was banged up, but nothing serious so she was treated and released. John was told he'd be hospitalized for two weeks then have at least two months before he could go back to work. His hospital bills were automatically paid by the drunk driver's insurance, but he didn't have disability insurance. I knew that and knew there was no money coming in. Sooner or later there would be an insurance settlement, which would have to pay for lost work time, but heaven only knew when that would be. Knowing that, I sat Betsy down and told her I would be supporting us until John recovered and the drunk's insurance paid off. She started protesting and finally my temper got the better of me. "Betsy, you are going to have one angry Indian on your hands here in a minute. You can play the martyr for someone else. You took me in when I needed it. I don't need you now. Can you understand that? I don't need you. When I came, you didn't need me. Now you do. You can damn well take the help I am offering and be thankful for it. You silly, foolish pride is a crock of shit. You know something Betsy? I have heard church people say it is more blessed to give than to receive. Well, I can

add to that. It's a hell of a lot easier. I know. I have been on the receiving end for a damn long time. You have been on the giving end and now you are going to learn just how hard it is to receive, like it or not. Now get out your frigging budget book and we will see how we are going about this."

I had never seen Betsy cowed before, but she was now. She almost cringed as she went to her desk and picked up the notebook she used to keep up with bills. Suddenly I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing. "Betsy, you can stand up now, my barking is over and I have no bite. Betsy looked at me, stopped, and started laughing herself. Once she got started, she couldn't stop.

When she got control of herself, she said, "Climbing Bear, I guess I needed that, but it is funny to have your son take you down a peg or two."

She brought her budget book and we looked over the bills. I had never seen her budget before and was surprised at just how far she made a dollar go, but it was definitely a paycheck to paycheck situation. With no income from John, there was nothing to fall back on. In fact, I was surprised that without the groceries I brought in, things would really have been tight. You would never have known that John and Betsy didn't have any surplus and just lived from paycheck to paycheck.

"Betsy, I passed my math test so I think I can see here that without one pay check we--and I mean we--are in deep doo-doo. I don't see anything here that can be put off. The utilities have to be paid, we have to have food and there's a house payment here."

"John and I have always said the house was our savings. I can get an equity loan on it."

"Betsy, that would be foolish. You'd risk your home for a few thousand dollars. You have been paying on the house how long?"

"Twenty-something years. I'm not sure."

"Ok, I'll write a check equal to John's paycheck since that will make keeping your budget easy. But no house payment until I talk with the bank. And we have to do something about a car. I suspect the man who hit your insurance agent will be coming around wanting to settle. Don't sign anything. You probably need to hire a lawyer so you don't get flim-flamed. Know a good one?"

"Actually I do. Joey Nelson is a lawyer here in town. Don't think he will charge a great deal since he is one of our boys."

"Call him now and retain him even if it costs money. Insurance companies exist to receive payments, not make them and they have more practice in avoiding payment than we do in getting it."

The next day I went to the bank to check on the Taylors' mortgage. I was told the information couldn't be given out and I understood that. I had the manager call Betsy to get permission for me to see their payment schedule. I had seen the payments were \$400 per month. They had been paying on their house for twenty-nine years lacking a month, so they were now paying almost everything on the principal. They only owed thirteen more payments. I wrote a check for the current payment and \$1200 additional. Of course, the extra came off the principal, but I'd pay more next month since I had a check coming for carvings I had sent to Denver in November.

January came and with it my twenty-third birthday. The gym crew managed to pull a surprise birthday party for me. My real birthday present had come a few days early when John came home.

The week following my birthday, George, my boss, asked if I would consider driving the truck which went into Reno for things not delivered to the store. "It involves three trips a week. The other two days you can work store hours." I leapt at the chance and started driving for him. I was surprised to discover I loved it. The trip was solitude time for me and I enjoyed being out, even if I was inside a truck.

I paid a couple more house payments, adding \$1200 additional once. I hadn't bothered to tell Betsy I had either time. In March the insurance company finally settled. The doctors had told John he

couldn't go back to work until May, so the settlement included income replacement for all the time he was out of work along with money for pain and suffering. John and Betsy decided paying off the house was the first priority and were surprised at how little they owed. With a day job and having finished with my GED, I had more time to devote to carving. Also, I took work with me when I went to Reno because there was always a delay while I got loaded.

Shortly after John came home, I was talking about how much I enjoyed the trips to Reno and John asked if I had thought about becoming a truck driver. "You are unattached, need to see the country and it pays well." I told him I hadn't thought about it, but it sounded good. "You still have a bit of money saved don't you? I mean after bailing us out."

I said I did and I would look into the possibilities of getting my commercial driver's license. I had to go to Reno to find a divers' training school. I rented a room for six weeks and worked very hard at getting the training I needed. I passed my tests on my first try and found a job immediately doing local hauls.

I moved out of my room and into an efficiency apartment. I was making good money and after a month, bought a four wheel drive truck. My job was five days a week and eight hours or less since it was based on making a round trip so loading and unloading time really determined how long I had to work. The dead time I used to carve or jaw with other drivers. Weekends I went home to Winnemucca.

