

The God Slayers

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Dedication: In memory of my brother Michael, taken long before I was ready for you to go. You were and always will be my hero. *A star burns bright burns out before its time.*

GMO: Noun: 1. **Genetically modified organism:** an organism or microorganism whose genetic material had been altered by means of genetic engineering.

Webster's Dictionary.

Science without conscience is but the ruin of the soul.

Rabelais: Rabelais: To the Reader.

It is a further and very worrying step down the wrong road for humanity.

John Smeaton, National Director

Society for the Protection of Unborn Children.

Chapter One

James Emerson Cameron was a geneticist straight out of Harvard Medical School and not likely to get a job in any hospital. In fact, he was lucky to graduate, his ethics questionable, his methods illegal and his research beyond the morals of his times. Yet, he was unquestionably brilliant. Tall slender with good shoulders and trim waist from his sculling days, he put the stereotype of an egg-head nerd to shame. With clear blue eyes, black hair so dark it shone blue and a dimpled chin, he presented a Calvin Klein face to the world. He simply could not understand the ethics prohibiting genetic modification on humans.

Why, he argued, not correct the faults in a deformed, retarded or diseased fetus before it was born and became a drain on society's declining resources?

His views were not only unpopular, radical and unethical but illegal. Still, he persisted getting kicked out of one research lab after another until in desperation he went to the black market underground. There, he was approached by some dark secret organization that promised him the world---his own lab, his choice of assistants, equipment up to and including a Cray super-computer and all the time and money he needed.

One catch, he had to live at the lab and it was in a desolate, unpopular location. He asked where and was told the west. Somewhere between the Dakotas and the Four Corners area. He said he didn't care as long as it wasn't at Area 51. They did not find that amusing.

He supervised the building of the facility and was given state-of-the-art everything. The only thing they demanded was that it had to be built on government land – hidden in the black budget but officially known as the Wind River Indian Health Clinic/Hospital on BLM land. He smiled when he heard that, thoughts and ideas swirling through his head on fetal alcohol syndrome and Indian babies. A population no one would care about or miss.

“Perfect,” he told the shadowy people who accommodated him. When told what modifications they wanted him to try, he was delighted that they were on the same page. He left for his new home on a private jet some three days after meeting with his new bosses.

The clinic they built was beautiful but the real prize were the labs and complex underground. There, he had his apartments and everything a single man could want yet he was more into the research than Xbox, movies, surround-sound and chicks. His bosses offered to fly in a \$1000 hooker when he wanted one but he shrugged that off in favor of the eagerness to get to work.

The natives were suspicious because he was white, rich and from the government even when they were offered free healthcare. The population on the reservation was small, insular and poverty-stricken. There were no casinos nearby and the only jobs available was a three-hour trek to the pine forest where the giant Weyerhaeuser logged and reforested.

There were a few abandoned gold and turquoise mines but none had yielded more than a few hundred dollars in the last 25 years. Set in a deep ravine at the foot of the Snoqualmie Hills was such a turquoise mine. Near it was a neat doublewide set on cinder blocks dug into a hole in the ground. The house had a basement/storm shelter and was the home of the old man who still worked in the shallow caves prospecting.

He had raised 10 children and five grandchildren – only one of which was still alive. A granddaughter who had migrated east to attend a prestigious school of Law just outside Washington to become a lawyer. She went to work for the government – the FBI. A stunning redhead with dark brown eyes, no one knew she was three-quarters Sioux or that she had been born and raised on the tiny reservation. Her hair was not the true red of a Celt but a deep mahogany that the Indians called oxblood. She was tall too, coming in at nearly 5'10”.

The day she returned home to her grandfather's was a day of joy. She drove her old Jeep up the horse track, tooted her horn and waited patiently for her Abuelo to come to the door. Instead, he approached silently from the mine carrying his backpack and pickax.

“I'll make coffee,” was all he said as he took her bags into her protests. She looked tired but then, she would be. The nearest airport was 200 miles away and she must have driven her car in from Washington. He brought her things into her old bedroom, untouched but clean since the day she had left six years earlier. She flopped on the double bed and he quietly closed the door behind him.

In the morning over the simple breakfast of fried dough, eggs, and coffee, she told him why she was there. She was, she said, two months pregnant by an important and wealthy married

man. He wanted her to have an abortion and she did not. She knew he was capable of forcing her so she ran to the one place she knew she would be safe.

“Will he come after you, Rachel?” Her grandfather asked calling her by her white name.

“No one knows I came from here, Grandfather. I started fresh from college. All my records start there, not from back here. If he wants to, though he could track me down but he doesn’t care that much as long as I disappear.”

“A new clinic opened out by the town. Free healthcare,” he said.

She laughed shakily. “Good. My healthcare stopped when I resigned from the FBI.” She hated lying to her grandfather yet he knew she was holding something back.

On Monday morning, two weeks after the clinic opened, she was there for her first prenatal checkup. She liked the nurses but the tall handsome doctor gave her an unsettled feeling. He was surprised when he read her medical history, commenting that she did not look Native American with her auburn hair and brown eyes.

“My parents were Renée and Jason Strongbow,” she returned. “They died in a multicar pileup on the Delaware Watershed Turnpike.”

“Do you have a high school diploma?”

“I went to college,” she returned dryly.

“Ever have your IQ taken?”

“Yes. It was 156.” He was not surprised, she seemed bright, intelligent and healthy. Just tired. He prescribed prenatal vitamins and a high-protein diet. No alcohol.

“I don’t drink,” she returned flatly, remembering the fetal alcohol syndrome children on the Res.

“Good. There are too many children here that their mothers should have heeded that warning,” he returned.

“Poverty, booze make common bedfellows,” she said putting her clothes back on. “Are you married?”

“No.” He was amused at her brashness.

“What brings a good-looking doctor like you out to the back-ass of nowhere?”

“You always so blunt?”

