

Ancestors of Star

EXCERPT

.....A woman sat behind a desk, working with a computer. I said, "Hello, my name is Tim Hyatt. I'm supposed to ask for Ms Star..."

She looked up suddenly, as if I'd startled her. "You're expected," she said, standing up. Dressed in tee shirt and jeans, she stood as tall as me, just shy of six feet. Her eyes were a dark liquid brown, and her bronze features smoother and livelier than the other faces in the room. Her age was concealed behind an aura of physical fitness. She could have been anywhere between twenty and fifty.

"Can I wash up before I see her?" A coating of dust itched my eyes and drew at my skin.

"Come with me," she said, and led the way through a door behind the desk. Glossy, black hair waved loose and straight past her shoulder blades, and the denims clung tightly to her hips. We passed examination rooms and a half-dozen people, mostly women, doing medical things – not a lot of privacy here – until we reached a door with a nameplate, 'E. Y. Star, RN, Head Nurse'. Instead of knocking, she turned the knob and walked in, seating herself behind the desk.

I sat in the single visitor chair. "I didn't realize that was you..." I stammered.

"This is a small clinic in a town where everybody knows everybody. No need for name badges here, Mr. Hyatt," she said. "Welcome to our clinic. I'm the director and the head nurse here, and the one who spoke with you on the phone. Did you find your way okay?" Her voice was soft and musical. And she wore no wedding ring. But did Indians even wear wedding rings? I had a lot to learn.

"Your directions were good, but there weren't many opportunities to go wrong."

"Were you impressed? I mean, when you came into town?"

I thought for a minute how best to answer. "Not in a positive way. It's kind of bleak."

"Honest answer," she said. "You're in Indian country. The Lagalero reservation is only here because in the 1890s no one else wanted this land. It's a hundred miles from anywhere. You can only raise a few sheep on it and you can't mine anything out of it. But it's all ours."

I said nothing, thinking it was better to listen much and talk little for the first few days.

She took a file out of her desk drawer and spread it open on the desk.

"You said here that you wanted to get experience to help you get into med school."

"Yes."

“Did you have to come all the way out here for that? Don’t they use student help in clinics back in Chicago?”

There was nothing I could say other than the truth. “I understand that the Bureau of Indian Affairs gives out medical scholarships...”

“...and you think a year’s experience on a reservation would help your case?”

“Could it hurt?”

“Well, recommendations from the staff here will certainly help. Most important, you’ll know if you could really stand years of service on a reservation when you graduate. Our Dr. Murphy started out just like you, working in the clinic for a year. He won a scholarship and he’s been back here for three years. But...”

I waited politely.

“...but he’s Lagalero, and you’re not. He was raised here and he’s comfortable with life here.”

She got up and came around her desk, moving with catlike grace. From behind, she roughly squeezed my shoulders and biceps.

“Hey!” I half stood up.

“Relax. I’m concerned about your fitness. The work will be pretty physical.” She resumed her seat.

I sat down again, still unnerved. “I see you got the photos I sent,” I said. Pictures of myself in my competition swimsuit were taped inside the manila folder.

“When I asked for a statement of physical fitness, I meant a letter from a teacher or team coach. I didn’t really expect a Playgirl photo spread. But you made your point.”

She gazed at me a moment, and said, “I’ve got to get back to the patients,” she said. “Any questions?”

“Not really. There was that one strange question on the application.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“About how I’d feel taking orders from a woman.”

She smiled, the first I’d seen on anyone since driving into town. “We have only two doctors, a woman and a man, but the day to day running of the clinic is up to me. I’m the boss here. The last thing I want is some jackass coming in here with a sackful of testosterone and giving the women a hard time. God knows we get enough of it from our own men.”

The glint in her eyes startled me. Behind the soft voice and lovely body was a strong spirit, a street fighter.

“The ideal man for this job should be smart and built like an ox, but able to take orders without question. In my experience, it’s hard to find those three qualities in the same person at the same time. If I hire someone who’s unsuitable or who leaves on me, I can’t get the money put back in my budget. I have to make the right decision the first time.

“I’ll show you your dormitory room and leave you there. They serve meals for government staff in the cafeteria behind the dorm. Supper’s between six and seven, breakfast from six to eight. I’ll expect to see you in the clinic at eight.”

I stood up when she did, and followed her across a dusty courtyard that separated the clinic from another gray wooden building. She touched my elbow and said, “You know, it was your answer to that question got you the job.....”