One Friday after work, a couple of drivers I had befriended asked if I'd like to join them for a beer. "If I can have ginger ale, would love to." We went to a local bar and the two downed a couple beers in no time flat, and started urging me to have a brew. I had been sober for several years, I told myself, and could probably handle a beer. I ordered a beer and when I picked it up, became conscious of someone taking the bar stool beside me. Before I could turn around, Black Horse said, "I'm not around to sober up your ass this time." I almost dropped the beer as I turned to see who had spoken. There was no one there. What I had heard really crashed in on me then. Black Horse really wasn't here to sober me up and I knew that one beer would lead to more and more. I put it down, thanked the two guys and left. That was the last time I was tempted to get drunk and I knew that one beer would lead to being drunk.

A week later, the trucking company manager asked if I was interested in taking on long hauls and I told him I was. I was assigned a rig and started hauling long distances. I enjoyed seeing the country, I was making good money. I had decent clothes, paid for my truck, moved into a nice small house on which I had a rent-to-own agreement. In short, I had everything I wanted except companionship. I was lonely. I saw John and Betsy infrequently since I wasn't in the area for any length of time. They had taken in a fifteen year old boy who had "my room," so I was never in Winnemucca overnight. Phil and Virginia had married in the spring and were expecting a baby. I enjoyed seeing them, but it increased my sense of loneliness.

My path kept crossing that of two drivers who drove as a team, Al and Chris. I had come to suspect they were gay, but the question had never been asked. Then it happened that we were all three in Beaumont, Texas waiting to pick up a load of motor oil. For some reason or other, we had a delay in the loading and couldn't get loaded until late the following day. "Why don't we rent a really nice room and take it easy?" Al suggested.

"Sounds good to me. You pick the place."

Al called and made reservations in a swanky hotel rather than a motel. "We all have money to blow so why don't we? Life is short."

We got our bags from the trucks, called a cab and went to the hotel. When we got to the suite--Al had really gone all out--we showered dressed in nicer attire than we wore driving and went down to dinner. When we were ordering drinks, Al said, "Order what you want, but Chris and I cannot have alcohol because of our medicines."

I laughed and replied, "I can't have it because I'm a recovering drunk." The meal was great and afterward we decided to take in a movie. When we got back to the room, Chris said, "Med time, Al." They each took a handful of pills and when they finished, Chris said, "Climbing Bear, hope this doesn't run you off, but I guess you need to know about Al and me. We are both HIV positive, that's the reason for the pills. Not that it means anything to you one way or another. We are also gay which may mean something to you--one way or another," he laughed. "We are in fact, an "until death do us part" couple, lovers, soulmates, call it what you will. As I said, I guess you need to know that and I hope it doesn't make any difference."

I'll admit, I was surprised. "I never suspected and am surprised I haven't heard it mentioned by other drivers. But anyway, it does make a difference, a huge difference because I am gay." Once the words were out of my mouth, it was like a dam had burst. I talked for two solid hours with few comments from the two, pouring out my life story.

When I finished, Chris said, "Climbing Bear, I never suspected and I know about loneliness, both of us do. We've been there, especially after we tested positive, but we have each other now, long after we both expected to be dead. We may die in a wreck next week, food poisoning at some greasy spoon next month or AIDS next year, but we are making good use of the time we have--long or short."

The two talked about their lives and before we went to bed, there was a group hug, which I liked even though I felt strange doing it.

We met again in Reno a few weeks later. We all had the weekend free and I invited them to stay at my place. "Got room for an extra?" Al asked.

"Sure, especially if he's an Indian and sleeps on the floor."

"As a matter of fact he is an Indian, but I don't know where he sleeps," Al laughed. "Give me the directions to your place. He's not in yet so I'll call him in his truck and give him directions." I gave Al the directions to my place and when he finished talking to his friend, he said, "He said he'd be in by 5:00 and to hold supper."

I kept my truck at the terminal when I was on a run so I could have a way home when I got back. The three of us got in and headed for my place. On the way, we stopped by a grocery store and picked up food for the weekend. Chris and Al got a kick out of my grocery shopping. I had not forgotten what I had learned working in the grocery in Winnemucca and put it to good use...We got to my place and I opened the windows to let fresh air in then the three of us started getting supper. At 5:00 a taxi drove up out front. I looked out the window and saw a man get out, look at the house, pay the driver and start up the walk. I couldn't see his face, but he was tall for an Indian, I thought and was wiry in build. When he walked on the porch, Chris threw open the door with a flourish, bowed and said, "Welcome, Chief!"

"Chief hell, I'm just a humble kick ass warrior you Anglo."

"Watch your mouth or us white folks will have to whop you Indian ass again. Get your lazy ass in here we have a real Indian for you to meet. Climbing Bear, this is one damn great Indian, Taequo, rescuer of young good looking boys. Taequo, Climbing Bear, Apache extraordinary."

"Taequo, welcome to my house," I said as I shook hands with him. "What's this about rescuing young good-looking boys?"

"Just a little adventure I had a while ago in Florida. Tell you about it later. By the way, that was part of the reason my chief gave me my second eagle's feather. Guess you white folks don't have such."

"Because of your kind, we can't even own one. Got any eagle feathers, Climbing Bear?"

"Just one, but I'm young," I laughed. After all the banter, Taequo said, "Damn glad to see you two again. It's been awhile. Give me a hug!"