“I find anything else a waste of time,” she shrugged.

“No. Haven’t time for relationships. You have a job?”

“No. Why would I come for free health care if I had money?”

“Can you type?”

Now it was her turn to be amused. “Not on a typewriter. I can pound the keyboard of a computer 100+ words a minute. You offering me a job?”

“Yes. Doesn’t pay much but the healthcare is great. And cheap.”

“Maternity benefits?”

“Will the father be paying his share?”

“Bastard,” she spat. “Not likely. He’s married and wanted me to abort him.”

“Him? You know the sex already?”

“My spirit ancestor told me,” she grinned and left him standing there nonplussed.

She told her grandfather she was hired and would pay half the expenses. He laughed saying that the air and water were free but if she wanted to waste her money on gas for the generator and hot water to go ahead. The house was sans electricity, water was spring fed by gravity to the house and he used coal lanterns at night, battery-operated radio. No Wi-Fi, no TV no electric lights.

“I forgot how close and clear the stars are,” she marveled sitting on the porch with him and staring at the vast expanse of celestial sky. “In Washington, you hardly ever get to see the sky.”

He took her hand. “It is good you have come home, redheaded child. Orrin has spoken of you.”

“Yeah? What did the Great Spirit say? I’m an idiot?” She stood up and strode off down the drive that was little more than a horse trail. The old man watched as her body began the subtle changes that marked the beginnings of her pregnancy.

They settled into a routine, she worked five days a week at the clinic and was an efficient and perfect employee. She was amazed at the amount of work the physician did and eventually because she was there, others began to use the clinic. Her baby bump grew until it began to interfere when she drove or bent over. That was when she started her once weekly trips off the res to the largest town staying away for one day before returning home to no comments or explanations.

She received regular care from the doctors including vitamin injections that left her tired and achy for a day afterward but the fetus continued his growth on schedule, was healthy and happy.

Her baby was born, a beautiful boy with crystal-clear ice blue eyes with black centers, dark bronze skin and mahogany hair even deeper than her own. She called him her Firebird, after the Native American legend. When he opened his eyes to stare at the new world, the doctor who delivered him, his mother and great-grandfather, it was as if an adult looked out of those eyes. She named him Lakan which meant nothing in the Lakota language but she liked the sound of it. Her grandfather gave him his spirit name which he would keep hidden until he was old enough to be initiated into it.

The clinic prospered and Cameron treated his patients. If the incidence of fetal miscarriages and birth defects went down, the committee that oversaw such things did not notice but put it down to better healthcare.

Children began to disappear when the boy Lakan turned three. He was a quiet child, always at his great-grandfather’s side or underfoot with his mother at the clinic.

It wasn’t until she saw him reading the computer files over the edge of her desk that she realized the boy was... gifted.

“Laky,” she said. “What are you doing?”

“Mama, these numbers are wrong,” he spoke with a lisp, his two front teeth just coming in. He was going to be tall like her and his father had been 6’2” yet he gave the impression of a small child.

“Wrong how?” She was curious, most children that age could just begin to pick up words like ‘read’, ‘cat and dog’.

“There are more account numbers than patient numbers,” he answered. “For services these other accounts provided but are not listed under the appropriate names.”

She gasped to hear such words coming from her three-year-old. “Lakan, can you read this?” She scrolled the site to Wikipedia on law cases picking a particularly convoluted case. He read it with ease and further astonished her with its simple meaning that the litigant had violated his own nondisclosure contract and therefore voided the buyout offer.

He looked at his mom. “Are you afraid of what he did to me?”

“He? Who is he? What did he do?” She snapped, horrified. He told her, showed her the secret files in the lab and the basement.

Row after row of children hooked up to artificial wombs and kept in coma-like conditions while the doctor and his assistants performed genetic manipulation on them only to have the children die or suffer irreversible brain damage. Those fetuses he experimented on pre-birth survived but damage from the alcohol their mothers had ingested and twisted their brains too much to be useful.

“Is that what he did to you? All those vitamin injections he gave me?” She was aghast. “We have to get out of here!”

She scooped up the three-year-old and ran for her grandfather’s not listening as the boy tried to tell her that there were cameras recording them and he did not yet know how to wipe them clean. On the long drive home, she met a car on the lonely road and knew instinctively that the black Hummer with tinted windows meant them harm. She began a desperate race across the Badlands of ravines, rocky paths and trails craning her neck behind to watch as the Hummer followed.

The boy was strapped into a car seat and keening with fright, his hands holding his bottle with his favorite drink. Cherry Kool-Aid. After all, he was only three years old.

She knew how to drive, she had taken the defensive driving course at the FBI Academy and still had both the skills and her issued Glock. Locked in the glove box and inaccessible.

Hitting a pothole, she felt the steering rod go and suddenly the car bucked like an unruly horse. In slow motion, she felt the whole 2000 pounds of steel go over and over on a roll. Too many times to count banging her head on the crushed roof, slamming her head into the side wall as glass broke, and then back onto the roof. It was the pointed rock through the open window slamming into her head that killed her.

When the Jeep came to a rest a hundred feet down the ravine of the dirt road, it resembled a piece of modern art and not a four-wheel-drive vehicle. No airbags had deployed on the driver’s or passenger’s side but had in the rear cushioning the side doors. The tough little child’s car seat had maintained its integrity and protected the child from most of the damage. It did not prevent whiplash or the violent shaking of his head from side to side causing his brain to jam forward and back. Swelling was immediate and catastrophic. Vital functions begin to shut down and the boy began to die.

The watchers from the road waited and when no one exited the vehicle, they carefully descended the slope to peer inside. They saw the former FBI agent, her head a battered mass of flesh, bone, and blood. Nothing was recognizable, her eyes, her entire face was gone.

“The kid?”

“Looks bad.” The second man dressed in black jeans, dark shirt and jacket reached in and plucked the kid out. “His pulse is barely there. Eyes pinpoint and nonreactive.”

