

MIDNIGHT HOUR

An Anthology

Abby Vandiver

CROOKED
LANE



NEW YORK

SKIN

By David Heska Wanbli Weiden

“**Y**ou want the usual, Virgil?”

I nodded and put three dollars on the counter. The barista set the cup down in front of me. *Pejuta sapa. Black medicine* in Lakota. The coffee was good, strong but not bitter. The place had opened a few years ago, the first coffee shop on the Rosebud reservation. Now we had four restaurants, not counting the food truck that served burritos and tacos out by the grocery store—Rapper’s Delight Tacos, all their items named after hip-hop artists: Snoop Dogg Nachos, 2Pac Carnitas, the Biggie Burrito. I liked their stuff, but nine bucks for three greasy tacos was a little steep for the rez.

I took a seat out on the patio and settled in. A few cars passed by, no one I knew. I thought about heading out and joining my friend Tommy out at the fast-pitch game. His team, the Rez Sox, were playing a crew from the Pine Ridge reservation, the Wild Oglalas. The games were usually pretty laid-back, but I knew there might be some tension tonight, given the traditional rivalry between the Sicangu and Oglala tribes, so I had promised Tommy I’d stop by. I was wondering if I had time to order a brownie when my cell phone buzzed.

“Virgil, it’s Charley. You got a minute to talk?”

Charley Leader Charge. The attorney who’d represented my nephew—for free—when he was falsely arrested for possession of narcotics.

“Hey, Charley. How’s it going?”

“Not too bad. Trying to keep up with the paperwork, keep my clients happy. How’s Nathan?”

“He’s all right. Goes to a different high school now, seems to like it. Even got himself a girlfriend.”

“Good to hear. That whole thing—what a mess. Nathan didn’t deserve any of that.”

No, he didn’t. My nephew had gotten caught between warring heroin and pill dealers, and he’d barely escaped with his life. Charley had stuck by us the entire time, and I hadn’t forgotten. Even though he was based in Rapid City, he was known for helping out folks on the rez, where he’d grown up.

“Thanks again,” I said. “Appreciate what you did.”

“My pleasure. Just glad it worked out.” He cleared his throat. “So, I’m calling about something else. A favor.”

“Yeah?” I waited for him to say more.

“It’s a little complicated. Deal is, I’ve got a longtime client—can’t say who it is, but he’s an important person here in Rapid. I’ve worked with him for years. Anyway, he’s been in this long-running battle with the Hampton school. You know about them?”

“No.” I took another drink of my coffee.

“The Hampton Theological Seminary. Or just Hampton. The oldest seminary west of the Mississippi. Very wealthy, very connected. The mayor sits on their board, along with state senators and reps. You get the picture.”

I didn't, actually. When I'd heard the word *favor*, I'd assumed that Charley wanted me to beat up somebody here on the rez. That was my job—or used to be, anyway. I was the person you called when you wanted some rough justice, usually after the federal government or the tribal police released some child molester or rapist without any punishment. A hired vigilante, although some liked to call me a thug or worse. But that didn't matter, because I'd stopped giving beatings after the problems with Nathan. I'd had plenty of offers but turned them all down. I didn't understand what some school in Rapid City had to do with me.

"Okay," I said, "it's some fancy place. What's the favor?"

I heard papers rustling over the phone. "I'll get to that. But first, I need to explain, this is somewhat, ah, delicate. As I said, my client has been in a legal battle with Hampton, and it's gotten personal for him. The favor, you see, is something that's not entirely within the boundaries of the legal system. I need some assurance as to your discretion."

This I understood. "Yeah, sure. I'll keep my mouth shut. Always have."

"Good. I knew that, of course. I'm in a difficult position, because as an officer of the court I can't advise or recommend any action that's . . . extrajudicial. I'm just acting as a middle-man here."

"I get it. What's the deal?"

"Well, the Hampton School has a collection of very rare books. And their prized volume—printed back in 1779—is *The History of Christianity*. They've had it for almost a hundred years, and it's the jewel of their collection. It's displayed in a trophy case in their lobby."