The three men hugged each other with a lot of patting on the back. When they finished, Taequo said, "Climbing Bear, how about a bear hug," and laughed. Taequo was wiry, but strong as a bear. I could tell from his hug. I still wasn't used to hugging, but I was learning to like it quickly.

We had a grand time at dinner. I guess we eat at truck stops and wherever we can so a good home-cooked meal was special. When we finished, I poured coffee and we all went to the living room and just talked. After awhile I remembered Chris' comment about Taequo rescuing a young, good-looking boy and asked about it.

"It was the damndest thing. I was leaving Florida headed north when I realized I was taking the wrong route--well, not the wrong one, but not the one I intended to take. It was raining like mad and as I started across a causeway, I saw a kid climbing up on the guardrail of a bridge. I stopped the truck in record time, hopped out and grabbed him just as he was about to jump. He was naked as a jaybird. I put him in the sleeper and Chris and Al met up with us and we got him dressed in some of Chris' clothes. Later we had a prayer meeting--our kind of prayer meeting." The three laughed and later told me their prayer meetings were straight talk. "I took him to meet a family friend and thought that was the end of it. It wasn't. Turns out he was gay and felt he had cheated on his soulmate and both of them went off the deep end. Old Red Hawk shows up and gets them straightened out. They did a vision quest with him last summer and then had a gay wedding. Red Hawk was dead, but by damn, he showed up. Great ceremony. They are going to Ohio to college. Expect to see them next week or so. But what's this about you having a feather?"

Friday night, Al and Chris had the guest room which had a bed in it. "Taequo, I hope you are a real Indian because there is no other bed. I have a futon and sleep on the floor. You have the living room. You probably noticed the couch is a futon. You can sleep on the couch or put the futon on the floor." As I spoke, I handed him a sleeping bag.

"Perfect," he said.

Al and Chris went on to bed and Taequo poured another cup of coffee and asked me again about my eagle feather. I told him about my year with Black Horse and what had happened since.

Saturday morning I suggested we head for the hills just to get away from the city. We had a grand time doing nothing but telling tales and enjoying being in the outdoors. Sunday Chris and Al went to Mass. Chris said somehow or other his growing up religion had taken on a pretty significant meaning when he realized he was facing death. "Of course, Al and I may outlast you two, but when I was first diagnosed as HIV positive, it was a death sentence.

Taequo and I sat around the house while they were gone, talking about what it was like growing up Indian. His early years had a lot in common with mine. I guess when you live in two worlds growing up, you are not sure where you fit or if you do. Somehow or other we had to come to grips with being Indians and feeling comfortable with that before we could function in the white man's world.

I found myself really liking Taequo. There was no bullshit about him and great depth, but he was also one funny Indian. One minute he would be very serious and the next I would be rolling in the floor laughing.

When Chris and Al got back, we fixed dinner then talked about our schedule for the coming week. I had checked before I left Friday and saw there were two possibilities. One would take me to Atlanta and the other Richmond. "Take the Atlanta one," Taequo said. "I'm headed to Memphis then Atlanta. We'll hook up in Atlanta if our schedules work out."

I said I'd do that unless someone else had the run. "Hey, it's Sunday and guys are starting their runs, call the dispatcher and ask for the Atlanta run. Taequo, our paths will cross in Memphis if we time it right," Al said.

I called the dispatcher and asked for and got the Atlanta run via Waco, Texas. When I got back, Taequo had a sheet spread out on the coffee table. When I got near I saw it was a road map with three routes mark in red, blue and green. "That's it, Taequo said. "Now that I own my rig, I have a lot more punch when it comes to getting routes. I finally have arrived because I have those three runs. Of course, when I get tired of them, I ask for others."

When I left Reno Monday morning, I found myself singing. I was surprised at how happy I was. After I thought about it, I realized I had a good weekend. I had been with people who had some understanding of me and who I understood. It had been the best weekend I had in a long time.

As I approached Atlanta, I found myself singing again. I was looking forward to seeing Taequo. It was not the usual pull into town, sleep and leave without seeing anyone you really knew and doing nothing. I really wasn't seeing much of the country because when I had a layover, I slept or hung around the terminal. Maybe Taequo would be up to doing something other than sleep and eat.

I reached the terminal and left my trailer to be unloaded and reloaded for the return trip. I had a day layover in Atlanta and hope Taequo had the same. As I took my tractor to the motel where I would be staying, I suddenly realized Taequo didn't know where I was staying and I didn't have his cell phone number. I was mentally kicking myself when my cell phone rang. I had a no hands rigs, so I just punched the button and before I could say hello, I heard, "Damn good Indian you are. I tried to find your trail, but you done gone and hid it good--you thought. Had to call your dispatcher to get your cell phone number, but I hope you didn't think you could hide that easily."

"Taequo, where the hell are you," I practically shouted I was so glad to hear his voice.

"You might look at the ramp coming up," he laughed. As I did, I saw Taequo's tractor pull on to the highway. "You headed where I'm headed?" he asked.

"Depends on where you're headed. I'm headed for the motel at exit 36."

"Got reservations?"

"Have never needed them," I replied.

"You will this weekend. The Shriners are in town along with the Promise Keepers. There is no room at the inn."

"Damn! I guess I'm in for a long ride to find a bed."

"I'll share my room if you are a real Indian and sleep on the floor," Taequo laughed.

