

CHAPTER 1

A Missing Bone-digger

“They’re not even sure where he went missing from! Where do you start tracking?”

Uncle Levi sat across from Grandpa at the table. With a deep sigh, he pulled at a fold in the lapel of his Windy Lake Police Service uniform and leaned forward. He studied the wrinkled face of the old man.

Samuel and Chickadee worked around the two men. Sam was scooping ashes out of the wood stove. Chickadee kept the men’s tea warm and cups filled. The old man was silent for a considerable time. “Think like him,” he said.

Uncle Levi looked at the lake outside the wide window in Grandpa’s kitchen. He shook his head a little.

“Hard to say to a company boss from down south.”

The children tiptoed around the kitchen as their Elders talked. They knew they were hearing the Mighty Muskrats’ next mission, and causing too much noise

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would get them sent outside. Grandpa motioned to his cup. Chickadee filled it.

“What was his name?”

“Dr. Troy Pixton. He’s an archeologist, hired by the mining company.” The kids could see that the newest issue on the First Nation was stuck in their uncle’s mind like a rock in a moccasin.

“What do they need with a bone-digger?” Grandpa frowned.

“It’s part of the mining company’s contract with the community. They have to do historical assessments of the places where they’re going to build a new building or prospect in a new place. The archeologist checks out the area, does a few exploratory digs, and then digs deeper if they find anything. They usually don’t.”

“Or they never say.”

“Well, that’s what all the traditionalists say. And those crazy activists. Who knows what’s true?”

The old man chuckled.

The thick, wood door of the ancient house creaked loudly. Atim and Otter stepped in from outside. Each boy had an armful of chopped logs and sticks for the wood box.

Their uncle nodded at the boys.

“That granddaughter of yours is their war chief,” Uncle Levi said to his father. He took off his police cap, scratched his head, and then replaced the hat.

“Who’s a war chief?”

“Denice.” Uncle Levi sounded slightly annoyed.

“She’s your niece.” Grandpa looked at his son.

Uncle grunted in acceptance.

“You know why she fights like that,” Grandpa gently chided his son. “Your brother lived fast and hard. He partied too much. Denice rebelled by devoting her life to taking care of him. I don’t have to tell you that.”

Uncle Levi nodded in grudging agreement.

“To take care of him...she had to go to the same rough places he did, stay up as long as he did, be out all night with the same people he was. She became rough and tough too, trying to take care of her dad. And when he passed, she had no one to take care of anymore. So, she turned outwards.” Grandpa leaned toward his son, looking into his eyes. “You know she will do much for our community, if she can turn her strength to a good cause.”

Uncle Levi nodded but stared out the window at the lake.

The sound of logs tumbling from the boys’ arms into the wood box drew everyone’s attention. Grandpa seemed to notice the children for the first time, but they all knew he had just been waiting until all their chores were done. With a wave of his hand he dismissed them. “All right. Go outside, rez puppies.”

The kids left the small house in a rush. They were inseparable, and they had been given the name Mighty

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Muskrats by their oldest uncle who had watched them laugh, fight, poke, and snap at each other as they grew up. The nickname had spread across the First Nation and each of their exploits added to the Mighty Muskrats' reputation.

"We have to find him!" Chickadee urged her cousins as they walked up the gravel road. Her smile beamed from a scattering of freckles sprinkled across pudgy cheeks. Long black hair fell over her wide shoulders.

"What are you talking about?" Atim was the largest of the group and the oldest. With his muscles and long legs, he could easily outrun his cousins and his brother, Samuel. Ever since his parents had moved their family to the reserve, Atim had been growing out his hair, but it had yet to touch his shoulders and it often hung in his eyes. He moved it away with a flick of his head.

The sometimes leader of the group, Samuel, rubbed his chin, trying to squeeze out as much info as he could from what he had heard in the house. "Some city archeologist must have got lost. Uncle Levi has to find him." With his thin frame and short cropped hair, Sam bounced down the road as though his big head was pulling him along.

"We should!" Atim declared. He tingled with excitement at the thought. With most of spring break still ahead of them, there was plenty of time to figure out where the missing bone-digger was. They walked a little faster.

Otter's parents had died in a car accident when he was young. He had been raised mostly by their grandpa and had spent a lot of time with the old man learning bushcraft and the teachings of their people. He was the smallest of the Mighty Muskrats but in many ways the toughest.

Otter stopped and studied the sky. It was a beautiful spring day, a big change from the storm the day before. After a moment's reflection, he jogged to catch up to his cousins.

"Let's go to the fort!" Chickadee began to run. "I can check him out on the Internet."

The boys followed.

The Windy Lake First Nation was on the shores of the great lake that gave the community its name. Although the First Nation made up the bulk of the community, the Métis and Canadian community just off the reserve was starting to grow. The houses and neighborhoods of Windy Lake were scattered amidst evergreens and outcroppings of ancient limestone.

Back in the 1950s, an open pit mine had opened up near the community. An energy generating station and dam had been built on a nearby river to provide electricity to the facilities. The pollution from the mine and the changing of the water levels by the dam had been the source of much conflict in the area.