I finished the last of my coffee, now lukewarm. “All right, what’s that got to do with me?”

A pause. “My client would be most appreciative if you might be able to . . . appropriate the book from the school. And he’d be happy to pay you for your time and effort. Two thousand dollars. Cash.”

Now I understood. This dude was some sort of collector and wanted this old book for himself. But I was no thief. I didn’t mind putting the hurt on someone who deserved it, but stealing shit was not my thing.

“Look, Charley, you know I ain’t no burglar. I mean, I get that your guy wants this book for himself, but—”

“No, he doesn’t want the book. To the contrary, he wants you to dispose of it. The book should be destroyed.”

“Destroyed? I don’t get it. Why steal a book just to trash it? Makes no sense.”

He cleared his throat. It sounded like an old car trying to turn over. “You see, my client despises this book and has tried to persuade Hampton to divest themselves of it. As they have declined to do so, he’s decided that he has no other option than to seek alternative methods of acquiring the volume. And that’s where you come in.”

“Okay, sure. I understand that part. But why does he hate the book so much? He against religion or something?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s got nothing to do with the content of the book,” he said.

“But I don’t—”

“It’s the cover of the book.” He paused. “The story is that, back in the late 1700s, a white man, Daniel Morgan, was attacked by an Indian but was supposedly able to fight him off and kill him. He claimed self-defense. Who knows what

really happened? But we know what Morgan did next. He took the body of the Native he'd just killed, flayed and tanned the flesh from the corpse, and used it for the book's binding." He paused again. "The book is made out of human skin. Indian skin."

* * *

My mind reeled as I started to drive back to my house. A book bound in human skin? I knew Indians had been slaughtered back in the day, but this was beyond anything I'd ever heard. It was one thing to kill someone in battle—and there'd been a lot of battles back then—but it was truly evil to strip the flesh from a body and process it into a book cover. And to display it in a religious school? The whole thing was sickening.

Once I'd gotten past my shock, I'd agreed to steal the book for Charley's client. What choice did I have? I owed Charley, big-time. Not to mention I wanted to take that goddamn book and burn it. But that wasn't allowed. Charley told me to save the binding—the skin—and give it to a medicine man who could follow the proper spiritual procedures and give it a decent burial. I didn't have any objection to that. Besides, Charley said he'd leave the two thousand dollars in an envelope tonight in the lockbox outside his office in Rapid City. That money would come in handy, as I'd been without any income for quite a while.

My only concern was getting into the school without being caught. That and the fact that the book was apparently in some trophy case, which was probably locked up tight. I'd have to go in at night, when everyone was gone. I guessed security would be minimal at a religious school, but there was no way to be sure without seeing for myself.

I tried to focus on the road, but grotesque images of a dead Native being skinned kept drifting into my head. My phone buzzed, and I saw it was my friend Tommy calling. Grateful for the distraction, I answered.

“Yo Virgil! Thought you was gonna come by the fast-pitch! Them Oglalas thought they were hot shit, but our pitcher was fire, man. Dang, he was throwing curve balls, rise-ups, fast-balls, everything. Beat ’em seven to two. Now it’s time to par-tay! Where you at?”

“Heading home, I guess. Sorry I missed your game.”

“Well, shee-it, meet me down at the Depot! Buy me a celebration beer—I deserve it. What you say?”

“Sure, why not?” I needed some time after the call with Charley, so I turned the car around and headed toward the bar.

Twenty minutes later I found myself at the reservation tavern. It was quiet inside, but that wouldn’t last long. Later in the evening the place would fill up, but I had no plans to stay for that. I didn’t drink, and nothing good happened at the Depot once the liquor started flowing.

“There he is!” Tommy motioned for me to join him in a table at the back, near the pinball machine. His beer was half-empty. “You want a Shasta?” Without waiting for me to answer, he waved to the bartender, Charlotte, and pointed at me. She knew I didn’t drink and came by with a can of Shasta and a glass of ice.

“Toast!” Tommy raised his Bud. “To the Rez Sox! First victory this year. Hecetu yelo! Uh-huh.”