“Bring him anyway. The doctor wants him regardless. Dead or alive.”

They cradled the boy and carried him back up the traverse, laying him on the back seat. One held him on the chest with a huge hand while the other drove. On the way back, the driver radioed in an accident report with fatalities to the nearest police station – the Tribal Police in nearby Trigger’s Bay.

When they reached the clinic, Cameron met them at the entrance to the lab. “Kid’s dead or near,” they reported. “The woman died on impact.”

“Give him to me,” he ordered and they handed over the gravely injured child. “Go back on patrol. No sense you not being there to do your jobs.”

The two BLM agents left without another word. He brought the boy into the lab and treated him noting the dismal vitals and decreasing signs of brain function. Pouring massive

steroids into the child's IV, he dropped the temp in the room and placed the boy in a sterile ice-filled container in the surgery.

Scrubbing up, he entered the surgery room to perform a craniotomy to relieve the pressure on the boy's brain. Then, he waited.

One day turned into a week. The boy despite the odds and the medical impossibility began to live. First, the EEG blinked and showed that indeed his brain was no longer flat line but dreaming. In six months, he opened his eyes.

Chapter Two

I remembered to the day when I was born. In fact, I remembered before I was born. While I was still just a tiny mass of cells in utero growing a brain, I had the sense of my own awareness. Once I developed ears, eyes, and a nose, I heard things. Like my mother talking to me and naming me. She wanted to call me Jesse after an early crush from grade school but I put the suggestion in her head of my own choice. Lakan. It meant World Changer in the old language, the language before the great apes stood up and walked on their hind feet.

I remembered the trauma of birth, seeing my great-grandfather's wise old brown eyes and my mother's sweet face, the watchful expectant look on the doctor. Instantly, I knew he was not to be trusted.

I knew things but my infant body and undeveloped tongue, mind, and the sensory system could not tell of those things. I had to grow, to catch up before I could and by the time I was ready to reveal them to my mother, it was too late. I remembered the accident and her murder. I felt it when the bright candle of her light went out. I felt my own brain take on such injuries that I knew I was dying.

Yet – the GMO that Cameron had injected into my mother during her pregnancy had changed me and kicked in moments from that death. Cells underwent a radical shift into a sort of suspended stasis while others began to repair the most critical injuries staving off cessation of the major functions. My brain did not remember the pain or the why, only that it must not reveal those changes.

When I opened my eyes six months later, I saw the world through a dull perception. My reactions and emotions were stunted. Cameron tested me extensively and pronounced me developmentally delayed. Brain-damaged. Released me back to my grandfather but kept tabs on me with monthly checkups at his clinic. It was easy to fool him for in truth, my brain felt dull and lagging behind. My grandpop did not care, he took me in and cared for me as if I were an orphan foal. He bottle-fed me until I learned how to eat again. Carried me with him everywhere until I learned how to walk and do those things I had taken for granted. He never judged me and was always patient, praising me when I had done something right and using a word or two that meant more to me than any effusive reward.

He celebrated my birthday as milestones giving me not gifts but responsibilities. By the time I was five, I took care of my own horse and his, the two Heeler dogs, chickens and a small herd of sheep he raised for meat. He believed in giving me responsibilities, giving me a sense of self-worth and accomplishment.

He used to take me to the mine until I got lost once in the dark stope and scared both of us. Me into a quivering mass and he to the point of frantic. He called the Elders and they organized a search delving deep into the old mine and found me curled up in a fetal ball in a shaft long forgotten and only feet away from deep water. No one knew how I'd gotten there, myself included. After that, I explored until I knew every inch of the tunnels.

When I turned seven, I grew tired of lighting the kerosene lamps and using the wood fireplace to heat and cook. Using parts from his junk pile, I built solar panels on the roof and rigged it to provide electricity powered by both sun and wind. I also hitched a wind turbine to the spring and the wind-pumped water with full pressure into the house for the first time in 25 years. In fact, the first time since the house had been laid there.

“How did you figure all this out?” Grandpop asked scratching his head. He handed me a bottle of red water, my favorite---cherry Kool-Aid. He wore his hair short and under an old straw hat he’d found on the side of the road. He was taller than my mom but bent over through the years. I thought he told me he was in his 80s.

“I read about it somewhere,” I said in my slow halting speech. Since the accident, I was prone to lapses in concentration and comprehension, slow to talk, act and react.

“Maybe I should’ve homeschooled you, Lake. I don’t think your mother would have wanted you to grow up ignorant or illiterate.”

“No, she wouldn’t,” I said cocking my head as I listened to her agree. “She says to teach me the old ways, too. Like you tried to teach her.”

“You see her spirit, boy?”

“Is it her spirit? She looks real. Solid. Huh.” I tried to touch her and my hands encountered only the briefest of sensations. Sort of like a chilly surface brush. “Mom says hello, Grandpop,” I repeated. I took a drink and my lips stained from the cherry flavor. Grandpop smiled.

“Hello, Rachel. I hope your spirit is happy,” he replied.

“No, Grandpop. She wants the men who murdered her to be punished.”

“Do you know who did it, Lakan? The police said it was an accident. She was driving too fast.”

“I was there, Grandpop. There was a big black beast chasing us.”

He looked at me funny. Sometimes, the words I wanted did not come out like I planned. They made perfect sense in my head but once they left my mouth – they were so inane.

“Who?”

“That doctor mom worked for,” I answered quietly.

“Doctor Cameron?” He looked skeptical.

“I can prove it.”

“How?”

“There’s a secret lab beneath the clinic and access below by old mine shafts where he keeps the bodies.”

“Bodies?” Now I was scaring him, my stoic brave great-grandfather.

“All those children that disappeared? He took them.” I could see he did not believe me and I told him that I would show him.

Grabbing my backpack, I loaded it with water bottles, flashlights, extra batteries and hard hats with lamps. Strode to the door and held it open. “You coming?”