We got to the motel, signed in and went to our room. "Up to a movie tonight or had you rather go to a strip joint?" Taequo asked.

"Think I'll pass on the strip joint, how about a movie?"

"Man, you are in for a treat! Let's get showered, changed and head downtown. We can eat and then take in a movie at the Fox. Summer series is on and there's a theater organ sing along. I love it. Hit the shower and get dolled up."

When we had both showered, we took the train downtown, had a wonderful meal then went to the Fox. The movie was an experience. I had never heard a theater organ and this was a huge one. I loved it. After the movie, we walked around downtown for awhile with Taequo pointing out the sights. It was midnight when we caught the train back to the motel.

We both started to pull the mattresses off the bed and sleep on the floor, but realized there wasn't room so we crawled in bed. I was pleased that there were two beds because I was nervous about sleeping with a man and especially Taequo.

Taequo was up before I was and when I got up, he was gone. I showered and had just gotten

dressed when he came back to the room with coffee. "Thought you might need some wake up juice," he said as he handed me a cup. "I have sugar and that creamer stuff if you want it."

"Know Black Horse? I lived with Black Horse a year. He made the coffee most of the time and it was hot, black and that was it. I just want it hot and black. Thanks."

"I picked up a paper yesterday. Friday's addition always has a section on what's going on in Atlanta. Been here before?"

"Yea, but I realized the other day all I ever saw of a city was the terminal and the inside of a motel room. Guess I have been real stupid that way."

"Don't know about stupid, but since all terminals and all motels look alike, you sure have missed a lot. Ok, we are here all day today and tonight. When do you leave? Sunday morning?"

"Right."

Ok, then today we go to the Martin Luther King Center. You need to see that. He did a lot for us as well as blacks. Don't think the present crowd is doing much for anyone, but the center's about the past and a great man. Then there's the Carter center. Great man, lousy president. And late this afternoon and this evening, Stone Mountain and the laser show. But first breakfast."

I learned a lot about Taequo that Saturday. He was very serious and reverent at the King Center. He was serious, but having a good time at the Carter Center. He had really meant it when he called Jimmy Carter a great man. I knew little about him and was fascinated at the Center and at Taequo's knowledge of the man.

Stone Mountain was a hoot. It was a strange mixture of history, amusement park and pretense. Nothing would do but that the two of us climb the mountain. It wasn't too difficult for me and a snap for Taequo. The laser show was also a strange mixture of fun and half seriousness. I did have to laugh when the figures on the mountain appeared to go marching off.

We had been able to do everything by bus and train which I liked because a tractor is not a very good pleasure vehicle. We decided we were both hungry and found a place and ate a second supper at midnight.

The next morning Taequo again beat me up and brought coffee. "You know, I could get used to having someone bring me coffee every morning."

"Laudy, Massa Rhett, I don't know that Miss Scarlett would let me do that," Taequo said in Prissy's voice. That squeaky little voice coming out of the tall, lanky Indian absolutely cracked me up. While we were having breakfast, Taequo asked about my trip back and said we might get together when he got back to Reno, but it would be a couple weeks before he was due back there.

I pick up my loaded trailer and headed west. It had been one great weekend. "You nut," I said to myself, "you could have been having a time like that ever since you started long hauls," but I knew it wasn't true. Even if I had gone to all those places, I would not have had the weekend I had because Taequo would not have been there.

The next couple weeks I did make an effort to use my downtime to see the sights and it was a big improvement over motel walls, but it was not like Atlanta. I caught myself saying, "Taequo would get a kick out of that. I wonder if Taequo has ever seen that?" I definitely had Taequo on my mind.

I really found that out over the next layover I had, which was in Chicago. I spent time at the Field Museum, the Art Institute and saw a lot of interesting stuff, but it wasn't like it would have been had I been sharing the experience with Taequo. That got driven home the following week when I was in Phoenix at the same time as Taequo and had marvelous time. I hoped I wasn't too obvious when I asked Taequo about his owning his own rig and getting a few set runs. My purpose was to find out what

his runs were and to match mine to them as much as possible. I had a clear understanding of his runs when I left Phoenix and started ending up in the same city as Taequo when we had a layover if at all possible. After a month or so spending most of my layovers with Taequo I had to admit that I had fallen in love. I had a very bad case and knew it.

I was becoming a basket case because I was in love with Taequo and had no idea whether or not he was gay. In fact, Taequo was so circumspect that I had no idea whether he was interested in either men or women. There was no doubt that Taequo considered me a close friend, but beyond that? I just didn't know and I certainly wasn't going to give him even a hint of my feelings. I was not going to risk losing my best friend, a friend who gave me so much joy. When I was exploring with Taequo, I became a little boy again in a lot of ways because everything was new and exciting. No, there was no way I was going to drive Taequo away by telling him I was gay, much less in love with him.

Taequo and I had made arrangements to meet in St. Louis for dinner since neither of us had a layover there. I was to pick up Wounded Hawk for the next segment of his journey on what he called his "official Indian dog and pony show." Over dinner, I learned both had attended a Halloween party near Cleveland. Taequo said, "I'm so ugly I didn't have to wear a mask," and laughed. I may as well make it clear right here that Taequo is not ugly. He is not pretty handsome, but he is one rugged Indian and his face shows that. He has the looks of who he is, straight forward, solid, honest, rugged. He is and looks all male.

