



## Chapter 51 (excerpt)

### *The block will never be the same*

I kept on the road, I-80 headed east. Thinking about Laramie, Bozeman, Stephanie. Depressed on all accounts. Not down, depressed. Wondering if I was living Truffaut's film, *The Man Who Loved Women*. A succession of *affaires du coeur* which became an autobiography. Did I have a pretext for each of mine? More subtle pretexts? As in that movie, had tragedy been bearing down on me from the blinds while I was distracted by what fit so well into another pair of cowgirl boots?

How many times could the finality I often felt hanging so heavily over me be evaded? Passing through Grand Island, Nebraska, visited in a storm by Thunder People and Forked Lightning, my mind cleared somewhat and I realized what had been happening was way beyond a simple head trip. It was in the blood, of the past. Warfare in which I had no experience was being waged. Fighting spirits, challenging mythology. Tribal. Tragedies, seductions, obsessions used against, weakening me. Had my mind really cleared, or was I now delusional? What was real? I was being erased. Shaking, I pulled over in heavy rain. I had to find stronger power, heavier medicine, but knew neither where nor how.

At Des Moines, seeing the sign for I-35 Minneapolis, I thought of Annie, visualizing her face. It had been much too long. Pacing my travel, I arrived in Cloquet at 3:30 pm, Friday. Annie was surprised when I walked into the Library and gave her a long hug. I needed a woman in my arms, to be in a woman's arms. One part of me wanted her to be Stephanie, another Annie, as never before. Annie was not only a woman, but a presence. A strong, Native presence.

I was searching for a bridge over what had become increasingly rough emotional, cultural, and spiritual waters. A bridge to the love, belonging, faith I sought on the other side. In Annie's arms I found refuge for the moment, though when we parted, I was very aware of my hand on her back, the electricity in simply touching her. It was like we were balanced at the top of a cliff, and this time we'd jump off. She must have felt my shiver, but said nothing.

Annie was planning to drive over to Duluth to a folk club near UMD for the evening, and asked if I wanted to go. Nothing to think about there. I killed time until she got off work, then suggested we ride the Triumph to the city. Annie agreed, and ran home to change. Annie BlueJeans. While waiting I rolled out the bike, then made a cup of coffee. Two years. How many miles? It had gone by as if in an instant, a flicker of candlelight.

She liked Italian food and knew the place to go. It reminded me a little of Angelo's, where Cathy had worked in Laramie, though without the yang. Checkered table cloths, candles in red vinyl-netted glasses, wine goblets stacked in front of a mirror behind the counter, torn romaine.

"Now that I'm here, bring me up to date on Rezlife and what's doing in Cloquet." Not much seemed to be happening, but everything was probably too subtle. After thousands of miles, including meeting Stephanie a few days ago, which I mentioned to Annie, life up here seemed to be barely moving. It takes a lot of sap and time to boil down a gallon of maple syrup. I wondered how long it would take for the right guy to cross Annie's path.

"Any handsome warriors around these days who might have a chance of keeping up with you?"

"*Ogichidaa*, warrior. If by that you mean the guy I'm having dinner with tonight, I guess the answer is both yes and no."

"Meaning?"

"Handsome? Definitely. A warrior? Yes. Road warrior, not Rez warrior, so no, too," Annie said, smiling a bit selfconsciously.

Simple and direct about me. Sidestepping the question of someone else. If she wanted to tell me, she would when she wanted to.

"Could you be a little more specific about the handsome part?" I asked, simply teasing, but then my mind began considering other possibilities.

"You got the message." Need me to write it? On birch bark maybe?

Did I mention that her long black hair was unbraided tonight, pulled back over her ears, gathered in back, that she was dark and beautiful, at once both delicate and strong, had a well developed though private sense of humor, was absolutely spellbinding? I was honored to be with Annie LaCroix. The woman. The Native woman.

Walking out into the cool night air after leaving the club, wind on our faces, I kicked over the Triumph for the ride back. Annie held on to me, lay her head on my back as I wondered when she had last been with a man. It was too intense to even think about. If I am going to turn away from Bozeman and the near complete uncertainty of Stephanie, if Annie and I are going to flee the grinding boredom of separate everyday lives, fall in love and never look back, paddle away in one canoe, it will be now, on this ride. We will return to the GMC, and she will spend the night.

I heard her softly humming a song, tickling my back as we rode along. Hitting a bump, she grasped me more tightly as we both laughed at her reaction, then returned to her song.

Awareness. I knew there was something between us, perhaps in a way neither of us completely understood. So close to the edge now. I sighed, feeling her at my back, wanting her there. One tender touch, a word, an inviting look would be all it took. Then again, maybe we were never to be together in this life, as in *Evangeline*; our happiness would be with and through others. The thoughts came easily; withstanding the force, knowing what was right so much more difficult. When we get back to Cloquet, will our hearts speak the words, render that burning look, race away together?

My mind moved closer, considering her shining hair again, all that made her so special, alluring. I pulled over at the top of Thompson Hill, near the exit for Spirit Mountain. Traffic rushing by, St. Louis Bay and the lights of Duluth below.

"What were you singing, Annie?" My heart ached, not only from tonight, but these last years. Despite so many blessings, so little real happiness. So hungry for it. Yet I held back, did not pull her to me.

"Just an old song. Sung in Ojibwe, naturally." She tried to laugh, but looking straight at me, didn't quite get there.

A wave felt the point, moved to wrap around it. I saw myself gently grasping Annie, finding her lips.

"Annie, will you write down the song and the Ojibwe translation for me?"

Approached the cove, building height. Now! Now!

"Oh, it's nothing, only some words ... . Hey, let's go over to Superior tomorrow, to Wisconsin Point," she said, stepping away, looking to the east and pointing.

Turning *from me*, really, as the wave broke, mixed with the ebb of the previous one. Promise unfulfilled. Flat, slack water. No tree, no bench. This was neither Market Street in Camp Hill the night of the reunion, nor Bozeman. Emily

was gone, Stephanie nowhere to be found, and now Annie was distancing herself.

"Yes, let's do that," I agreed quietly, restrained, stopped by forces for some reason I knew could not be overcome tonight.

"Ready to go?"

"Ready," she replied.

When we got back to Cloquet, Annie thanked me for the evening, gave me a hug, and was gone. I didn't see a reason to go anywhere else, so I just put away the bike, drew the blinds, and crashed. Lying there, I thought about Annie, Stephanie, Laramie, this trip, the future, restless for hours. The evening's fire had not gone out.

Annie was here, with me. Closer than ever before. A trade blanket over my arm, motioning for her to come closer, I finally fell asleep, dreaming of forests and mountains, painted warriors, horses with handprints, a clouded moon, the earth shaking, sparks from a fire, darkness. The jingle of her ceremonial dress. Then her touch.

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That's not an old song I was singing, Annie thought, driving into a different darkness, not that of the Reservation. It was my song. About hearts, yes. About a man, one who will be tested, grow stronger in body and spirit. A man I want, forever, even if only in our dreams.

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