

AUBURN

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Chapter 21 - Pedro

The morning run for parts had just returned when a Navajo policeman arrived. He drove a sparkling clean cruiser except for the morning's dust at the wheel wells. Policemen always gave me the willies, and being an Indian policeman didn't seem different. My mind did pretzel loops of everything they could possibly arrest me for, and a few more beyond that.

"Need to talk with everyone." He didn't explain why.

We all assembled in the repair bay with big doors open at both ends for a gentle breeze as the heat had been rising.

He rubbed his chin. "Pedro was knifed last night in a fight at a hang out that was providing illegal booze."

I felt like saying 'so', but restrained myself. "Is that our hydraulics mechanic? We just received the big O ring seals for a dump truck we expected him to work on. An excavator would be next."

The policeman handed around a badly taken photo of a face. Two of the mechanics said that looked like him.

"How is he?"

"Pretty bad. The hospital has him on intensive care."

I noted they didn't say ICU. The Feds had been not paying the Navajo hospital for back charges, and couldn't afford the staff for a full time Intensive Care Unit.

The Indian mechanics were stoic, but their eyes showed their anger.

"We want to know if he had any enemies. Any of you know who might be angry with him?"

Heads shook for no such information. I intervened for the staff. "They say no. Anything else?"

The sun made the policeman squint as the heat had him holding his police uniform cap in this hand.

I had to make an attempt. "Anything you can tell us? How badly? Where was he when he was stabbed?"

“Investigation is continuing.”

That made a most unhelpful comment.

“Can you give me a lift up there to the hospital?”

“Against regulations.”

Another most unhelpful comment.

He turned away, lingered a few seconds, walked to his cruiser, and drove away.

I brought my vision back around to the staff. “I’m going to visit him. Any one else want to go?”

Everyone looked away. I had heard before what they wouldn’t tell me that visiting Pedro could bring an attack on one of them or their families. Whatever this had caused could run deep back into history just like a small place in the mountains back east.

I went to Wheelchair Bob who used Google for the nearest hospital phone number, but Pedro had been moved to the hospital at Window Rock. He gave me directions to the hospital and Pedro’s family home. I borrowed one of the small older cars from the sales lot. It rattled and banged at every rut and pot hole. I arrived at the Navajo Nation Capital and parked in the shade. That red car would get hot if left in the sun.

The hospital building looked baked in the sun. The lobby was somewhat warm.

“I’d like to visit Pedro.”

The nurse or whoever she could be at the desk pointed her eyes at the floor for what seemed forever. But probably only half a minute. “He’s on isolation. His sister has been here.”

That police cruiser pulled up. He asked about Pedro and heard the same thing. He frowned and departed briskly without saying a word of thanks.

I moved to the counter. “He worked with us. We’d like to express our sorrow and concern with the family.” I had little confidence that could be the right Indian way to say that, but at least that seemed different than any Anglo way I knew of.

She gave a slight smile. Not too much to say this wasn’t a serious medical issue, but enough for a little personal warmth. “Give me your name and I can have a nurse tell him you were here.”

“Nati.”

Her eyebrows jumped for just a split second. “Oh!” But I didn’t know what that meant. “We’ll tell him, thanks.”

“Thank you.” Not being able to think of another thing to say right then I turned and went out. I felt defeated as if I carried my tail between my legs.

Two blocks away had a fast food outlet. I went to the drive through window, and

bought two buckets of crispy white chicken with sides of cole slaw, beans, and french fried potatoes.

I became lost at least twice before arriving at an off white little one story house. The number at the door matched what Wheelchair Bob had provided.

With my shoulder bag strap over my shoulder and two bags of warm food in my hand, I tapped on the door.

A young woman about my age opened the door, but grief streaked across her face.

I said. "I'm so terribly sorry. I'm Nati from Sunrise Service. I have no idea of the proper traditions, so instead I brought food for the family. May I offer it to you?"

A woman's voice called out from in back. "Come in." The young woman at the door stood aside.

The front room had a table in the center much like a small dining room. I put my two buckets of food on it. After that I didn't know what to do.

A woman came in through a inside door. The darkened room behind seemed to have a bed. Tears wet her face.

She stood there looking at me as if her eyes didn't work. Eventually her gaze went from my face to the hem of my skirt and back up. I'm not so good at guessing Indian ages, but I guessed she could be the grandmother.

Diapers can be so convenient and I needed to go, which I did silently. I was glad I wore an especially thick one right then.