Anyway, we had a leisurely dinner, but as soon as it was over, we were on our way. When Wounded Hawk and I left St. Louis, he told me about the party and started talking about Taequo, telling me more about his involvement with the people at the party. I can't really remember what got me started talking, but I suddenly realized I had poured out my feelings for Taequo and my frustration at not knowing how he felt and fear of telling him how I felt. When I finished, Wounded Hawk didn't say anything one way or the other, so I dropped the subject.

At the end of the week, I picked up Wounded Hawk and we headed to Denver where he was doing a conference on oral literature starting Friday. He laughed as he told me about the seminar he had just attended. "I sometimes think it's basically dishonest, but these academic types have everything figured out and expect me to put the official Indian stamp of approval on it or beat them up because they are wrong. If I approve, it proves they have been good to Indians. If I disapprove, they allow themselves to be beat up to salve their guilt. Fortunately, the whole of the academic world is basically incestuous so they keep all their stuff to themselves, reading and criticizing each other. Anyway, I'm doing this conference on oral literature in Denver. It starts tomorrow evening and runs through Sunday. After Friday, I have only morning sessions. Think you could be available Saturday and Sunday afternoon and for a few days afterward? Like to go Indian camping and you and Taequo qualify as campers."

"I definitely have the weekend, the first in a couple weeks. I'm not sure about more days. Will check when I get back to Reno." I dropped Wounded Hawk in Denver and headed for Reno. I got in late Thursday and when I talked to the dispatcher, he didn't want to give me any time off after the weekend. Fortunately, Big Jim, a fellow driver called in asking if he could get a rig for a week because he had broke down and didn't have one. "Looks like you have a week if you want to give up your rig for that long," the dispatcher said after he explained the situation.

"See you next weekend," I said as I ran for my truck. I went home and packed for a week's camping, threw my things in the truck and was headed for Denver when I realized I could drive all night and the next day and still not be in Denver and I wanted to spend every minute I could with Wounded Hawk--and if the truth be known--with Taequo. I whipped the truck around and went back home. I called the airport and got reservations for a flight to Denver Friday afternoon. I would like to have gone right away, but there weren't any seats available. Anyway, I would arrived in Denver hours before I could

make it driving and I was really too tired to start without risking going to sleep at the wheel.

My flight was at 3:00 in the afternoon Friday. My bags were packed so I didn't have to worry about that. I arrived at the airport at 1:00, checked my bags, took the truck to the long term one and ran back to the terminal. I had called Wounded Hawk the night before and let him know when I would be arriving. I was on my way and still arriving before I would have been half way had I driven.

When my plane arrived, I went to baggage claim, picked up my bags and started toward the taxi stand to get a cab to Wounded Hawk's hotel when I heard, "Looking for a ride, Chief?" It was Taequo and without thinking I grabbed him in a bear hug. He seemed a bit surprised, but gave me a hug back.

He had a cab waiting and we were soon in Wounded Hawk's suite. "This is sure a nice place for an Indian," I joked when I walked in.

"Maybe for just any Indian," Wounded Hawk laughed and added, "but you need to remember, I am an official Indian. Welcome, Climbing Bear," he said and grabbed me in one of his bear hugs. "Let's eat!"

We went to one of the hotel dining rooms. The young girl assigned to our table was trying to puzzle out who we were. I had to laugh at her because all of her questions were stated in the negative. She first asked, "You are not members of a rock group, are you? Then, "You're not in a movie, are you?" And we all cracked up when she finally asked, "You are not all Indians, are you?" Wounded Hawk told her he was the only official Indian, but Taequo really got her confused by showing her his official BIA card (Bureau of Indian Affairs which certifies who is and is not an Indian). I guess if I had been in her shoes and saw these three dudes with long braids, I would wonder what was going on too. While we were eating, Wounded Hawk explained his plan. "Tomorrow I have workshops in the morning and we'll go exploring tomorrow afternoon. Sunday the conference breaks up at lunch and I think we can find a camping place in the mountains before dark. We'll establish a camp and just be lazy Indians for the rest of the week. "

Saturday afternoon, I noticed Wounded Hawk managed to go explore this or that, leaving Taequo and me together. I kept hoping Taequo would make a move, but he didn't. We just talked about what we had been doing, where I was headed next. For some reason or other, we started talking about where we'd like to live. He was really enthusiastic when he started talking about North Carolina and the people he knew there. Since I hadn't seen much of the state--just a bit from interstate highways, I couldn't comment on it.

Sometime after mid-afternoon, Wounded Hawk suggested we find a camping place and set up camp. "You two jokers can spend the night and I'll come back when I finish the conference. That way we'll be all ready as soon as I can get back." Fortunately he was driving his four wheel drive truck because he took us along a mere trail which seemed a highway compared to the last few miles we traveled before we stopped. About half way between the last vestige of a road and where we stopped to camp, Taequo said, "Think we need to call your truck the Enterprise, Wounded Hawk, because it is obvious we are 'going where no man has ever gone before'." Wounded Hawk laughed and kept driving. We were below the timberline so there were trees, but not many and they were pretty rugged looking. Finally Wounded Hawk pulled into a grove of pines and stopped. "Grab the gear because the Enterprise has landed."