As mines go, this one had produced a spectacular amount of quartz with very little gold to show for it but had been loaded with turquoise which in itself was rare to find so far north from the Navajo and Hopi lands where it was more common.

This turquoise was deep blue shot through with strands of pink making it a rare and costly gemstone much in demand. Mined to the last speck in the late 1890s, no one had brought out more than a few karats in the last 50 years. Called the Opal Heart Mine, it had officially been closed and abandoned before the US government had deeded the land to the Wind River

Reservation and my great-great-grandfather had purchased it with his first and last \$100. It had been in the family since and still was even though Gramps had mortgaged it to put my mother on the way to law school.

We approached the old buffalo wallow that time and the weather had turned into a ravine coming down from the range. If I looked up, I could see the tops of the mountains where late spring snow still capped the highest peaks. It was chilly here in the high desert and I wished I had brought my jacket as I shivered. Standing in front of the man-sized hole covered with chaparral brush and small piñon trees, my grandfather handed me my jacket from out of his pack.

Gratefully, I pulled it on as he reached inside the dark hole for his coal lanterns. Using a long self-striking match, he lit the wick and trimmed it. Light flared and illuminated a scant 5 feet into the stygian black. I always liked that word stygian. Precocious of me to use it but then, I read. A lot.

Grandpop took the lead obeying my directions until we came to a dead end that he had never bothered to look beyond. The cave angled back on itself and because of the angle, it presented an illusion of a flat wall when instead, another four tunnels branched off. Three went nowhere except in circles coming back on themselves but the fourth led down into caverns that were the epitome of the Greek version of hell, complete with a stalagmite that could have been a portrait of Hades. Another looked like Poseidon raising his trident.

“The gods are buried here,” Grandpop whispered and I did not have to tell him to be quiet as even his whisper echoed in the room.

Beneath a frozen waterfall of stone was a vertical crack just wide enough for us to fit into but we had to remove the backpacks and drag them behind us. The headlights glowed on walls of smooth rock, almost as if it had parted for us like the Red Sea had for Moses. The hiss of the coal lantern and my Grandpop’s easy breaths were the only things I could hear.

One minute we were entombed in the Earth’s crease, the next we were in a chamber carved and blasted by man. The walls were worked smooth, the floor concreted and machinery hummed with electricity providing power and lights. Electricity kept the huge freezers running and they preserved the remains of my kindred brothers and sisters.

Grandpop looked at each glass-fronted coffin and recited each child’s name. There weren’t many – perhaps six or seven but he knew every one of them. What was even weirder, there was an empty one with my name on it.

Chapter Three

“Lakan, are there cameras down here?” His voice was sharp and worried. I reassured him.

“Don’t worry, Grandpop. I’ve been coming down here for two years and no one’s ever caught me.”

“Two years!”

“Since I was 10. That’s when they called me and told me where to find them,” I explained.

“Them? Their spirits?”

“Yes. I suppose. I thought they were the real person, though.” I laughed shakily. “Sometimes, they seem more real than me.”

“In the spirit world, they are more real than you,” he replied. “We need to leave this place and tell the Tribal Police what you have found.”

“And the FBI,” I agreed. “I can take pictures.”

“You have a camera?”

I rolled my eyes. “Grandpop, I have a smartphone. It does everything.”

“And where did you get that?” He asked sharply.

“I ordered it off eBay.” Then, I had to explain prepaid credit cards, the Internet and ordering everything through the library, picking up mail at my PO Box. All of which I had done under his nose. As for money, I had transferred part of my mother’s life insurance into a bankless account in my Internet name.

“The white doctor thinks you are stupid, Lakan. He thinks you are brain-damaged.”

“That’s what I want him to think, Grandfather. I have no intention of going back and becoming one of his guinea pigs. I’m not going to wind up down here in this...plastic coffin.”

“We should leave.” I nodded and retraced our steps back towards his mine and familiar territory. We emerged into a soft twilight; we had been down in the earth longer than I had expected and as we approached the house, we saw the headlights of a big SUV shining on the front porch.

Standing in front of the high beams were two of the doctor’s henchmen, big men that guarded his home and patrolled the clinic grounds.

They were staring up at the solar panel array on the roof. Both men looked like ex-military with buzz cuts, dark jeans, shirts, and jean jackets. Neither wore cowboy boots which set them apart from 99% of the men around us. Both were 6 feet, well-muscled without being bulky and very fit. Dark-haired, brown eyed and armed with semiautomatic pistols that they kept concealed in shoulder holsters. I had seen them before; Dr. Cameron had sent them to pick me up for my monthly checkups. I did not like or trust them any more than I did the doctor. They treated me as if I were a stupid dog, calling me slow and retarded. Of course, I fostered that perception of me.

“Mr. Strongbow,” the younger one with dark brown eyes under an LA Raiders cap greeted. “Out late prospecting?” He didn’t wait for a reply but pointed to the roof. “Nice solar array there. You have somebody come in from the big city to do that?”

Grandpop nodded. “Solar Solutions out of California.”

“That must’ve cost a pretty penny. Didn’t know you were so flush. Come up on a big mother lode?”

“Why? You want to buy in?” My grandfather asked. “For your information, I used my granddaughter’s life insurance. The boy needs light and stimulation for his brain.”

“Isn’t any TV or Wi-Fi out here,” the man laughed. “Besides he’s...slow. What can he learn?” He stared at me and I let drool dribble out of my mouth as I stumbled forward to grab for his baseball cap. He stepped back as if I were contagious and muttered ‘retard’ under his breath.

“What do you want?” Grandpop asked, foregoing his usual good manners. “It isn’t the day or the time for the boy’s checkup.”

“Dr. Cameron would like to see both of you at the clinic tomorrow morning. We thought we’d save you a trip into town, you could spend the night in the clinic hospice rooms.”