I tapped my glass to his. “Good going. Melvin pitch today?”

“Yeah, his arm was movin’ so fast, I couldn’t even see it!”

I noticed Tommy had chalk on his face and grass in his hair. “Any problems after the game?” I asked.

“Naw, the Oglalas was bitchin’ a little, but it was cool. You decide not to come?”

I took a sip of my Shasta and wondered how much to tell Tommy. He was my oldest friend, but maybe he didn’t need to hear about this stuff.

“Well, I was just at the Buffalo Brew, you know . . .” I said, and trailed off.

“Something up with Nathan?”

“No, got a call from Charley Leader Charge. My lawyer? He needs me to do something for him. A favor.”

Tommy downed the last of his beer. “Yeah, what kind of favor? He need you to put someone down? Thought you wasn’t doin’ that no more.”

“Nothing like that. Different type of job.” I scanned the bar to see who was there. No one I needed to worry about. “You know anything about some Bible school out in Rapid called Hampton?”

He squinted and looked up at the ceiling. “Hampton? The old boarding school? North of Rapid?”

“No, it’s a Bible college or something like that.”

He motioned to the bartender for another beer. “Yeah, it was a boarding school first. Pretty sure. Maybe my grandma went there? Sica, man. Evil. I heard them Rapid City skins won’t go near that place.”

Boarding school? Charley hadn’t said anything about that. Every Native knew about the boarding schools that existed back in the old days. Little kids would get taken from their parents and shipped off to the East Coast or, if they were lucky, one of the nearby schools where they’d at least be closer

to their families. But whether on the reservation or off, the boarding schools were tough places for Indian kids, because they'd be punished—beaten—if they spoke their language or tried to hang on to traditional ways. Many never made it back and were buried in the sad little school cemeteries.

“Who runs it now? Got any idea?” I asked.

Tommy was watching some guy play the old Black Knight pinball machine. One of the flippers didn't work, so you always lost when the ball drained to the right.

“No clue, homes. So, what up with that? You gonna tell me?”

What the hell. “All right, but keep this quiet, okay?” I moved in closer and lowered my voice. “I have to get in there, whatever the place is. I guess they got an old book displayed in their front lobby. Long story, but I need to grab it.”

Tommy stared at me. “The book? What for?”

I paused. “Uh, this book—it's pretty fucked up. It's a really old book, maybe two hundred years old, and Charley needs me to get it. Some client of his wants it.”

“The book is, like, an antique?”

“I guess so. Whole thing is pretty messed up.”

“Messed up how?”

I paused again. “Well, the book—it's, uh, made with skin. The cover. It's bound with human skin. From an Indian. I guess some wasicu killed a Native long time ago, then cut his flesh off and turned it into a book cover.” I took a drink of my soda. “Told you it was fucked up.”

Tommy's face turned three shades paler. He was utterly quiet, which was rare for him. I waited for him to say something.

“This is for real?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Let’s go get that goddamn thing,” he whispered. “Tonight.”

* * *

I’d never seen Tommy so angry. He was generally a happy and fun-loving guy, but he cared deeply about Native issues and indigenous peoples, and this thing had really set him off. I’d tried to talk him out of helping me, but he’d insisted on coming along. Although I usually worked solo, there was no question I could use some help on this job. I didn’t know what to expect up there, and I trusted Tommy. He was riled up and wanted to head out there right away. I didn’t have any objection. We needed to leave as soon as possible, as it was a three-hour drive to Rapid City from the reservation.

I called Nathan and told him to fix his own dinner and that I’d be home very late. Nathan was fine with that—he’d play his new video game with his friend while he cranked his music as loud as it would go. We drove to Tommy’s house first so he could drop off his softball stuff and grab some things.

“You want to come in?” Tommy asked.

“No, I’m good. Just hurry. Got a long drive.”

While Tommy was inside, I looked up the Hampton school on my fancy new cell phone. I clicked on the button that said *Our History* and read a little about the place. I saw that they acknowledged being a former Native boarding school, but their website didn’t say much beyond that. I skipped the *Prospective Students* button and clicked on *Current Students*. I wanted to find out if the main building was open at night. I hit the *Library* tab and discovered that it closed at nine PM. That was good for us, because it meant we’d arrive long after closing and the place should be empty.