She took me by the wrist and ushered me to a chair at that table and sat down. Her hands said for the others to sit, too. When she motioned something else a third woman went into the back and brought out an elderly man.

A teenage girl arrived and set out plates and utensils. That older woman nodded and the teenager served the food with water and lemonade.

The few words were all Navajo, and they seemed to me to be prayers in a wailing tone.

There was a knock at the door. One of the Sorceress' Acolytes named Ruth came in. She put her hand on my shoulder as if we were best buddies, or maybe that meant something else. One more little mystery about Navajo traditions. "Did Nati bring the chicken?"

Grandmother, the two women, and the teenage girl all nodded 'yes'. The men were motionless.

Ruth asked. "May I say a chant?"

More nods.

The chant was, of course, in Navajo, but I thought I heard my name 'Nati' in

there a few times.

Finally she finished. There were tears all around. She pulled up a chair next to mine and sat next to me with our shoulders touching. She took my hand which made me nervous all over again. She whispered, “we don’t eat,” and then she served more of the side dishes.

The men went outside. The teenager swept the plates away. Another woman joined her in the kitchen as they washed and dried.

The elderly woman had tears in her eyes again. “Thank you.”

The Acolyte responded in Navajo first. “Nati, can you give me a lift?”

That sounded like a directive it might be time to leave. In the car she put her hand on mine. “Nati. Who told you to bring that food?”

“No one.”

“No one? No one at all?”

“No one.”

“You really are special. You didn’t know ... I know you didn’t know that is a very old tradition. You just did that on your own? Yes?”

“Yes. I just felt they could lose a breadwinner in the making and somebody should do something.”

“You are very special.” She leaned over giving me a kiss on the cheek.

I had no idea what to do about that. Instead I cried at the whole thing. Why did Pedro have to be hurt so badly? Did I have anything to do with that? “Tell me. Did I intrude in something by starting that business? Did somebody have to attack him out of spite?”

“Let the police find all that out. For the moment you are very special, and let’s let it rest at that. Drive me back to the Sorceress. I have to ask her about the traditions for something like this.”

That night I wearily trudged from Sunrise Service to the Sorceress’ house where there was a light on, and there were voices. All four of her favorite Acolytes were with her.

They served a dish of corn and meat in a spicy sauce. We all held hands around the table, but nobody said a word for a minute or two.

The Sorceress said something in Navajo, and the Acolytes took over from there. “The Sorceress is very pleased with what you did. She will tell the Chapter elders you have done the right thing. How do you feel?”

“Not a clue.”

They chatted in Navajo. “We understand your not knowing. Men frequently don’t

know. The Sorceress agrees you are very special.”

That night two of the Acolytes snuggled up on each side of me for the cold night. Even with our clothes on I was confused what I should do. Ginger had to sleep elsewhere. Sometime during the night she squeezed herself down into the covers between my legs.

Two evenings later a mechanic gave me a lift at the end of the day to Uncle Joe's. I wanted to pay Joe for the next box of grapefruit, a pack of diapers, dog food, and whatever had been written on a list given to him. Just to keep things clean I paid him mostly in advance.

As I handed him four twenty-dollar bills he leaned over the counter and whispered without anyone else being in the store. “Pedro's attackers were high on drugs and drunk on illegal booze. They were very angry. Unfortunately their anger was at Pedro for working at Sunrise Service. They thought he worked for you. They didn't trust Anglos before, and you are so strange that to them you are even less comprehensible.”

“Shit.” I don't remember having ever sworn after arriving at the tribe. “What can we do? Do I have pack on down the road?”

“Don't run. You may be known further away than you think.”

“OK. So what can I do?”

He stood straight up as his eyes focused through a window and way off across the valley. He held a finger up signaling ‘wait’ as if an idea was forming. “They have the wrong idea. They think the mechanics are working for you. We have to turn that around. The truth is you went to town and got that business license for them.”

Ten days later the Acolytes arrived early and brushed my hair with a little conditioner. They had washed my most faded denim shirtdress for making me look as honorably poor and un-presupposing as possible. My battered old knife sheath was hung on the belt at my left hip. My old Army canteen went at the back of my other hip as a metaphor for carrying my own weight. They put my stout snake-skin covered walking stick in my right hand. My old Fedora hat with the snake skin band and the rattles went on my head. “Come Nati. You too Ginger.”

We met a Tribal Agency bus at Joe's. It had been repainted turquoise blue over the school bus yellow all of which had faded in the sun with rust spots showing. A hole in the exhaust pipe in front of the muffler gave it that peculiar sound of an old vehicle needing repair. We all climbed in including Ginger which didn't bother the driver one whit. I think people brought their dogs and everything else on that bus all the time.