“I can drive myself and the boy in,” Grandpop said gruffly.

“Nope. Your truck has a flat tire and no spare.”

Grandpop stared and went to look – his old F-150 sat on its rims, all four tires flat with a thorn in each one. The only thorns around were down in the gully where you’d have to be on a donkey to ride through it.

Grandpop’s lips thinned and I could see him thinking about resisting but his old Colt .45 single action was in his backpack and not easily accessible. I shuffled over to the big black

Denali and opened the door, climbing into the driver's seat where I fumbled with the keys, turning it on and grinding the starter before Redcap could stop me.

With a curse, he reached in and hauled me out by the shirt front. I batted at his face with my hands and tried to bite him. He tossed me into the backseat, grabbed both my hands and seat belted me in making the lap belt unnecessarily tight. His face was close to mine and I wailed in his ears striking at him with my head but he was too quick jerking it out of the way before I could connect.

"Tell him to quit or I'll hurt him," he ordered Grandpop.

"Lakan, stop." I subsided making only small whimpering noises until I pissed my jeans. The smell made him rear back in disgust.

"Pee-pee, Grandpa," I mumbled, tears running down my face.

"Don't you touch my boy!" My grandfather roared and charged the men.

"Ganpa! No!" I yelled and kicked the back of the seat. My grandfather stopped, his nostrils flaring like a winded horse and the other men grabbed him by the arm. "Calm down, grandpa. The boy's not hurt. Get in the car and we'll take a nice quiet trip to town."

Grandpa slid into the back seat with me, tossing his backpack onto the floor space between us. Mine, I'd left outside the SUV and the driver threw it into the back. I gave Grandpop a worried look – if either of them went through it, they would find items that did not belong in a retard's pack.

I put my hand on my grandfather's knee and used sign to tell him not to worry, that I would not let them hurt either of us. I spoke in Lakota; a language I knew they did not understand.

The two men got into the front, seat belted themselves and locked the doors. Starting the engine, they reversed and drove slowly down our long driveway that was part road and dirt trail. The suspension was tough and we rocked side to side on the ruts and rocks.

It was a two-hour ride into town and once there, we drove slowly down the only paved street in the whole village directly towards the clinic which sat on the very edge of town. It was a modern building built of prefabricated walls, designed to be solid in a thunderstorm, hurricane, and tornadoes of which we had all three. Built of cinder block and steel, it looked like any typical small-town hospital and this one was no more than a five-bed facility. It serviced the entire Wind River Reservation and was the only hospital for 200 miles. For anything serious, patients were driven to Bismarck or airlifted further. Dr. Cameron was the only MD on staff, for surgeries he called in another doctor who flew in once a week to perform those.

Both men exited the vehicle leaving us behind. To my surprise, the doctor was waiting for us at the front doors and the first inklings of panic hit my belly. I gripped Grandpa's thigh with a cold hand and he whispered to me in Siouan. "Do you think they saw us?"

"I don't know, Grandpa but I'm not staying to find out." I unhooked the seatbelt, grabbed our packs and reached for the door handle.

"What? You going to outrun them?" He laughed. "Or change into an owl and fly away?"

I grinned. "Better. Almost." I stepped out of the SUV and held his hand as the curious trio approached us from the other side of the black Denali. The white government must have gotten one hell of a discount from Cadillac. Every one of these agents drove one.

"Mr. Strongbow?" Cameron asked beginning to become alarmed. "What's going on?"

"You tell me," he countered. I slipped into the mindset I needed and opened the veil between worlds, saw my mother standing there and she said to hurry or they would be able to follow. Grandpop did not waste time asking questions but followed mom through the yellow-

tinted place. We walked through yellow sand and the sky was a pale amber, there were no clouds, no sun, and no mountains in the distance. No bugs disturbed the silent air which had a scent like cedar to it.

“Where are we? The spirit world? Rachel –.” Grandpa’s voice was heavy with emotion and I could see he wanted to touch her.

“No, Grandfather. You can’t. If you touch her, you will bind her spirit in this place where she can never leave it.”

“Isn’t she here now?”

“She is here as a visitor as we are here. Neither living nor dead can bide here,” I answered.

“What is this place?”

“The space between. When the doctor changed my DNA, he left me open to places like this. I’ve just now learned how to come through and back.”

“Where are we going?” He asked.

“I’m following mom,” I said shrugging. “She will take us to safety.”

We followed her and he asked a great many questions but she had no answers other than she was our guide in this place. We walked for what seemed like many hours; my legs grew tired and even Grandpa took on a weary countenance. He was, after all in his late 80s.

“What’s it like, Rachel? Are you happy? Is it everything it’s supposed to be?”

She smiled. “I can’t tell you, Granddad. You have to die to experience it.”

“My time will come soon enough, I think,” he whispered and I looked alarmed.

“No, Grandpa. You can’t leave me alone!”

He rubbed my head. “You are never alone, Lakan. Your spirit ancestors are always around you.”

There was no way to tell time in the yellow realm and the few times I had both a watch and a phone, neither worked within.

Mom stopped at a place that didn’t look any different than the last place we’d stopped or the place where we’d entered. “Here is where you exit,” she smiled and blew me a kiss. She sent one to Grandpa and I felt a soft whisper of cool air touch my cheek. I took his hand and opened the veil so both of us could step through. We emerged from the house and the first thing I noticed was that all the lights were on and the front door was wide open. There was never a need to lock it, no one had ever broken into a home on the res and Grandpa lived too far out for most to make the trip in. He had nothing worth stealing. Besides, most of the people knew Grandpop would give them anything if they needed it and asked.

“Did they search the house?” He rushed forward and I stopped him, listening to the vibrations on the air. It told me that whoever had been here was long gone.