After a few minutes, Tommy came back out carrying a gym bag, which he tossed on the floor of my truck. I saw he'd washed his face and changed clothes. He wore jeans with a hole in the knee and a T-shirt that said SAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE.

"What's in there?" I said, pointing at the bag.

"Couple of flashlights, hammer, crowbar, and some grub. You hungry? Got an Indian taco, but it might be a little moldy. Some chips too—flamin'-hot-nacho flavor."

I shook my head. "I'm good." He opened the bag as I pulled away.

"So, what's the plan?" Tommy asked, between handfuls of chips. "The place open at night? We do a little smash and grab?"

"It's a Bible school, so I'm guessing it'll be closed up by the time we get there. Library closes at nine, so we should be cool." I rolled down the window halfway to rid the car of the nacho-chip stench.

"Aight, how we get in?" he said, sending miniature nacho-chip asteroids flying from his mouth as he ate.

"I don't know. Check the back door, I guess. Go in through a window if we have to."

"You think they got an alarm system? Don't need that boo-shit."

"Maybe. Let's just get in, find the book, and get out. Charley said it was in the main lobby in some trophy case. Shouldn't be too hard."

"What's this book called again? You know, the title or whatever?"

"*The History of Christianity.*"

Midnight Hour

He snorted. “Like to drop a little Indian history on the mofos who made that thing and kept it. Get some Custer action going, you know what I’m saying?”

“Hope it won’t come to that.”

I stared at the road, my headlights shining in the darkness.

* * *

After about an hour of driving, Tommy passed out, dead asleep. I listened to KILI, the radio station for the Pine Ridge reservation, until it faded out. I switched off the radio and focused on the highway. As I drove, images crowded my mind: the wasicu settler, having killed the Native man, stripping the flesh from his back and tanning it, turning it into a horrible leather. I wasn’t exactly fluent in the Lakota language, but I remembered that the word for skin was *wichaha* or *há*. *Taha* or *tahalo* for animals. How could the killer view the Indian’s flesh as that of an animal? I thought about my own mother’s skin, how soft it was on her arms, how warm it was when she embraced me, the joy I felt when she picked me up and laughed. When did the Native person become an animal in the wasicu’s eyes?

One of the proverbs that was always approvingly trotted out for Natives was that, back in the old days, we used every part of the buffalo after a hunt. The meat, the hooves, the animal’s skin. It was all put to use and nothing was wasted. This was thought to be a part of the Indian way of life—a demonstration of wise management of the environment. But the larger point was always overlooked: that it was important for every person to use all of their abilities and talents for the good of the community. A person’s gifts should be encouraged

and not wasted or ignored. But in modern America, it seemed like any skill that didn't result in greater wealth was devalued and diminished, if not mocked and ridiculed. I wondered if the killer had felt this way so long ago—that the Native person he'd murdered was without value because of his refusal to accept American ways. Or was it just simple racism—the notion that anyone with a slightly different skin tone was not deserving of human dignity? No matter what had happened, the book was a disgrace. It was time to do the right thing, even if it came two centuries late.

* * *

A few hours later, we hit Rapid City. I stopped by Charley's office first and checked his late-night lockbox. Just as he'd said, there was an envelope inside with my name on it. Twenty crisp hundred-dollar bills. I stuck the envelope in the inside pocket of my jean jacket.

Thirty minutes later we arrived at the Hampton school. I looked at the clock on the dashboard of my truck: exactly midnight. The large parking lot was pretty much deserted. Only a few sedans and an SUV were parked on the outskirts. The parking lot had a few dim lights but the building itself was dark, no lights on at all. I drove around to the back and parked a block away on the street.

"Tommy, wake up. We're here."

He opened his eyes and blinked. "What time is it?"

"It's late. Just past midnight."

He yawned. "Oh, man, I was beat after that game today. Good to grab a little shut-eye. That the place?"

"Up ahead. Thought we'd park back here; stay out of sight."