When the cousins' parents were teens, officials at the government department that ran First Nation

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communities had noticed that First Nations in Canada were often in remote locations. These places would be perfect draws for tourists and thrill seekers they decided.

In Windy Lake, a hotel had been constructed, the local snake pits fancied up, and a new dock for visitors' boats was built. The community was told to drag the non-functioning vehicles scattered across the rez to a central location away from the highway and tourist spots. The tourists and their money never showed up. But the field of stacked, old vehicles became a gathering place for the discarded metal, electronics, and appliances that seemed inappropriate in the garbage dump.

The kids looked around for watching eyes before they headed to a Bombardier within the pile of cars, trucks, and other vehicles. The Bombardier was a cross between a van and a snowmobile. The big box for the driver and engine rested on skis and tracks, so it could get through the snow. This one had been abandoned for years.

The Mighty Muskrats opened the door to the old blue snow-van and climbed inside. The interior of the faded Bombardier was a kid's heaven. Posters lined the walls. Cushions and blankets lined the benches. But they clambered past them, opening a screen that originally separated the riding compartment from the engine. Instead of a motor, there was the gaping maw of an aluminum culvert. The metal tunnel led between two pillars of old cars and farther into the junkyard. Boards covered with

old carpets lay along its bottom. The kids crouched and crawled into the tunnel. Otter closed the metal screen that hid the tunnel behind him.

The other end of the culvert was stuck into the emergency door of a school bus. The long vehicle was buried in the pile of cars. Couches replaced most of the bus seats, a dining table and chairs were pushed against one wall, and a laptop computer blinked on a table in front of a sofa. Long ago, the kids had snaked an electrical cord to their sanctuary from a nearby hydro pole.

Chickadee took a Wi-Fi adapter from her pocket and plugged it into her computer's USB port. In a moment, she was searching for the doctor's name.

"Troy Pixton...Troy Pixton...Troy Pixton...come to me, Troy Pixton."

The boys giggled.

"Shhh!" Chickadee scolded. But she broke into a grin as her attention shifted back to the screen.

The boys moved farther into the bus.

"Probably not the cricket player.... Wow! A lot of people know him," she cried. "Probably not the psychiatrist from the States."

Samuel slumped into the driver's seat and took his current read from off the thin dash. Knickknacks and interesting items from the refuse outside covered the bus's hood and filled the view through the missing windshield.

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The trunk of an overturned car sat in front of the bus, which prevented anyone from seeing in or out.

Atim went to a discarded set of weights closely gathered around an incline bench that was screwed together from mismatched pieces. Otter quietly picked up a battered guitar leaning against the wall and pulled out one of the dining chairs. His fingers began to play over the strings.

"Here he is," Chickadee spoke. "Degree in anthropology and archeology from Victoria University.... Dr. Pixton has written *Oral History: Smoke or Mirror?* and *Canada Had a Spirit and Intent Too! Treaty-making in the Late 1800s*. He was the head of the Native Studies Department at the University of Alberta."

"Sounds like he's anti-Indian." Sam shook his head. "An archeologist who doesn't like the cultures he's studying."

"Doesn't seem that weird when you consider he's hired by the mining company." Atim curled a barbell.

"Maybe that's where we should start...at the company office." Chickadee swiveled her chair until she was facing the boys. They nodded in agreement.

"Sounds good." Samuel snapped his book shut.

Otter stopped playing guitar and they got ready to leave the fort. Once they were back in the Bombardier snow-van, they surveyed the land outside its rounded windows.

“Do you see anybody?” Atim asked as he flicked his hair out of his eyes. The other Muskrats shook their heads in turn.

With the area clear, they quickly tumbled out into the sunshine. Through the tall, dead grass from last summer that surrounded the junkyard, they followed a trail to the road.

The walk through the rez was unseasonably warm and humid. A thin layer of black soil, thickened by eons of decaying foliage, was easily scratched, revealing a hard bed of white limestone mud. The high points of the reserve were outcroppings of rock slowly being shaped by erosion. The children’s community had been cut out of an evergreen forest that eked out a living on an inch of topsoil.

“I can’t wear anything black! I just got this hoodie and it’s already full of white mud!” Chickadee shouted at no one.

“It’s a conspiracy to turn us white.” Atim chuckled.

“We’d be drowning now if we were back in the time it was made. This was a big lake bed ten thousand years ago.” Sam studied the road.

“Doesn’t help me now! I need to be clean today!” Chickadee rolled her eyes.

The boys laughed.

They walked past crumbling homes; built according to government plans, erected by lowest bidders. The only variety in the houses was the decade they were built and

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their state of repair. That stretched from condemn-able to could-use-a-good-paint.

In time, they turned off the road and down a trail that entered a smattering of forest. The houses of the reserve were scattered along a stretch of highway and not in the neat rows of the Métis half of the community or the trailer park. It was not uncommon to come across a patch of wilderness between neighborhoods on the rez. In the shadows of the thin, but tall, pines the temperature dropped to a chill. The kids walked a little quicker.

A scream cut the air.

Otter stopped. "Hear that?"

A woman's angry outburst once again sliced through the quiet of the bush.

The Mighty Muskrats looked at each other and then took off running.