

THIS TIME FOR SURE  
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# Turning Heart

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I parked my truck in the lot at Turtle Creek, the Rosebud Reservation's supermarket, and looked around for dogs. A pack of them had attacked a woman on the street last month and nearly killed her. They'd gone blood crazy, biting her repeatedly and ripping the skin off her face and arms. We had an animal control officer, but he couldn't keep up with all the escaped and abandoned canines. People in the border towns outside of the rez dumped their mutts here if they wanted to get rid of them. Some of the dogs were picked up immediately but others adapted quickly, turning feral and joining packs. Those were the ones you had to watch for.

I didn't see any, so I walked inside. I headed to the freezer cases at the back of the store, underneath the hanging sign that said WOYUTE TASAGYAPI. I'd pick up some pizza rolls, a couple of frozen macaroni and cheese dinners, a six-pack of Shasta Cola, and maybe a few Tanka bars for later. I was reaching for the frozen food when my cell phone started vibrating. A number I didn't recognize flashed on the screen.

"Is this Virgil?" A woman's voice.

"Yeah, who's this?"

"Janeen. Remember me? Rob's sister."

Janeen Turning Heart. My buddy's little sis. Rob and I had

been tight back in high school—classmates, best friends, comrades. We'd taken the same classes, hung out after school together, and cruised up and down Main Street endlessly on the weekends, hoping that someone would notice us. When my mom died, the first place I went was to Rob's house, where they gave me food, burned some sage, and helped me through the roughest days. In our last year of high school, we'd talked about getting some money and opening up an auto body shop on the rez. But I'd started drinking and listening to heavy metal music. Rob joined the Army instead, got shipped out to fight in the war, and came home in a body bag. I'd always felt guilty over his death, thought it was my fault, somehow. I hadn't gone to the funeral. Instead, I'd hopped on my motorcycle and rode flat out to the Black Hills, pushing the bike to its limit, the road just a blur beneath me, riding until I couldn't see anything, stopping only when I ran out of gas.

"Hey, Janeen, been a long time," I said. "How's it going?"

"Not so good, actually. Wondering if I can talk to you?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"Well, are you still, you know, helping people out? If they have a problem?"

Damn, she wanted me to kick the shit out of someone. I was the reservation's enforcer, the guy you hired when the police wouldn't take action. The person who'd make sure justice was served when the feds released a child molester or rapist. No set fee—I got paid according to the number of bones I broke, teeth I knocked out, and black eyes I gave. Now my dead friend's sister needed my help. How could I let her know that I was trying to quit beating people up?

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Kind of complicated. Rather tell you in person. If that's cool."

I put the pizza rolls back in the freezer. "Yeah, no worries. Where you at now?"

"Living out by Parmelee. Just past the elementary school."

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Twenty miles away. “You going to be in Mission any time soon?”

“No, that’s sort of the problem. Any way you could come out here?”

Images of Rob Turning Heart flashed in my head. The goofy way he’d smiled, the ratty ball cap he always wore. The last time I’d seen him before he shipped out, both of us too embarrassed to say anything meaningful, instead just giving each other an exploding fist bump.

“Yeah, I’ll head over now.”

Half an hour later, I pulled up in front of a little trailer off Highway 18. The yard was neat, the little patch of grass mowed and free of weeds. I tried to remember the last time I’d seen Janeen. I vaguely recalled speaking to her a few years ago—maybe at the Rosebud Wacipi, but I wasn’t sure. I rang the doorbell and waited.

“Virgil!” She smiled as she opened the door. “Come in.”

I stepped inside the tiny living room. A small couch, an old television, and, off in the corner, a crib. She noticed me looking at it.

“Six months old,” she said. “He’s asleep, for now. Go ahead and sit down. You want some pop?”

“Yeah, sure.” I hadn’t heard about Janeen being pregnant, but that was no surprise. I’d quit drinking and didn’t go to the bars anymore, so I didn’t hear a lot of the rez gossip. I had no idea what her situation was now.

“Cherry cola or grape?” she said from the kitchen.

“Grape sounds good.” While she was pouring the sodas, I took a look at her. Long dark hair, tall, blue jeans and a red T-shirt. I could see some of the little kid I’d known back in the day, but she was her own person now.

“Thanks for coming over.” She handed me an old jelly jar filled with purple liquid and sat down.

“Yeah, good to see you.” I noticed there was a framed photo of Rob in his Army gear hanging on the wall. I didn’t see any

other pictures.

“You, too.” She looked me over, up and down. “Dang, you’re even bigger than before. You lifting weights?”

“Naw, just working, gettin’ by.” I drank some of the soda. “So, how you been? Don’t know the last time I saw you.”

She looked at me with a strange expression on her face. “You don’t remember? We ran into each other at the Depot a while back. We stayed there a long time, talked about Rob. You started crying.”