He took a drink from a bottle of water stowed in his bag. “What you want to do?”

“Let’s try the front first. Grab your flashlights, the crowbar and hammer too—stick ’em in your gym bag. We run into anybody, just say we’re looking for the hospital.”

“Hospital! That’s a good one. Hoka!”

We walked in the darkness to the school. It was quiet here, only the noise of the wind and faint murmurs of traffic off in the distance. The building was huge, constructed of reddish bricks, arched windows, and a spire towering over the roof. It looked old, and I could imagine Native kids being marched inside long ago and the anguish they must have felt at being separated from their families and their culture.

I raised my finger to my lips to indicate that Tommy should stay quiet and motioned for him to join me. We slowly walked up the stairs to the front entrance. There were no lights on, and I didn’t see any security cameras in the corners. I peered into a large window but couldn’t make out anything inside. I went over to the old-fashioned wooden door, grabbed the metal handle, and pulled. It was locked. No surprise there. I motioned for him to follow me, and we walked around to the back of the school. There was a little parking lot there, and I didn’t see any security vehicles, just an old bicycle attached to a rack with a U-lock.

I spotted a small door off to the side, next to a large dumpster. I motioned to Tommy and we crept over to it. I turned the handle and pulled, only to discover that it was also locked. It was a metal door with a dead bolt, so there was no way we could kick it open. I looked around for another entrance but didn’t see one.

We walked around to the eastern side of the building, which was secluded by a stand of trees. It was dark on that side, so I whispered to Tommy to get the flashlights. He handed one to me, and we scanned the area.

“You see that?” Tommy said.

“Yup.” A large window was slightly ajar, no more than an inch or so. But that might be enough. The window was about five feet high—just low enough that we might be able to pry it open. I whispered to Tommy to hand me the crowbar and gave my flashlight back to him.

I wedged the tapered end of the crowbar in the side of the window, which had a metal frame. I used all my strength and was able to get it open a little. I motioned for Tommy to hook the claw end of the hammer underneath the front edge of the frame, and I inserted the crowbar on the other end. We struggled for about thirty seconds until the frame finally came loose with a loud cracking sound. I looked around to see if anyone had heard but didn’t see any motion nearby.

I was able to swing the window up, and I saw that it opened into someone’s office. There was a computer monitor and cords on a desk, which I pushed aside. I grabbed the frame and pulled myself up and inside, stepping on the desk. Then I indicated to Tommy that he should put the tools back in the bag and hand it to me. He climbed up and stepped in.

“Flashlights,” I whispered. He nodded and handed one to me. We turned them on and looked around the office. Bookshelves, computer equipment, a large desk chair. A door on the opposite wall, which presumably led to the hallway. We just had to figure out how to get to the main lobby. I wondered if there was some teacher in the building working late, grading tests or papers.

“All right, let’s check it out,” I said quietly, and pointed to the office door. “Keep the flashlights off until we know there’s nobody here.”

I slowly opened the office door and stuck my head out into the hallway. It was dark, but there was a lighted exit sign at the end of the corridor, so I could see that there were about ten office doors and an old-fashioned water fountain. I motioned to Tommy to follow me. He closed the door quietly, and we started down the hallway toward the exit sign. It was absolutely silent, and I didn’t see any lights coming from the bottoms of closed doors, so I began to think we were alone.

We came to the end of the hallway and turned right. There were more office doors and a couple of restrooms with two lighted signs above them.

“Yo man, I need to pee,” Tommy whispered to me.

“You got to be kidding.”

He shook his head. “Homes, I’m on Pisscon One. Got to go.”

I sighed. “Stay quiet and hurry! We need to get moving.”

He slowly opened the door to the men’s room and went inside. The door squeaked when it closed, and I held my breath until it was quiet again. After a minute he came out, and I motioned for him to follow me. We walked to the end of the hallway and took another right.

We gazed out into a large open space, and I recognized the front entrance. Although it was dark, the huge windows by the door allowed in enough light from the parking lot that I could look around. Over to the side were two ornate wooden doors and a sign that said CHAPEL. There was a sizable reception desk in the middle of the room and several rectangular yellow couches. I scanned the space and located some large display cases on the other end of the room.