We walked couple hundred yards from the truck into the grove. Suddenly we were on the edge of a small spring-fed stream, which pooled before it plunged over a cliff two or three hundred feet from the pool. There were no trees blocking the view from the cliff since the ground ended abruptly at the cliff's edge. We had a magnificent view from the cliff. The area back from the cliff was level for about a hundred yards, a perfect place to pitch our tent.

We quickly got the tent set up although none of us planned to use it except in case of bad

weather. As soon as the tent was up, Taequo and I started gathering rocks and preparing a fire pit. Wounded Hawk had gone to look for pine cones and dead limbs for the fire. He came back just as we finished the fire pit and dumped a load of pine cones in. "There's plenty of dead limbs under the pines. If you two will take the axe and buck saw and get some cut, I'll take the other axe and buck saw and see if I can find some hardwood." Taequo and I got the axe and saw and went back into the grove. Wounded Hawk hadn't understated the case. I'm sure the dead limbs for ten years or more were waiting for us. We set to chopping and sawing and soon had a pile of wood stacked and ready to be picked up. We each gathered a load in our arms and walked back to the campsite where Taequo started fire. Soon it was burning well and since Wounded Hawk had not returned, so we went back and carried another load of wood to the campsite. We had just got it stacked when Wounded Hawk came back with several lengths of hardwood logs. We took them from the truck and Taequo started sawing them into lengths for the campfire. I went with Wounded Hawk to pick up the pine Taequo and I had cut.

By the time we got back, the campfire was a bed of hot coals and Taequo had started supper. When it was ready, we ate and again confirmed the fact that food outdoors is always better. When we finished eating, we had coffee. After a second cup of coffee, Wounded Hawk said, "I best get on my way. I need to get together a few notes tonight for the session tomorrow morning. See you guys mid-afternoon."

After Wounded Hawk left, Taequo and I gathered pine straw, which we spread and covered with a pad. The straw made a big difference in how comfortable our sleeping bags would be. After we had finished our preparation for sleeping, we sat on our sleeping bags across the campfire from each other and started talking about growing up and how we ended up driving. One thing lead to another and before we turned in we knew a great deal more about each other then we had before.

I guess it was a result of the clear, clean air and altitude, but both Taequo and I slept until after nine. The campfire had, of course, gone out, but it only took minutes to get it started. As soon as I could, I got coffee going and then started breakfast. While I was getting breakfast, Taequo had gone to the pool below the spring, stripped and washed up. When he came back, he offered to finish breakfast so I could wash up and I took him up on the offer.

We had breakfast and Taequo suggested we explore the area around us. We cleaned up from breakfast and then started walking. There were no trails around, so we just wandered along, pointing out plants to each other. I found both of us had some knowledge of the values and uses of plants, but together we just about knew them all. We had been walking for about an hour when Taequo suddenly put his hand on my shoulder and signaled for me to be quiet. He sat down on a rock and motioned for me to sit beside him. As soon as I was settled, he pointed to a clump of bushes. We were sitting perfectly still, both looking intently at the bushes when slowed they parted and a doe and her fawn walked out of the clump, looked at us, decided we were no threat and walked along the way we had come from the camp. When the two disappeared, Taequo let out a deep breath. I whispered, "Holding your breath? Me too." We stayed where we were for several minutes, then got up and continued our journey.

Wounded Hawk came about two. We had continued our exploration and without realizing it, were walking parallel to the truck trail. Wounded Hawk spotted us through the bush, stopped the truck and honked the horn. We climbed in the truck and Wounded Hawk said, "While we are all here, we can get some more hardwood." He turned the truck around and drove to a hardwood grove where the ground was littered with limbs, large and small. There was only one ax and buck saw in the truck and the two started chopping and sawing limbs, which I loaded on the truck. They were just cutting them in lengths I could handle since we could cut them for the fire when we got back to camp.

We built up the campfire and buried a dutch over with a pot roast in the coals and Wounded Hawk prepared biscuits for another dutch oven, but those would go in the coals later. Taequo had made fresh

coffee and the three of us sat talking about the conference Wounded Hawk had finished. "There were a good number of undergraduates in the group and they keep things stirred up. They are not afraid to ask questions or to question answers. Puts some of the older crowd on edge. "

Sometime later, without mentioning it, the three of us walked to the edge of the cliff and sat down, watching the sunset, which was spectacular.

It was getting quite dark when we got up and walked back to the campfire. Wounded Hawk had put the biscuits in the coals before we went to watch the sunset and they and the roast were ready when we got back. We all three ate as if we hadn't had food in a week. Fresh mountain air does that to you.

When we had finished supper and clean up from it, we were sitting around the campfire, silent. I looked up and saw Taequo staring into the campfire and Wounded Hawk was looking at me. He looked away and continued scratching on the ground with a stick. He looked up again, first at me then at Taequo. He threw the stick into the campfire and almost exploded, "Shit! Am I going to have to do everything for you two knot heads? Taequo, keep your mouth shut while Climbing tells you something." I looked at Taequo and he looked as befuddled as I felt. I didn't know what to say. I knew what I wanted to say, but I was afraid Taequo would tell me to get my fucking queer Indian ass out of his sight. I really didn't know what to say, so I just stared into the fire for what seem like ages then suddenly I realize I was talking and had been talking, telling Taequo I was in love with him. When I finished, I looked over at Taequo who said nothing. He just sat, poking the campfire with a stick.

