

Charity

hardship, sorrow,
and true friendship

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Excerpt

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by Paulette Callen

“Augusta Roemer. We will talk.” Gustie and Jordis started up the stairs. “Not you.” Jordis stopped. “Go play with your horse,” Dorcas commanded. Gustie’s expression clearly asked *Now what?* and Jordis’s answered *I have no idea—you are on your own, Augusta.*

In contrast to the cold, bright outdoors, inside the cabin was hot and dim. Gustie shed her coat and removed her glasses to wipe off the condensed moisture. She sat across from Dorcas. On the table between them rested a wood box that Gustie had not seen before. “I want to give you something.”

Gustie was about to protest that she’d been gifted well enough for her role at the agency. Dorcas raised her hand. Gustie held her tongue.

Dorcas considered her through squinty eyes, produced one slow back-and-forth motion of her head, and said, “No deer.”

Gustie, afraid that Dorcas would think she was mocking them, claiming to see deer when the Indians could not find

them, replied gently, "I did see them."

"There's no deer. But Deer Spirit comes to you. Very sacred thing. The spirit of deer is your helper."

"How can these things have anything to do with me? I am not Dakotah. I don't even know about these things."

"The deer people are gentle. You have the deer spirit. You walk softly, Augusta Roemer. You can be quiet, so you can hear. You can see. The deer are gone, but Deer Spirit is still here. That is good."

Gustie did not doubt the earnestness of Dorcas's beliefs. She felt, though, that the old woman was influenced by wishful thinking, a longing for the past. No matter how flattering it might be for Gustie to believe it herself, she did not. She had seen real animals—not spirits—stragglers, perhaps, passing through on their way to somewhere else. But she did not feel like arguing with Dorcas.

"Now we call you Woman Who Sees the Deer," Dorcas said. "Woman Who Sees the Deer," she enounced again with satisfaction. "I give this to you now. It is your medicine."

Dorcas opened the box and took out a small piece of bone on a leather string. When Gustie held it in her hand, she saw it was the tip of an antler, hollowed out for the leather to be run through, and smoothed at the edges. Nothing could have been

plainer; nothing could have filled her with more tenderness, even awe. She put it around her neck and looked around at the tiny cabin, so poor in every way but warmth. “Why have you been so good to me?”

Dorcas said, “Old Indian legend. You rescue somebody, you stuck with them for life. Can not help it.” She continued seriously, cocking her chin toward the outside where Jordis murmured to the horses. “My little wounded bird—you took the arrow out of her heart.” A warming quiet filled the cabin as Gustie, used to Dorcas’s silences, waited for her next words. The old woman’s head was down, almost as if she had dozed off, but Gustie knew better. She waited patiently.

When Dorcas lifted her head, her eyes were open, but in the way of some of the very old, she seemed to see the past more clearly than her present surroundings. She began as someone who has been waiting a long time to tell this story. “I want to tell you about our old ways. How it was before the black robes and the missionaries. And the soldiers.

“There was a woman in our village. When I was a child, she was very old. She lived alone in her own tipi. She was no man’s wife. Never was. She was a two-spirit person. One sent to us with two spirits—the spirit of the man and the spirit of the woman in one person. The two-spirit ones are blessed, since

the Great Mystery gives them two, not just one spirit. They were respected among the people. Always invited to the naming ceremonies to give the secret names to our children.”

She paused and continued with more animation. “But the stories told about her were not told because she was a two-spirit woman. The stories were told about how she got her name. I heard this story from my mother and my grandmothers, and from all the old people who were there and saw it. Once I heard it from her. In her own tipi. There was a terrible battle with our enemies, the Rhee. Our warriors were outnumbered. All had got away but Walking Crow. His horse was dead and he was on the ground. He was surrounded by the enemy. His sister—the two-spirit woman—watched the battle with the women on the hills. At that time her name was Blue Stone. Blue Stone and Walking Crow. Brother and sister. Blue Stone saw the warriors running for their lives. She saw Walking Crow, her brother, on the ground. She jumped on her pony and galloped in among all the enemy warriors. She did not make the tremolo in the way of women, but she gave the warrior’s yell. Blue Stone came riding through all the enemy warriors making the warrior yell. Her brother swung himself up behind her. She rode out with him. No arrows touched her. The warriors on both sides cheered her. The Rhee and the Dakotah

cheered her, and the women on the hills made the tremolo. There was a great feast that night. We lost the battle. But Blue Stone's courage lifted the hearts of the people. Made our enemy respect us. Blue Stone was given a new name. Warrior Heart Woman. Two more times she went into battle at the side of her brother. Two more times, no arrows touched her. She lived in honor her whole life. She wore the eagle feather because of her victory in battle. She took a wife. When I was a child, she had already lived many winters. Many many winters."

Gustie's heart was racing.

"Some winters after Warrior Heart Woman passed on there was a young man among us who liked to wear the women's clothing. A *winkda*, he was—a two-spirit person in the body of a man."

"Was she, Warrior Heart Woman, a *winkda*?"

"No. The two-spirit person in the body of a woman is *koskalaka*. My people were glad because they had someone among them touched by Wahkon Tonkah, someone to give the secret names to the children. It was a good thing to have a *koskalaka* or *winkda*. He had a brave heart. He could ride and hunt and do all things properly. He danced to the sun, sacrificing for his people three times. But then the missionaries

came. They shamed him and made him wear clothes like the other men. And he sickened in his heart and died. After that we had no one blessed by Wahkon Tonkah with the two spirits, the spirit of the man and the woman in one person. The wasichu consider this a very bad thing. I do not know why.” Dorcas shrugged her shoulders sadly. “I saw what happened to that *winkda* boy, and I was afraid for Jordis. For I knew she had two spirits, and my heart fell down because her life would not be one of honor, but one of sadness and loneliness. My little wounded bird rode these hills like a ghost until you came.