These had to be what we were looking for.

We walked over to them, and I pointed my flashlight inside the first display. Framed certificates, a trophy, framed old newspaper articles and photos. No books. The next case had a sign that said FACULTY PUBLICATIONS, and about twenty books were propped up inside. My heart started to beat faster, and I focused the flashlight on the volumes. *Theory and Countertheory of Homiletics; Posthuman Systems and the Divine; Ruthless Compassion*. I kept looking, but all of these books seemed fairly new and not hundreds of years old. I checked them again to see if I'd made a mistake, but it wasn't there.

"No book," I said. "Maybe we're in the wrong room?"

"Look," Tommy said. He pointed toward the chapel entrance and shined his flashlight near the wooden doors. He moved his beam up and down, and then I saw it. A freestanding triangular cabinet with a glass front. An old one, with fancy wood trim and a few shelves inside. It looked like something you'd see in a castle in England.

We moved closer to it and peered inside with our flashlights. There was a wooden easel on the middle shelf supporting a large book, dark brown, with faint gold lettering on the front and side. The spine of the book was torn, and the edges were frayed. The book was so old, it was difficult to make out what was embossed on the front cover. It took me a few seconds to read the old-fashioned font, but then it came into focus.

The History of Christianity.

This was it. The object that had haunted this school. The sickening volume that was apparently the pride of Hampton, given its prominent location in the main lobby.

That would end tonight.

“Son of a bitch,” Tommy said, “we found it. Let’s open this thing and get out of here.”

All of a sudden the room exploded with light. I stumbled and shut my eyes instinctively.

“Who the hell are you!” I heard someone shouting at us, but I couldn’t see where he was.

“I’m, uh, we’re—”

“Get your hands up!” he shouted. I could tell he was behind us. The police?

I squinted and looked around. “Hey, we’re just—”

“I said hands up!”

I turned and saw a man wearing black pants, a black shirt, and a ball cap that said SECURITY. He was pointing a small handgun directly at me. I raised my hands, still holding the flashlight. Tommy did the same. Now that my eyes had adjusted to the fluorescent overhead lights, I got a better look at the guy. He was about twenty-five years old, with short black hair and medium-brown skin. I could tell he was Native. Then I took a look at the gun, which was still pointed at my chest. It looked like a little Ruger LC9 semiautomatic, but I couldn’t tell for sure. At this range, any handgun was dangerous. I kept my eyes on his face to see what he was going to do.

“Yo man, take it easy,” Tommy said. “Why don’t you—”

“How’d you get in here?” the man said.

I quickly ran through some possible cover stories in my head. I didn’t think the hospital story would wash, given that we had flashlights and a bag of tools. I decided to go with a utility story.

“We’re with Black Hills Energy,” I said. “Got a report of, ah, an outage. Just checking on it.”

The security guard looked at Tommy and me, top to bottom. Tommy was wearing his standard uniform of ragged jeans and a T-shirt, and I had on an old jean jacket and flannel shirt. Not to mention Tommy reeked of sweat and nacho-cheese chips.

“Bullshit,” the guard said. “I’m calling the cops.”

“No, it’s true, man!” Tommy said. “We heard there was some, you know, natural gas here. Just doin’ our job!”

The gun moved from my chest to Tommy’s. “Uh-huh. Tell it to the police.” He shifted the gun to his left hand, pulled a cell phone out of his pocket, and started to press a button with his thumb.

“*Don’t do that!*” Tommy yelled.

The security guard stopped, surprised.

“Man, please don’t call no cops!” Tommy dropped his flashlight. It banged as it hit the floor. “Look, dude, I gotta be honest with you—I got one strike against me. You call the cops, I go back to the joint for a long time.”

This was true. Tommy had spent two years at the state max for assault, and I knew he’d do anything to avoid going back.

The security guard looked at Tommy. “Not my problem. What the fuck are you guys doing here?” The gun stayed pointed at Tommy, but he put the cell phone down.