I didn’t remember, which wasn’t surprising. If we’d talked at the Depot, then it was back in my heavy drinking days. I’d put all that behind me, although it was hard to avoid the ghosts of old conversations and past incidents.

“I’d probably had a few. Sorry.”

“Yeah, you were pretty smashed, but whatever. It was all good. We were just missing Rob. Drowning our sorrows, I guess. You told me some stories about him I never heard before, had me laughing.”

Yeah, I missed him. He was another one of my ghosts—more than just a friend, he had been like a brother. I still heard him in my head sometimes, cracking jokes or telling me to get off my ass and do some work.

“Seems like only yesterday he was here,” I said.

She got up and threw the empty soda can in the trash. “Yeah, it does. I named the baby after him, you know. That’s little Robbie.”

“That’s...really great.” I turned away and pretended to take a drink so she couldn’t see my face. I took a few seconds, then walked over to the baby. He was starting to wake up, blinking his eyes and looking around.

“Hi, Robbie, how you doing, little guy?” He grinned, his tiny face lighting up. “Hey, he smiled at me!”

“He might be pooping,” Janeen said. “He makes a weird face when he goes.”

She came over and picked the baby up, then smelled his bottom.

“No, he’s okay.” She put the baby back down in the crib. I could hear him making little noises. It sounded like a forest after a rainstorm, crows and jays returning to the nests, talking among themselves.

“Listen, I appreciate you coming out here,” she said. “It’s hard for me to get around now. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. You know, with a baby, I got to be able to buy formula, diapers, all that stuff.”

I nodded, not sure where she was going with this.

She went on. “Here’s the thing. Last month, I wake up, Robbie’s screaming his head off. I don’t got enough formula for the whole day, so I need to run to the store. I feed him, get him dressed, and we head out. Except my car’s gone. Missing.”

She looked at me like I knew who’d done it. “Well, it’s not a car, I guess. It’s a minivan. A crappy old Dodge Caravan, but it runs. I’m like, shit, somebody stole my ride.”

“You sure it was stolen?” I said. “It wasn’t repo’d?”

“No, it was paid off. Bought it in cash. Someone took it.”

“Okay. Anyone else have the keys?”

“Yeah. My shitty ex-boyfriend. Robbie’s dad. He’s gotta be the one who did it.” She went to the kitchen and put some water on the stove. “Hold on, I need to get some formula ready.”

I watched her scoop some powder into a baby bottle. “Who’s this guy?” I asked. “The ex-boyfriend.”

“Just some asshole I met at the bar. You know, we hooked up, I let him stay here, then I got pregnant. My fault, but I’m not sorry. Only thing I’m sorry about is being with that jerk. Turns out he was messing around with some skank. I told him to pack up his shit and get out.”

“Why do you think he took your minivan?”

She scowled. “Because he’s a lazy dick! And he’s got my spare set of keys. Who else could it be?”

“It’s not that hard to steal a car, you know, especially the older models. You don’t need keys, just a slim jim and some wire cutters. Could have been anyone.”

“Who’s going to come all the way out here to steal a ’95 Caravan?”

This was compelling logic. “Okay, so what do you want me to do?”

“Well, I just need my ride. Can you go see him and get it back? Hey, you gotta rough him up, that’s cool with me.”

I hadn’t laid down a beating on anyone for a while. I’d decided to change my ways, do things the right way. Wolakota, the Lakota path. Restorative justice and all that, not leaving some guy by the side of the road with a broken arm and a bloody face. But I looked at Janeen. She had Rob’s eyes, his mouth. Rob, the friend I’d let down. The guy who’d always stood by me. Some debts can’t be forgiven so easily. This was my second chance to do right by Rob.

“I’ll help you out, okay? See what I can do.”

“Oh jeez, thank you so much!” she said. She came over and hugged me, which I wasn’t expecting. “You don’t know how hard it’s been without a car. Look, I don’t got much money, but there’s sixty dollars—”

I held my hand up. “Don’t want your money. Save it, buy some baby food. Just give me the key to the van, in case I find it. And what color is it?”

She smiled. “Silver. Used to be anyway. Kinda rusted out now. Oh, there’s a sticker on the back window—you can’t miss it. It’s that Calvin cartoon kid taking a pee. The asshole stuck that on.”

I finished the last swallow of grape soda and put the glass down. “Hey, you haven’t told me who this guy is, where he lives.”

“Oh, right,” she said. “His name’s Gil. He’s out in Norris, last I heard.”

“Gil? What’s his last name?”

“Uh, White Eyes. Gil White Eyes. But most people call him Chunky.”

Chunky White Eyes. My cousin.