“Saddle up the horses, Grandpa. We need to ride into the mountains and hide,” I said before running inside. Grandpop didn’t argue. Most of my valuables I kept in my backpack but my mini laptop had been lying under my bed next to the high-tech Wi-Fi hotspot device I had made from scraps of electronics. That alone was worth a small fortune because of its radical new design. It could hitchhike on Earth Guard and I used it to surf the net as well as give me access to the satellite’s programming. It was one step away from hacking the NSA. Both devices were gone and I didn’t waste time looking for anything else. By the time I had packed a change of clothes, food, weapons and ammo, he had both horses saddled and had turned the stock loose. The dogs milled around our feet, upset because they sensed our agitation.

We were mounting just as I looked down the trail to the entrance of the road off the highway leading to our place. “They’re coming back.” Swiftly, we mounted and trotted the horses off into the soft welcoming darkness.

Chapter Four

The phone rang in Cameron’s office, the one phone he never used because whoever was on the other line was the only person he was... leery of pissing off. He did not know the man’s name, he only knew that he was the one in charge of his lab, the money and the ultimate owner of his research. He didn’t know the man’s identity but had been told to call him Mr. Chase. Cameron picked up the phone with trepidation.

“Hello?”

“Dr. Cameron. I hear you’ve had some problems,” the unctuous voice stated. “Do you know how much money we have funded your little project with these last ten years?”

Cameron said, “Millions, I imagine.”

“Try 227 million and counting, doctor. And what have we to show for it? Nothing but dead Indian babies.”

“I do have something,” Cameron offered and there was an uncomfortable silence on the other end. The doctor rushed to fill it. “One of my early subjects showed promise but was involved in a car accident in which his mother was killed –.”

“Ah yes, the inquisitive Agent Strong. Rachel Strong. I thought her son was a...vegetable.”

“Not quite,” Cameron said dryly. “But definitely brain-damaged. Yet, we have evidence he found the lab and I have his laptop.”

“His computer? He’s able to use a computer?”

“Not only use it but it’s encrypted and I can’t get in it. I did open it up and the thing is structured like you would not believe. Also, I found a Wi-Fi device that’s homemade and simply unbelievable. It looks like it came out of a Silicon Valley R&D lab.”

“The grandfather?”

“Great-grandfather. No, he doesn’t even have a landline and they barely had the modern conveniences until last year. Now, the house uses solar energy and wind power for the well. Someone is mechanically and electronically gifted. No one else lives in the house but the boy and the great-grandfather.” The doctor hesitated, knowing what he said next would make him sound as crazy as a fruitcake. “There’s a problem. I found the boy’s image on the security tapes in the lab. He brought his grandfather down into the cryo-lab where the bodies are stored yet neither of them went through the complex’s elevators or corridors. No doors were accessed or opened. They appear and then disappear. I sent two men to bring them back in and there wasn’t a problem until they stopped at the clinic doors.”

“What kind of problem?” Mr. Chase asked softly and that frightened Cameron more than if he’d yelled. “And?” He prompted.

“The both of them just disappeared right in front of my eyes. I caught it on the hospital CCTV. I think you should see it, Mr. Chase.”

“Send it to me.”

Cameron uploaded the feed directly to the spook's phone and both watched as the slender twelve-year-old moved gracefully and quickly in the SUV to exit with his grandfather. He spoke and his face was bright, intelligent and curiously adult, not the image of a drooling mentally

challenged fetal alcohol child. But it was the way he disappeared that shocked the scientist most. The boy stared hard with an intense focus, leaned forward as if he were opening a door and stepped through as parts of him simply vanished in a shimmer of yellow light. By the time security reached the area nothing remained but scuff marks and the two bewildered agents.

“Interesting,” Mr. Chase commented. “Have you sent anyone out to the home?”

“Yes. A team of your men. They found his laptop and Wi-Fi device as I told you.”

Mr. Chase hesitated. “I will be flying out there, doctor. In light of this development, the Director has decided to close the facilities and move you to a more secure location.”

“Close the lab? But I’ve succeeded in producing a prototype!”

“Yes and you’ve lost him. I want all your data on the projects sent to me. I will be there in—.” Mr. Chase looked at his watch, an inexpensive Timex. “Seven hours.” He did not say goodbye just the phone went dead and the computer dark.

Cameron backed up everything on a flash drive and burned the rest. He had no need to inform the regular clinic personnel, they would most likely keep the legitimate hospital up and running as a cover for the lab. When he was certain all traces of the project were destroyed and the only thing left were the bodies, he triggered the electronic sequence that activated the C-4 buried in the walls and floor. As he left the underground labs for the last time, he did not spare ten years of disappointments and research a second glance.

Cameron was in the agent’s SUV when he felt the subtle ground tremor as the detonation occurred. He knew it was powerful enough to blow the lab to oblivion yet would only be felt as a mild burp in the hospital above. Not that he cared but the powers that be would pass it off as a natural gas explosion deep underground to stifle any curiosity.

“There’s nothing left at the house,” Aiken said. He was the agent the boy had seen wearing the LA Raiders hat, the other was named Ferron. Both were ex-military, CIA and on loan to Cameron for dirty work.

“Your definition of nothing and mine may not be the same, Aiken,” Cameron said shortly. He was quiet the entire two-hour ride back out to the house.

As they arrived, the sun was just coming up and as it stole over the plateau where the house was nestled in a fold of trees and meadow, it lit the area with a golden glow as if the whole scene was painted in molten metal. Sheep with lambs were grazing on the front lawn and chickens were just beginning to come down from their roosts.

Aiken stopped at the front door which he had left open but was now closed. “They came back here, and let the animals loose. I thought you said nothing was left in the house.”

Cameron said, “Something was valuable enough for them to risk returning.”

Aiken exited the driver side and went inside. He came back after only a few minutes to explain, “Clothes are gone. Some food, ammo but we took his rifles and handguns. All they might have are knives. Nothing else is gone.”

Ferron returned from the barn. “Horses are gone, saddles and gear. I found some tracks.”