“Yo man,” Tommy said, “are you Indian? You Oglala?”

The guard paused for a second. “Yeah, so what?”

“We are too, homes! Sicangu! From Rosebud.”

I didn’t know what Tommy was doing, but maybe his rap could delay the security guard while we figured out our next move.

“Look, bro, I’m gonna level with you,” Tommy said. “We ain’t actually from the power company.”

The guard smirked. “No shit.”

“How long you been working here?” Tommy asked.

“None of your business.”

Tommy held his hands up as if in surrender. “All right, cool! Ain’t no thing. I just wanna know if they told you what’s in this cabinet here.”

“What?”

“This thing right here. The book inside. You know about that?”

He shook his head. “What are you talking about—book? You guys are trying to steal—”

“This motherfucking book! It’s made from the skin of an Indian! Just like you and me!”

The guard’s eyes widened. “What—”

“It’s true, man! We ain’t here to steal nothin’! Just want to get rid of that thing. It’s some old book—a wasicu killed an Indian back in the day, then took the skin off his body, made it into a book cover. It’s right there, bro.”

The guard was quiet for a moment but kept the gun pointed at us. “Somebody told me that when I first started working here. I didn’t believe it. I mean, what the hell? That’s messed up.” Now he aimed the gun at Tommy’s head. “But that’s on them. The president of the school or whoever. You assholes can’t be breaking in here, book or no book. I got to do my job.”

He raised the phone again.

“Hold up!” I said. “Please. Just stop for a second, okay? Look, man, we get it. You got to work, right? We don’t want to cause you no trouble. You seem like a good guy. But can you do us a solid? Just let us grab this book and we’ll get out of here. What do you say?”

He shook his head, the gun now pointed at me. “No! I’ll get fired if they find out someone broke in here. Now keep your hands up! I mean it.”

I saw that he was trembling, shaky. He’d almost certainly never confronted anyone with a gun before, and that made him unpredictable. Dangerous. I needed to calm him down. I noticed he was wearing a name badge that said *Lonnie*.

“Lonnie—that’s your name, right?” I said. “How about if we just take off, leave the book? That cool?” I lowered my arms.

“Put your hands up! Now! You guys busted in here—tell it to the cops.”

“Dude, why don’t you put the gun down?” I said, and took a step toward him.

He moved back about two feet. “Stay right there or I’ll fucking shoot! I’m calling right now.” He tried to push a button on his phone, but his hand was shaking too badly and he couldn’t do it. He kept shifting his eyes from the phone to me.

“Lonnie, just give me that phone, okay?” I said. “And the gun.”

“Fuck you.” He stuck the phone in his pocket and grasped the handgun with both hands, aimed straight at me.

“You gonna shoot me, Lonnie?” He didn’t say anything, but his eyes were blazing. “You really want to kill another Indian?”

“I warned you!” He took a step forward. The gun was just inches from my head.

I stood stock-still, waiting to see what he would do. I tried not to breathe.

After an eternity, he stepped back and lowered the gun. I took a deep breath and looked over at Tommy. His eyes were

wide and his head was cocked at a strange angle, like he'd seen something startling and unexpected.

"That book really made of Indian skin?" Lonnie said.

I nodded.

"Shit, go ahead and take it." He stared down at the floor, unable to look at me. "I'm probably gonna get fired." Lonnie moved behind the display cabinet and unlatched the back panel.

I gave Tommy the signal and pointed at the book with my lips. He reached inside and grabbed the book from the easel.

"What are you gonna do with it?" Lonnie asked.

"Get rid of it," I said. "We'll take the skin off first—give it to our medicine man."

He nodded. "I might as well go home; don't need the shitstorm that'll come from my boss." He turned away and started walking toward the main door.

"Wait," I said. He turned to me.

"Take this." I went over to him and handed him the envelope with the two thousand dollars. He opened it, then stared at me with a look of confusion.

I raised my right hand. "Just take it."

He gave a half smile and walked out.

Once the door closed, Tommy turned to me. "What the hell, man? He was gonna shoot you! Goddamn lot of money."

"Yeah, it was," I said.