“In your sickness, you talked of the woman who died. I was sorry for you. But I believe you were brought here by Wahkon Tonkah. It does not matter if you believe this. You are here. That is plenty. I knew that you, too, are *koskalaka*, a two-spirit person, and that you had been guided here for my wounded child. I was glad. I could join my mothers and grandmothers with a good heart, knowing my little wounded bird would fly. Even our own people—some have forgotten that the two-spirit people are gifted ones from Wahkon Tonkah. Should be treated with respect. Now you two must take care of each other. It will be very hard, I think. But you are strong, and she...” Dorcas treated Gustie to one of her rare and brilliant smiles, “...is stubborn.”

Gustie's heart was singing with the knowledge that there had been others, like her, and that they had had a name—the *koskalaka*, the *winkda*, the two-spirit people. They had been respected and honored. She felt like she could do anything, be anything, soar as high as a skylark.

Maybe Dorcas was right after all. How *had* she come here? She had begun with an empty and fearful heart and a soul that sat darkly like a lamp without oil in a big house with thick carpets, chandeliers, staircases, and many fine things she could no longer even remember...she had turned her back on them all for her strange love. And then, her heart, after being utterly broken, was mended and whole once more. She had discovered a new way of being that had nothing to do with doing or having. Gustie was not a religious person, but she felt touched by a Mystery that quickened her pulse like the dancers' drum, that gleamed in the old woman's eyes, and throbbed in the air of the tiny cabin.

"Why didn't you leave me on that cold pile of earth to die? You couldn't have known then—"

Dorcas interrupted her. "I wanted lots of new stuff. New chair, I got. New bed, I got. See? Pretty good deal. Now I can throw you to the fish. I am tired, Granddaughter. I want to have a little sleep. Go away now. You—" she nodded again toward

the outside where Jordis waited, “have many plans to make.”

“Yes, Grandmother.” The words came easily out of her mouth. She took her coat, kissed Dorcas on the cheek, and left the cabin.

Gustie’s heart was full. Dorcas had called her ‘Granddaughter.’ She told Jordis all the things Dorcas had said.

“She is not my real grandmother, you know. We are not blood relations. I call her Grandmother as an endearment, and out of respect because she has been a grandmother to me. I never knew her before she came to the mission to take care of me. You have been adopted by her as much as I have been.”

Moon and Biddie were standing ready, Biddie saddled, Moon in her winter blanket. “Let’s ride,” suggested Jordis. They mounted their horses and strolled them up away from the cabin. They could see the road winding from Crow Kills toward Wheat Lake. A horse galloped toward them stirring up the dry snow.

Gustie recognized the rider. “It’s Lena!”

Lena was going so fast she rode past them and had to rein her horse in and turn around. “Gustie! I’ve got to go back to Charity! Now!”

“What for?”

“I’ve got to see the ice house!”

“What’s in the ice house?”

“I don’t know. But I’ve got to see for myself.”

“Why?”

“Ella said that Tori was here to visit them. He...”

Lena started to cry. Jordis and Gustie dismounted and helped Lena down.

“It’s all my fault. I should have...”

Lena was crying hard, unable to get out full sentences. Gustie kept an arm around her until the spasm of grief passed.

“I’m sorry.” Lena said, reaching into her coat pocket for a handkerchief. She blew her nose loudly. Over the top of her hankie, she cast a watery look at Jordis.

Gustie had forgotten that the two had never met. “This is my friend Jordis. Jordis, this is Lena Kaiser.”

Jordis only nodded. Her eyes narrowed.

“How do you do?” said Lena, as polite as she could be with her streaming eyes and runny nose.

“Well, I was talking to Ella this morning...” Lena blew her nose again. “...and she said when Tori was here he was saying...” Lena wailed, “I didn’t even know Tori had been here. After Pa’s funeral I just got so wrapped up in things, with Will and all, I didn’t even think about Tori. I didn’t think about him not being to see us or anything. But he came all the way

here, and he told Ella and Ragna that as soon as Will's trial was over he was going to be able to get it all fixed up. And they asked him what it was he needed to fix up, and he said he couldn't say now while I had so much on my mind, because he'd made a promise, but when it was all over, then he could come and talk to me and put it straight. They tried to get him to tell what it was, but he said he'd made a promise. He was such a child that way. He wouldn't say anything more. But when they asked him to go to the ice house he started to cry, and he said he couldn't go to the ice house again. Not till he talked to me. They didn't understand it at all. He was just a dummy to them, you see. They let it drop because they just thought it was some dumb thing. And when he died, they didn't think of it then either. They never paid any attention to him. But I always knew that he had a kind of...oh...I don't know. Things made their own kind of sense to Tori. You just had to try to see it his way. If you could see a thing the way he saw it—simple—things he said would make sense. I could do that, you see, and that's why he came to me with everything. I never laughed at him. He told me everything that was bothering him. So that's why I knew that when he said he couldn't go into the ice house, he didn't mean their ice house...well he did...but he got it mixed up in his head. He was thinking of them as the same ice

house.”

Gustie shook her head. “Lena, I don’t understand you. What was in your sister’s ice house?”

“Nothing! Nothing was in *her* ice house. It was in Pa’s ice house. When he came out of Pa’s ice house the day of the funeral, he was sick. Something must have happened to him in there. I don’t know. But I never paid attention. I never asked him.” Lena started to cry again. “But I’ve got to go back and look in there. Right now. Can you go with me, Gustie? I don’t have anyone else. Will is a mess. Please?”

Gustie and Jordis exchanged a long look. Then Gustie nodded, “We will go with you.”