Cameron snorted. “You think you can track an Indian? Be my guest. But don’t bother. What the little sneak doesn’t realize is that I planted a GPS chip in every one of my…subjects. Including the boy and wherever he goes, I can find him.”

“Then what are we doing here?” Aiken asked.

“Waiting for the cavalry to arrive. We can set up in the house until Mr. Chase gets here.” Cameron stared, picked up his briefcase in which he’d placed his laptop and went inside the house.

The front door opened into a great room, a living, dining, and kitchen all in one. To the left was the master bedroom and bath done in soothing earth colors and southwestern theme. Neat as a pin and without the usual bachelor clutter. There were no photos anywhere but prints and oil paintings done by local artists of landscapes and horses.

To the right was a short hallway leading to two smaller bedrooms. The boy's room was the typical mess of a pre-teen with colorful posters of Star Wars and superheroes. There were eagle feathers and dream catchers on the walls and hanging from the bedposts. The other bedroom had been Agent Strong's and was left the same as when she had last used it except for the corner where her desk had been.

There, the boy had made it his own, his laptop had rested there and the desk held his mementos---feathers, curiously shaped rocks and smooth chunks of carved wood, fossils and his mother's collection of hair combs.

As before, there were no photos on the walls or in the room. Cameron did not comment but set his laptop down on the desk, pulled up the wooden chair and hooked the power cords into the socket. He had his own remote Wi-Fi hotspot and it uplinked immediately to the nearest satellite. In seconds, an image appeared on Google Earth of a moving icon of an Indian chief in eagle headdress. Aiken, looking over the doctor's shoulder snorted.

"You know where this is?" Cameron asked and the agent studied the topographical map. He traced the contour lines of the mountain.

"We're here." He pointed to a flat spot that denoted the plateau and the image widened as the satellite view enlarged. It showed the flat gray of the roof and the black SUV parked in the yard.

"Real-time images? I'm impressed," Ferron said. "That's not far from here mileage wise but considering the terrain and the elevation, it'll be a real bitch to track him down. Can you get a helicopter?"

"Yes, but that would attract more attention than Mr. Chase wants. I assume both of you can ride?" At their nods, he continued. "I'll have horses and another team here by morning. Till then, let the rabbits run."

Chapter Five

Grandpop knew these mountains, hills, valleys and trails like it was his own backyard which it was. He had been born and raised on this land exploring every inch of it for almost eighty years.

The further in we rode, the more he retreated into the mindset of the Old Ones. He stopped speaking English and spoke only in Sioux and as he did so, he became a teacher rather than a runner.

"See the tracks the horses make, Lakan?" he asked. "If we stop and cover their feet with rags, they will leave next to nothing that a white man can see. Also, follow where I go, I pick out places where my horse does not press as deeply and leave a tell-tale track. Watch the birds and the squirrels, they will tell you if anyone is near. They have special calls to warn each other of men, another for hawks or bears." We listened and I heard them laughing as the dogs tried to chase them. They barked at their jeering from high above on the tree trunks.

"Quiet," Grandpop said and both Heelers hushed. They were named Zig and Zag by my mom because they were always zigging and zagging endlessly as puppies. The horses were called Tango and Cash after some movie my grandfather had liked. I rode the one called Tango.

We had ridden all night between a fast walk and a steady trot and by dawn, I was ready to call it quits. My butt was rubbed raw, my legs ached and I was so tired that the last two hours I had been yawning wide enough to near crack my jaws.

We had climbed the first ridge, descended into a narrow valley and were climbing what Grandpop called Sheep Meadow Peak which lay west of the mountain called White Tooth. It was over 14,000 feet high and still carried patches of snow on its North face.

The predominant trees growing this far up were pines and firs, the footing underneath a carpet of needles that muffled the horses' hooves. Granite shot with quartz surrounded us. One side of the slope was scree and treacherous footing yet that was where Grandpop led us.

For every step over, we slid one down and the horses struggled. Once we finally made it across, I looked back and our passage was clearly marked as darker rocks turned over by their hooves through it. Yet, I knew the sun would lighten them in hours hiding our escape trail. Once across on the other side, we emerged in a meadow below the huge white finger of rock that gave the peak its name. We rode over the crest. I gaped.

Mile after mile after mile of mountains, valleys and land entirely covered with evergreens stretched before me. Millions of acres of wilderness, some of which men had not stepped foot on in over a century. No logging had been done here, no commercialization of any kind.

I couldn't even see a glint of silver or blue to mark the presence of a river. It was a wilderness and I thought that no one could find us in all that even with helicopters.

Grandpop smiled. "This is my true home and yours, Lakan. The land of our ancestors. It will protect and harbor us, give us food and shelter."

"It's so...big," I said at a loss for words.

"There are places down there that no one has ever stepped foot on, boy. You ready? We can camp in a draw about halfway down. Up here, we are too exposed." I swallowed and rubbed my butt. "Sore?" he asked with a small smile.

"Yeah."

"You don't have much meat back there. If you get off and walk awhile, it will help. Grab the horse's tail and let him pull you."

I slipped out of the saddle without groaning although I wanted to complain but I knew Grandpop would be disappointed if I gave in to it so I bit my lips as my feet hit the ground with a jar. Everything seized up.

My first few steps were awkward and painful but after a few yards, it felt good to stretch my muscles and walk.

The little bay gelding followed Gramps' horse eagerly as I held onto his tail. Mostly downhill, it was merely a question of keeping my balance rather than exerting my muscles having to climb.

I walked for a half hour until I was gloriously warm and loose, admiring not the view because all I saw was the butt cheeks of the bay horse.

Without warning, the gelding stopped and I nearly ran into him. Peering around, I saw the sides of a rocky outcrop covered with trees and scrubby brush, mountain laurels and a sort of rhododendron heavy with flowers.

Bees were just starting to drone as they fluttered from petal to petal, the sound of wildlife created a background noise that told me we were an accepted part of the surroundings.