"Taequo, knot head," Wounded Hawk said, "how dense can any one Indian be? You heard Climbing Bear, are you going to just sit there like a dumb-assed Indian?"

I looked at Taequo again and he was very much a Redman. He was blushing like a teenager!

Finally he started talking, telling me he was too old for me, he was too ugly and there were a lot of young, better looking men out there for me, all that kind of shit. After he had gone on for five minutes I had enough, "Taequo, if you are not in love with me or don't want me, just say so and cut the crap!"

Taequo started with, "That's not what I mean," and started telling me, again, why he was not good enough for me. To be honest, he thoroughly pissed me off. I got up, walked over to where Taequo was sitting, pulled him to his feet and gave him one big, one hundred percent Indian kiss. When I finally came up for air, I asked, "Now, what was it you were saying?"

Taequo blushed, got a silly grin on his face and said, "I can't seem to remember." Then the moment which filled my dream many a night became reality. Taequo took me in to his arms and kissed me, at first a very gentle kiss, which became increasingly passionate. As he pulled me to himself I was sure he knew what he was doing to me and I knew I was doing the same to him as our hardeness's pressed together.

We finally released each other and still holding hands, sat down together on Taequo's sleeping bag. Wounded Hawk said, "I think I have done all the damage I can do here," as he picked up his sleeping bag and pad and tossed them in to the truck. As he got in to the truck he said, "I'll see you two love birds in the morning." He started the engine and left the campsite.

When he was gone, I looked at Taequo, smiled, put my hands on the side of his head and kissed him gently, but before I knew it, we both were far from being gentle! Our kisses became passionate with a lot of tongue play. Taequo lay back on his sleeping bag and pulled me on top of him. I practically ripped his shirt off and unbuttoned his jeans. I wanted to see the man I had grown to love more and more, I wanted to see all of him in his natural beauty. I was hot and ready to love Taequo.

As I kissed and tongued his nipples, Taequo unbuttoned my shirt and pulled it from my body. He unbuttoned my jeans and slid them and my briefs down my legs. He lifted my head and pressed his lips to mine, then he ran his hands down my body. I was really hot as my tongue kept exploring Taequo's

mouth, then his hand moved over my ass and a finger traced my crack and my body went rigid as an image of my experience in jail flashed through my mind. I froze and then I started crying, weeping and clutching Taequo to myself. Taequo must have been very confused, but he didn't show it. Rather, he just started comforting me, holding me close, stroking the back of my neck. I buried my face in the crook of his neck and I cried and cried. I wanted Taequo more than anything and I had wanted him for what seemed like years and when he was ready to give himself to me, I came completely unglued. As if I feared he would leave me, I was clutching Taequo to myself with a death grip. Gradually I regain control. I raised my head, looked into Taequo's eyes, which were filled with pain, and I kissed him very softly. I then whispered, "Taequo, I love you, I love you more than my own life. I will always remember you just holding me when you must have thought I was crazy." I lay beside Taequo and told him why I had gone goofy. As I spoke, Taequo looked into my eyes and stroked my cheek, my hair, the back of my neck. As I continued to talk, his eyes never left mine except when he kissed my face gently from time to time.

When I had finally rundown, Taequo kissed me, got up, got my sleeping bag, zipped it together with his and held it open for me to crawl in. When I was inside, I smiled up at Taequo and he slipped in the sleeping bag with me. I wrapped my arms around my love and kissed him--gently and then more passionately. We were both very hot. "Taequo, I...."

"Climbing Bear, I can wait. I have waited for a very long time."

"Taequo, I don't want you to wait. I want our partnership to be sealed tonight."

Taequo was so gentle, so easy, so caring as I gave myself to him, wholly, completely. When we lay in each others arms as having made wonderful love, I whispered to my man, "Taequo, until death do us part."

He answered, "Until death do us part."

Nestled in Taequo's arms, I drifted off to sleep.

The sun woke me up and as I opened my eyes, I saw Taequo bending over me, a smile on his face. "Good morning, Climbing Bear." He leaned over far enough for me to wrap my arms around him for a good morning kiss. Unfortunately, he leaned over too far and fell on top of me. I saw no reason not to take advantage of the situation and I did. After we had made love, Taequo said, "That's the kind of good morning I want every morning."

I finally got out of the sleeping bag, washed up in the pool and got dressed. When I got back, Taequo handed me a cup of coffee and gave me a long, slow, great kiss.

Taequo and I set to work getting breakfast and we had it ready when we heard Wounded Hawk's truck. It was obvious he was well back from the campsite when he blew his horn. Taequo and I were both laughing as Wounded Hawk came closer, blew his horn and repeated the action twice before he drove up. He got out of the truck and walked to the campfire. He had a huge grin on his face when he asked, "Did I give the honeymoon couple warning enough?"

"More than enough," I laughed.

