

Chapter 2

Tommy got up early as usual. He pulled on his jeans, a sweatshirt and his running shoes and went into the kitchen. His mother stood at the stove, stirring a pot of what smelled like oatmeal, her black hair onyx in the morning sunlight coming through the window.

“Good morning, Tommy,” she said with a smile. “How are you this morning?”

“Fine,” grunted Tommy and went to the frig to get some milk.

Tommy’s mother dished up a bowl of oatmeal and put it on the table. “Going running?”

“Of course.”

Tommy ate his oatmeal quickly, hardly tasting it, rinsed his bowl and put it in the dishwasher.

“Have a good day at work,” he said on his way out the front door.

Stepping outside into the cold, Tommy shivered, thought about going back inside for a coat and decided the sweatshirt would have to do. The low winter sun cast long shadows and little warmth. He crossed the yard to the street, turned right and started off at a brisk walk toward the dirt trail at the end of the pavement that was hardly more than a set of parallel tire ruts. Ever since the battle in Finkle Creek he began his runs with a walk to warm up his left leg. It didn’t help much. The scared bullet wound hadn’t healed all the way yet and no matter what he did the leg was stiff and too painful to run full out.

He reached the end of the pavement, turned left toward the main highway and picked up the pace. As he jogged along, Tommy thought of his vanishing dream to be a warrior. He used to run miles every morning, not jogging, running full out. And he used to shoot his bow from horseback, do reconnaissance raids through Finkle Creek. Now he wasn't quite a cripple like Elkhorn who had both legs shot up in the terrorist attack, but certainly Tommy wasn't what he'd been.

He jogged stiffly around the dogleg in the dirt road, easing up on the turns to favor his left leg, which was already hurting. When he reached Old Highway 91 he went right, crossed over the blacktop and jogged toward the oncoming traffic. He gritted his teeth, determined to run at least a mile; not the 3 miles that had been his usual before he'd been shot, but a new high for him.

As he ran, the pain dulled to a hard ache, his left leg protesting even as it did his bidding. Thoughts of that day in Finkle Creek came back, the terrorists shooting everyone they saw and only Tommy and his friends there to stop it. Jim had died trying to drag Tommy out of the street. That bothered Tommy. Every time he thought about Jim dying and himself living the feeling of guilt was overwhelming. Why had Jim died? Why not Tommy? And Elkhorn's legs had been so shot up he'd never walk right again. Maybe with prosthetics someday, but for now he had only crutches or a wheelchair.

Tommy's left foot came down on a fist-sized rock that rolled out from under his foot. He lurched left, nearly caught himself on the berm, and then his left leg crumpled and he went down at the side of the road.

"Crap," he spat.

He shifted his weight off his left leg and regained his feet. Gingerly he tested his left foot, ankle, leg. It seemed okay, and he started off again. His thoughts shifted to Johanna. She was wonderful, he admitted that now; most beautiful girl on the rez and his friend Earl's little sister. Not so little anymore, he reminded himself. What she saw in Tommy at this point was beyond his imagination. Before, she'd ambushed him on many of his morning runs, begging to run with him. He'd been an idiot, refusing. Now he wished she would show up to run. He guessed that she probably didn't want to embarrass him because she could easily outrun him.

He jogged on up the road, his left leg getting weaker with every step. Maybe he wasn't going to make a mile yet. He pushed on. What kind of warrior would give up so easily? Just a little farther, he urged. A cold breeze swept across the highway, chilling him. No wind was going to stop him and he ran on, the leg throbbing.

A hundred yards up the road he crossed over and started back, jogging slower, the pain worse. He turned off onto the dirt road that led back home just in time to see his mother and father pull out onto Highway 91 on their way to work. He waved to them as they drove off.

Somehow knowing they were gone was a relief. They wouldn't be there to try to cheer him up and Johanna would be over later which really did make him happier.

He neared the spot where the dirt road connected to his street and stopped. From there he could see down to the riverbed at the bottom of the slope. Near the river, Chief, his old, horse huddled next to the big cottonwood tree trunk out of the wind. The water in the river wasn't frozen so the horse had water but Tommy noted that the hay was gone. He needed to feed the horse so he turned onto his street and went to the shed behind his house where they stored bales of hay.

Tommy grabbed a bale and dragged it over to the edge of the hill. It was easy to get it to the bottom. The slope was so steep that it literally slid there without help. Chief came over, nuzzled Tommy, and nickered his affection.

"I know, old boy," said Tommy. "You miss the runs down Cavalry Canyon don't you?"

Chief whinnied as if he understood and turned his attention to the bale of hay. It had been months since their last ride to shoot straw-stuffed soldier targets. Tommy missed it too. Would things ever get back to the way they had been?

"One of these days," he said to the horse, patting him on the shoulder. "One of these days we'll go for a ride again."

Tommy waited a while with Chief, listening to the river gurgle on its way to the ocean, feeling the cold wind on his face, lamenting his bad luck. It had been better before the battle at Finkle Creek and yet, knowing what would have happened if Tommy and his friends had not been there was even worse. He wondered if his life could be worse. He thought again of Elkhorn and realized it could. At least Tommy could still walk, jog with some pain, get around on his own. He needed to quit complaining and figure out how to make the most of what he had. Especially, Johanna. Finally with a last pat on the rump, he bid Chief goodbye and clambered slowly back up the hill home.