Grandpop told me to mount and as I put my foot in the stirrup, every muscle cried out in rebellion. The minute my butt hit the saddle, I cringed. He grinned at me and pointed to the rock wall.

“In there.”

“Huh?”

“Look with your senses, Lakan, not just your eyes,” he said cryptically. I rolled mine at his ancient Indian wisdom.

I stared, watching the bees and saw them disappear against the rock wall. Intrigued, I kicked the gelding forward and found to my delight that there was a fold of the outcrop concealing a narrow opening. Steering the bay horse inside, I followed the sandy wash for a short distance.

It opened up into a small meadow surrounded by hanging cliff walls. A small stream meandered through the center and disappeared into a crack in one wall.

Before my wondering eyes was a hidden valley, what Western writers had called a ‘hanging valley’. The grass was knee high and tasseled out, the seed heads blowing in a gentle breeze that smelled of fall. I saw sign of wild horses but the manure piles were old.

Grandpop led me over to an area under a particularly large overhang and there, I saw the remains of a campsite. He dismounted, unsaddled and told me to do the same.

Taking his rifle, an old .22, he walked back towards the hidden entrance. I knew he was going to remove all traces of our passage.

He did not tell me to do anything but I knew what needed to be done. By the time he returned, I had unpacked our gear and set up camp, made a small fire from which the smell of roasting coffee greeted him. Firewood wasn't tough to find; a blowdown had brought over a hundred trees to the forest floor down at the far end of the meadow. I saw squirrels, deer and sign of other game animals.

The creek had fish but they were minnow sized. There was a small pond near the middle of the field and I could see the ripples as fish broke the surface. We would not go hungry. I handed Gramps a cup of bitter dark coffee and he drank cautiously.

“Come on,” he said and I followed him. The Blue Heelers trod on our heels as we wove our way through the deep grass. The horses had found a spot under some trees and were grazing heartily.

In the trees, I could see a curious doe looking at us but Gramps ignored her to head straight for the east wall where I watched the sun climb over the cliff face. I caught a smell I knew well. Sulphur. My eyes widened and I hurried forward to find a series of shallow pools from which rose steam and bubbles. Hot springs.

“The ones to the east are cooler and get progressively hotter,” he explained. “The last one is hot enough to boil an egg.”

I stripped in record time and picked a middle one, easing my body in an inch at a time. He laughed at me. “Just go for it, Lakan. It just prolongs the agony.”

I screeched when it hit my nuts but it felt good too. The feeling of my tired and achy muscles just disappeared. I leaned back in the hole that was as deep as my waist and big enough for me and the two dogs. They of course, took one sniff and ran.

I spent a couple of hours in the natural spa and fell asleep, waking when the dogs licked my face. They had been hunting, I spotted blood on Zig's muzzle and guessed he'd caught a rabbit. Or Gramps had and fed them the parts I wouldn't eat. My mouth drooled, I loved rabbit stew almost as much as lamb.

Dressing took forever because I was wet and limp so I just bundled my clothes together and walked back naked. There wasn't anyone around to see me and I could care less, modesty wasn't part of my hang-ups yet.

Grandpop had made rabbit stew and he handed me a towel and a bowl. I ate first and then dried myself off, pulling on a t-shirt, boxers, and jeans after eating. Funny how everything tasted so much better when you camped out. I took three enormous bites, remembered yawning and the feeling of the bowl slipping through my fingers. I fell asleep as if someone had pulled my plug and didn't wake up until the moon was high in the night sky and the stars as bright as searchlights.

The fire crackled nearby and Grandpop was sitting with his back to it working the blade of his grandfather's knife on a whetstone. It winked in the firelight.

"Go to sleep, Lakan." His voice was mellow and kind. I rolled over in my sleeping bag and took his advice.

Chapter Six

The gathering group of men, machines, horses and equipment more resembled a military expedition than the supposed cover of a hunting party.

They met Mr. Chase at the small airport some two hours outside of the reservation. He had arrived in an impressive Lear jet that looked out of place on the small runway next to Piper Cubs and Beechcraft yet it brought no raised eyebrows as corporate jets landed there all the time on company retreats and millionaire estates in the Backwoods

The drive out to pick up horses and men took them only to the helicopter pad where they boarded a black and white helio that dropped them off a half hour later and a hundred miles away at a ranch funded as a training facility for covert ops. Four hours brought them to the small house on the plateau and they set up camp.

Mr. Chase looked every bit as intimidating in person as he had sounded on the phone. He was six foot three inches with long hair pulled back in a ponytail, cold brown eyes and scars buried in the wrinkles of his face. He wore blue jeans, flat soled Ropers, flannel shirt, down vest and Carhartt jacket with a worn Stetson in Silver belly. All of it used and not Rexall new. Or dime store cowboy. On his hip, he wore a Glock .40 in a custom made holster and in his luggage was a handsome rifle scabbard of worked saddle leather, the straps worn from use. The rifle was not the typical hunting gun; this one was larger barreled and held CO2 cartridges underneath the trigger.

Aiken said, "Trank gun?"

Chase looked at him with cold dead eyes. "I don't believe we want the child dead or injured do we, Sergeant Aiken?"

"No, sir."

"Don't you have something you need to do, Sergeant?"

Aiken swallowed and nodded, leaving Chase to commandeer the master bedroom and transform it into an Op-Center. He installed an upload link directly to the satellite and opened his laptop with a secure connection to the mainframe computers at Langley where he reported to his boss.

Her image appeared on his screen. Gray hair cut short and styled, black granny glasses perched on her nose, a severe frown that was at odds with the designer suit and pearl necklace. She was thirty pounds' overweight, the image of a typical Washington matron but she held a position of power that belied her appearance. Head of one of Washington's most covert agencies, she answered only to the director of the NSA and the President. And only if the NSA Director told her to inform the President. Right now, she was overseeing 57 covert black ops that were

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