After breakfast, we sat around drinking coffee and just generally enjoying being together, even if it was a threesome. After lunch Wounded Hawk asked if we'd like to go exploring and soon we were bouncing along a non-existent road. Finally Wounded Hawk stopped and we got out of the truck and started hiking. An hour later he said, "I hope you find this worth the hike." We rounded a turn and before us was a magnificent vista. Across the narrow valley was a waterfall, plunging over the edge of a cliff. The scene was breathtaking. Taequo and I stood, arm in arm, silent before the scene laid out in front of us. Finally, Taequo sat down on a boulder and pulled me into his lap. He rested his chin on my shoulder and whispered, "Climbing Bear, I love you." I swear when he said those words my heart skipped a beat.

I turned my head so I could see him and said, "And I love you, Taequo."

Wounded Hawk finally sat down on the boulder beside us and asked, "Now that you two have finally gotten together, what of the future?"

"I'm so wrapped up in the present that I can't think about the future," I answered.

"Same here" Taequo added.

"Well, I guess that's to be expected, but tomorrow is the end of the honeymoon. Climbing Bear is expected back in Reno and you will be in Denver. He will go his way and you will go yours. I suppose that kind of life can be lived and be happy, but I sure as hell wouldn't like it. I happen to know for a fact Climbing Bear has bent all sorts of things so the two of you would be in the same city as often as possible. Unless you make some dramatic changes, you'll be together no more than you have been. Climbing Bear should have been at the Halloween party and while the two of you hadn't gotten over being afraid of each other, he still should have been there. We are expected in North Carolina for Thanksgiving. How often do you go to North Carolina, Climbing Bear?"

"Maybe three, four times a year and then it's just passing through."

"Point made," Wounded Hawk said.

"What are our options? I can't quit work," I said. "I have to make a living."

"But do you have to drive for the same company?" Wounded Hawk asked.

"Of course not, but a different company wouldn't make that much difference."

"So what's to be done? You two need to think about that."

That was a very good way to make present pleasures seem very fleeting. I didn't see a solution and neither did Taequo. We finally dropped the subject.

When we got back to the campsite, it was time to prepare supper. Wounded Hawk said he'd take care of that and the two of us could go watch the sunset.

Man, it was a very different sunset from yesterday's because I was sitting between Taequo's legs and he had his arms around me, again resting his chin on my shoulder. We had nothing to say because nothing needed to be said. We were together and that said it all.

As we sat, Taequo started unbraiding my hair and soon it was all loose and blowing in the slight breeze coming up from the valley below. I seldom wore my hair loose, but it was a great feeling to have it loose and blowing in the wind.

When Wounded Hawk called us to supper, we got up reluctantly and walked back to the campfire, which felt good as there was a chill in the air after the sun had gone down.

We were eating supper when suddenly Taequo started laughing. He finally was able to tell us what was funny to him. "I was thinking of Chris and Al. They are in for a real surprise when Climbing Bear and I show up together."

"Just how sure are you of that?" I asked. "I am not at all sure that they haven't been doing their best to make it happen. After all, they introduced us."

"You're right come to thank of it. They have been on my case for a long time, telling me that living and driving alone was for the birds. They were right too."

"Taequo, do you realize what you just said? You said something about living and driving alone. They don't do that, so why are we thinking about driving alone?" I asked.

Taequo hit himself on the forehead and said, "Wounded Hawk, you called me a knot head last night and damned if I don't think you are right. There is no reason why Climbing Bear and I can't team drive. I own my rig so that's not a decision I have to have from the company. So long as I get the

deliveries made, they don't get a flat-assed damn how it gets done."

"Just one problem with that, Taequo. I don't have the money to pay for half the rig."

"Who says you need money? The rig is mine. I paid for it. It is free and clear."

"But that's just it. It's your rig that you paid for. If we are going to team drive, I need to pay half."

"Climbing Bear, we need to get one thing straight right now or it will catch us off guard and bite us in the ass. We are either in this together or we are not. I have a rig, we need a rig. I'm sure you have saved some money. We need a house, you have a down payment. I am not going into this partnership with an accountant's mind. I thought we agreed to share our lives until death do us part and that means sharing all we have. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Now that you put it that way, I don't."

"Then it's settled. When we get back, you can turn in your rig and quit. I won't have to do anything since, as I said, all that is required of me is delivery on time. You can fly back to Reno, get squared away and drive back to Denver and I'll pick you up next week."

"Just a little side comment here," Wounded Hawk said. "You need to remember the importance of talking things through. Relationships, partnerships require work, but, man, think of the return."

I flew back to Reno, resigned from my job, packed what I needed and could take, sold the rest, got out of the lease on the house and headed east to Denver. Waiting for me there was my great happiness, Taequo. He had already said we were spending Thanksgiving in North Carolina with a bunch of people I was dying to meet, not only because of all Taequo and Wounded Hawk had told me about them, but also because they had to be great for those two Indians to praise them as they did. Taequo had even suggested we might look for a house in North Carolina.

A few weeks later I found myself in North Carolina, sleeping in what had to be a sacred place after having met one of the most remarkable bunch of people I had ever know. The following morning I woke up and realized I was not alone in my sleeping bag. I was still getting use to the wonderful feeling of waking up with Taequo beside me. "Yes," I thought, "You may not be the prettiest Indian in the world, but you are the most beautiful creature in my world. Yea, Taequo, you have given me life and love and, damn, I sure needed both. I leaned over, kissed Taequo softly and saw his dark eyes open and a smile spread across his face and my world was complete.