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As I drove home, I tried to remember when I'd last seen Chunky. He was my second or third or tenth cousin—tough to say on the rez, given that we were all related. He was about five years younger than me and had been a goofy, gangly kid who always smelled like dog food. We used to play together when we were little; I remembered one day when we were climbing on wrecked cars at the junkyard. We'd been having a fine time until he pushed me off an old Duster and I hurt my arm. He'd laughed like a hyena until I hit him in the neck. Then he ran home and told his mother.

He moved away to the Pine Ridge reservation with his mom when he was a teenager, so we lost touch. I'd heard that he dropped out of high school and was a wannabe gang member, but that was all I knew. We'd simply drifted apart—the fifty miles separating the Rosebud and Pine Ridge reservations might as well have been an ocean.

And now he was back, and living in Norris, of all places. A small, isolated community on the rez, people who lived in Norris didn't take kindly to outsiders. Most of the people there only spoke Lakota, and they lived in the old Sioux 400 and transitional houses. Cheap, shoddy homes built in the 1970s, with split floors and cracked foundations. Some of the houses had been used as meth labs and were permanently boarded up.

I decided to head out to Norris right away. If I found the minivan, I'd drive it back and leave my truck there and hope no one messed with it. But the bigger issue was Chunky. If he had the minivan, would he hand it over or would I have to take it? I had no idea if he was still affiliated with a gang. It was hard to imagine Chunky as a hard guy, but maybe he was a different person now.

As I drove, I thought about him. Was he the same person, sometimes annoying and sometimes funny, or had he changed over the years? I wondered if it was possible for a person to alter

their basic nature, or if some part remained fixed and absolute. I'd been filled with anger for so long, but I'd tried to let that go and become calmer, peaceful. Part of that meant giving up vigilante jobs, but people still came to me with their problems. Problems that could only be resolved with violence, which I was trying to quit. And now I was right back in it.

I slowed down and made the turn on Route 63 into town. There were only a few hundred people living in Norris, so I'd be able to find the place pretty easily. I drove around slowly for a while, keeping my eyes open for a silver Caravan.

A kid rode by on a yellow bicycle. I motioned to him.

"Hey, you seen Gil around?"

"Who?"

"Chunky."

"No, not today." He started moving his front wheel from side to side, so he didn't fall over.

"You know where he lives?"

"Uh, over there." He pointed off to the north. "About two blocks down. Big dog in front."

The place wasn't hard to find. A huge mutt was tied up in the front yard with a metal chain. It looked like a Rottweiler or Pit bull or maybe something else. Heinz 57. When I got closer, the dog noticed me and started barking ferociously. I kept my distance and looked around the place. Weeds and trash in the yard. No minivan, but a beat-up Toyota Tercel parked in front, one window gone and replaced with a piece of plastic sheeting.

"Hey, anyone here?" I shouted. The dog barked even more loudly, growling and straining at its chain.

I saw some movement through the window. After a minute, the front door opened, and a man stepped out on the small front porch. He was tall and skinny, had long black hair, and was wearing sweatpants and an old T-shirt that said RED CLOUD WARRIORS. He didn't look like the Chunky I remembered.

He grabbed the dog's chain and pulled it back. "Diesel, shut up."

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When I heard the voice, I knew it was him.

“Chunky?” I said.

“Yeah?” He stared but didn’t recognize me.

“Hey, it’s Virgil. Your cousin. Virgil Wounded Horse.”

He looked at me closely, top to bottom, and his face slowly changed.

“Shit, Virgil? That really you? Damn, you look different. Bigger. It’s been, like, I don’t know, maybe twenty years since I saw you.”

I kept my eye on the dog, who was quiet now, but still watching me. “I know. Long time.”

He stayed on the porch and didn’t ask me inside. “So, uh, what are you doing here? I mean, how’d you know where I lived?”

“Don’t mean to bother you,” I said. “Thing is, I was talking to Janeen Turning Heart today.”

His face darkened. “That bitch.”

I felt my anger start to rise up like a red wave. “Hey, I know you two had a thing. Not my business. But she tells me that you got her minivan. That true?”

He looked down the block, both directions. “She here?”

“No,” I said. “It’s just me.”

“Huh. So, where is she?”

I moved closer to the house. “That’s not important. I just want to get her ride back.”

He took a step back. “It’s my goddamn car. I bought and paid for it. Don’t know what horseshit she told you, but it’s mine.”

I figured he’d say something like this. “I don’t want to get involved in any beef between you two. She tells me it’s hers and I got to believe her. How about I just take the minivan back and you guys can work it out on your own?”

He bent down and unhooked the dog’s chain, then looped it around his hand. “Yo, that skooch did nothing but whine and complain for three months. I figure she owes me about a grand

for the shit I put up with. You talk to her, tell her she can kiss my ass. How 'bout that?"