We banged and sputtered over every rut and pot hole.

The Navajo Agency building looked spiffy. Ginger took the hint and stayed out there. Smart dog found shade under the bus which the walking stick didn't need.

A short hall brought us to the Agency meeting room. There were several men and women sitting behind a table across the far wall. Uncle Joe, myself, the Acolytes, and the Sorceress all sat together in two rows of folding chairs towards the back.

More people drifted in including two more who sat behind that table in front.

Many people were talking in low voices. Mostly they spoke in Navajo which made me anxious.

One of the men near the center of the table turned to the woman next to him on the other side of the table's center. He nodded. She nodded back.

They didn't bang a gavel or knock on the table the way things had been done at my high school. They just started. The room quieted down.

They talked about the streets. Did they have the money for repairs and paving a few more blocks? They decided they could apply to the Navajo Nation for more funds.

The woman announced. "Sunrise Service. Joe Nelson."

Joe stood up and gave me a signal to stand up too. Those people up front acknowledged me with their eyes appraising what I looked like after all the rumors they must have heard.

Joe recited how he, the Chapter Chief, and I had thought up my going to the County for a business license. He recited all the failed businesses at that abandoned gas station. He had a page printed from the Internet of ten or so reasons why Native Americans had trouble forming businesses. He said an issue had to be no instinctive feel for property rights.

He said I didn't care about most things.

I nodded.

He pointed out how I dressed literally in a dress. That I had made my way across the country, and if anybody didn't want me on the reservation anymore I could go away in my own way.

But he didn't think so. He had phrased the request of the Tribal Chapter as a request to accept their use of my business license. That this was the Chapter's business down on that highway; not mine. They owned the building.

He had proposed taking the best of the tribal traditions of maternal families and group decision making and doing that. Have the Chapter create a Sunrise Service Council of five members for major decisions such as hiring and firing. They reported to the Chapter Council. And within that Sunrise Service council as a junior council. It made day to day decisions of accepting work and whether a mechanic arrived drunk or high. He would be an initial outside member of the Senior Council, and I would be on both. The other two members of the Junior Council would be mechanics. They could outvote me, and I could appeal to the Senior Council.

There were murmurs all across the room, and the people at the front table were whispering to each other. I wasn't sure, but I think there were heads nodding as if saying a tentative 'yes' in those murmurs.

The woman near the center brought her face around in my direction. "You are called Nati. Yes?" She didn't wait. "I read in the report sent to us that you don't want much money. Just a little for contributing to the Sorceress' table."

The Sorceress stood up and spoke in Navajo although I did hear an English word or two such as 'grapefruit'.

Eyebrows went up.

"And you, Nati. Is this true? Why are you wearing a dress? What are you all about? How does this fit together?"

An Acolyte stood up. She and Joe passed their story back and forth about me. The Acolyte did get the word 'diaper' in there as if no secrets were allowed. I bet then, and they told me later, they explained the honest reason why I wore dresses.

That drew a strange sound between a rustle and a gasp from the audience, and the people at the front were whispering to each other again.

They asked the Sorceress a few questions in Navajo which she answered rather extensively. I didn't need to be told she was talking about finding me and my presence in her home. She did say one English word as 'Ginger' which must have been about my dog.

The front table understood that. That dog brought this all together for them. The Acolytes later told me the people present understood boys and young men needing a dog. Having a dog was part of making a home, and my buying dog food for a hungry mongrel had been very good. That I paid the vet for shots, and how I had held Ginger comforting her for that terrifying experience had to be rare.

The woman at the center wasn't in charge in an Anglo-American way. They really were deciding things as a group. But when she sat up everyone including myself knew this was a decision. "Nati; we accept your offer. We understand it. But if one of our people gets pissed and sues, this needs to be written in Anglo law for the County and the State. Have you ever written such a document? Or even see one?"

"No, ma'am. Pardon me, but I don't know your traditions hardly at all. What am I supposed to call you?"

"Ma'am works. We have a Navajo word. We have been told and see in front of us that the Sorceress doesn't talk English with you. She thinks the words would create chaos instead of peace and gentleness. She tells us you are very gentle. You stick with Ma'am and Sir. We want our people to be themselves, so we wish that for you too while you walk among us. Joe; can you write that up?"

"Yes. But send the draft to the tribal lawyers. This has to work."

The Council asked me to come forward to them when they all shook my hand Anglo style.

The Sorceress surprised me with a public hug.