So it was going to be like this. "Chunky, where's the minivan? Tell me now or we're gonna have a problem. I get the Caravan back, it's all good. Best offer I can give you."

"Here's my offer," he said, smirking. "Get the fuck out of here or I'll sic Diesel on you. You don't want to mess with this guy. Tear you up."

He yanked the dog's chain, tapped it in the face, and pointed at me. The dog was at full attention now, staring and growling. Its short tail was rigid and sticking straight up. I could see that the dog's face was scarred and its ears were mangled. Diesel was a fighting dog.

Chunky must be one of the shitbags who entered their dogs in these matches. I'd never been to one, but I'd heard about them. The fact that Diesel was still alive meant that he'd won in his fights, because they'd shoot the loser, if it managed to survive. This crap sickened me. In the past, the Lakota people valued the sunka, using them to serve as guards against intruders and even assist in ceremonies. Now, assholes like Chunky used dogs for sport.

I didn't want to harm the animal, but I knew it could hurt me badly, even kill me. I looked at the dog, still growling. The animal wasn't snarling or showing its teeth—it was in fighting mode.

"What's it gonna be?" Chunky said.

Stupidly, I'd come unarmed. Given that I wasn't beating people up anymore, I didn't feel the need to carry. I had a baseball bat in my truck, but it was parked two blocks down.

The only play I had was to walk away.

"All right, you win," I said, and took off my jean jacket. "Just let me grab a smoke."

"That's what I thought." He sneered at me. "Take off, homes." I fumbled in the pockets of my jacket, looking for my cigarettes. "You got a light?"

“Eat shit,” he said, and turned away.

“One more thing.”

He turned back and looked at me. “What?”

“Fuck you and your goddamn dog.” I opened my jacket, leaned over, and quickly wrapped it around the dog’s head so he couldn’t see, and then I lifted its hind legs in the air so it couldn’t move. He started squirming and I fell on him, using all of my two hundred seventy-five pounds on the dog’s torso to break its ribs. It started whimpering and yelping, and I moved away quickly in case he got up, but the dog stayed on its side.

“What the fuck, man! What’d you do to him?” Chunky started moving over to the dog, but I got behind him and pushed him face down. I grabbed his right arm and twisted it, then put my knee on his back.

“Get off!” he shouted.

I increased the pressure until he stopped moving.

“All right, dude,” I said. “You gonna give me any shit if I let you up?”

He grunted and mumbled something.

“I’ll ask you again. You gonna be cool?” I ground my knee into his shoulder blade.

“Yes!” he shouted.

I let go of his arm, slowly stood up and moved back a step. I glanced over at Diesel. The dog watched me but was no longer in attack mode—it was lying on its side and trembling. Chunky sat up and stretched his arms and his neck.

“You’ll be all right,” I said. “But you better take that dog to the vet—the one in Valentine. That Toyota yours?”

He nodded.

“Take him today. If I find out you put that dog down, I’ll kick your ass for real. You hear me?”

He stayed quiet then nodded again.

“Okay, let’s get back to it. You got Janeen’s minivan?”

He glared at me. “Yeah, but I paid for half of it. She gonna give me my paper back?”

“I told you, you guys work that out. I don’t give a damn who paid what—she needs that ride for baby stuff.”

He turned his head to the side. “Wait, what?”

“I said, she needs her car for baby stuff—you know, diapers, formula, all that.”

His mouth dropped open in surprise. “Baby?”

No, it couldn’t be. He didn’t know about little Robbie?

“Uh, have you been out to Janeen’s place in a while?”

He shook his head. “Not since early last year. I mean, I went out there to take the Dodge, but I didn’t go inside, you know?”

I stood still for a minute, trying to figure out what to do. This dipshit had stolen Janeen’s car, then threatened me with his dog. I didn’t owe him anything, right?

But then a memory flashed into my head. When I was just eight years old, Rob Turning Heart was already my best friend, and he got sick. Really sick. He was coughing up blood and unable to get out of bed for over a month. I’d talked to him on the phone, and he’d asked me to come over to his house because he was lonely. But I didn’t go. I was scared. Scared that I’d get sick, too, and scared that I wouldn’t know what to say or how to act around him. I never did go to visit him when he was ill. He got better, slowly, and finally came back to school. When he first returned, I was embarrassed and tried to pretend like nothing had happened. But after school, Rob walked home with me and told me it was okay I hadn’t come over. He said he understood. And I started crying then. Crying for my cowardice and for Rob’s compassion. And I was happy I hadn’t lost my friend, my blood brother.

I looked over at Chunky White Eyes. He looked scared, like he’d entered some new, unfamiliar territory, a land where he didn’t speak the language or know the customs.

I sighed. “Come on. Let’s take a ride out to Janeen’s place. You can put the dog in the back of my truck—we’ll go to the vet afterwards.”

