

My Name is Mud

D.M. Rowell
Koyh Mí O Boy Day

My Name is Mud

CHAPTER 1.....3

CHAPTER 2.....5

CHAPTER 3.....16

Chapter 1

A storm brewed outside and inside the cluttered workroom. Two men stood long hook nose to long hook nose, rocking unsteadily on their old legs. James Sawpole stepped back, shook his head and snorted, “*Mawbane!* You dishonor the Kiowa Tribe, your family.”

Wilson Crow shuffled backwards and dropped onto the thread-bare couch. He cleared his throat before pushing out, “It’s better this way. Others will—”

James cut in, “You choke on your lies! You’ve done that since you were a boy. We all knew a lie was coming when you had to clear its way.”

Wilson struggled to rise from the low-slung couch. Once righted, he demanded, “Give it to me. I need it now.”

“It’s too late. My granddaughter is coming from California. She will take care of it. She is to be our next StoryKeeper.”

James reached past Wilson to open a cedar spirit box sitting on a table by the couch. He pulled out a pouch of cedar and a sage bundle. “It belongs to the tribe. It is part of our history. You need to cleanse yourself, right yourself, find balance. You will see how shameful—”

“Don’t lecture me, James. I have done what is necessary for my family.” Wilson turned and watched as James retrieved his eagle feather prayer fan before closing the box.

A buffalo jawbone club lay on the coffee-ringed table beside the spirit box. The dawn’s first light fell on a table lamp with a Kiowa camp scene painted around its shade. For James, everything was a canvas.

“Selling our history is not good for our people,” James continued as he took the few steps needed to his handmade easel desk. “My granddaughter arrives today. We will speak to the Tribal Council.”

Wilson took a halting step. “Does she have it?”

Shaking his head with disgust, James dropped into his desk chair, rocked the desk, and splashed muddy water from a multi-color speckled jar holding his well-used paint brushes.

“You’ve heard nothing.”

Standing above James, Wilson looked about the room. His eyes settled on the buffalo jawbone club. “James, you’re leaving me no choice.”

James pushed with one leg, turned his chair to the desk. “There is no more to say.”

Signaling the end, James turned his back on Wilson.

Chapter 2

I rolled to my back. I had a bed to escape and a flight to catch. I eased my arm out from under Lynne. She shifted. One leg slid out; I eased the covers loose. I never intended to stay through the night, absolutely hated the morning scene after a nice evening.

I looked over at Lynne. She was a beautiful woman. Her blend from an Italian mother and an African American father resulted in a mixture that should be repeated. Not just for the looks. She was the whole package; professional, confident, brains. Too bad last night was just that: the last. I had no desire, no time for emotional entanglements.

I quietly slid from the covers. My foot slipped on a pile of clothes. We had been in a rush to get to the bed. The memory of the evening before sent little waves through me—down low.

I smiled, and took a moment to enjoy the morning after buzz before facing the rush of my coming day.

I had the earliest flight out for Lawton, Oklahoma, the closest town to my Grandpa's home in the back country of what had been the Kiowa, Comanche, Apache Reservation. I needed to get to my Grandpa's place and back here, back to my office in Silicon Valley as soon as possible.

Once again, I shook off an uneasy feeling that had been haunting me since *the call*. My very traditional Plains Indian Grandfather seldom—OK, never—used a phone, never called. Yet he did, last night. He even left a message. My grandfather's final line, "I have a bad feeling. Come now," propelled me into action. I booked the first flight to Lawton.

Pulling my pants loose from the clothes pile, I kicked into my jeans. Found my sports bra and pulled it up and over. I slipped on a loose blouse, a formalizing touch to my jeans and Salomon trail shoes. I didn't want to over dress for "home."

A soft murmur came from behind me. I looked over. Lynne exposed one smooth, well-muscled leg while the other stayed trapped in the sheet. She rolled and reached for the vacant spot in the bed, found the still-warm pillow and pulled it in. I followed her caramel-colored thigh upward to a short patch—

Enough, I had to stop. Before my mind and body went any farther.

I forced my eyes away and looked around for my messenger bag. I snuck another peek at Lynne. The thigh was still uncovered Again, I forced my eyes away, reminded myself that this had gone on long enough. I had seen Lynne a few weeks beyond my usual pattern. If I continued seeing her much longer, it would get complicated. *And* I did not do complicated. My eyes slid toward the exposed thigh before shifting up to the sweet face. Definitely time to leave. I shook my head and moved out the bedroom door.

Dawn's light was a few hours away, but Lynne's electronics kept her small apartment lit enough to maneuver safely. I discovered my lime-green messenger bag with its contents spewed about by the entry doorway. It must have been unzipped when I slung it to the side of my roller suitcase coming into Lynne's apartment last night.

I rushed to it, found my phone and got its light on. This bag held everything I needed in life.

I pulled it upright, shined the light around. My file folders with all the notes I had to have for an upcoming client's company launch lay scattered about. I gathered those together, flicked through them, just to make sure all were in place. Once confirmed all there, I slid the files into

the front pocket. I glanced at and touched my computer in the padded back compartment, then just before zipping the bag closed, I spotted the unopened mail I had been collecting for the last few days. I intended to go through it all later, even the larger advertising-something envelopes.

I gathered the envelopes in a single swoop, again promised myself to open them before they went to the circular file. As I shoved them in the center pocket, my phone illuminated and showed the time, 3:48 AM. The sun would be rising in Oklahoma about now. My traditional Plains Indian Grandfather would be greeting the rising sun with his thoughts and prayers for the day.

I needed to move along. My flight left in a couple hours. Involuntary my head shook. I really did not have time for this trip. If it was anyone but my Grandfather, I wouldn't go. I hadn't gone back to my childhood home, the KCA Reservation, since I left for UC Santa Cruz ten years ago. I had no time to return. My agency had started by a fluke after graduation and had taken off immediately with no signs of slowing.

I checked my messenger bag and file folders again. I was nervous about leaving at this point, but the team could handle it. This latest startup company's launch, scheduled for next week, was the biggest yet for my agency. The company's expected Initial Public Offering, IPO announcement already generated more press for my agency than we had received with any of our past clients ... combined. Richard's company IPO could make his company worth millions, and launch mine to national awareness.

This really was not a good time for me to leave.

But Grandpa had called. His message was a short eight words, "Granddaughter, *Bow anh tah geah daw. Aim ah*, I have a bad feeling. Come now." It had been Grandpa's voice that tugged at me. He sounded ... wrong ... out of balance.

Since then, I had not been able to reach him. I'd not been able to tell him I had the earliest flight out. I was coming.

I didn't want to, but I was coming.

I swung the messenger bag over my shoulder. Thought a moment, then dropped the bag down again and unzipped the center compartment. I found the pocket hidden within and touched the supple leather of my medicine bundle. Nodded my head and zipped the messenger bag closed again. I swung it to my shoulder and held the messenger bag close to my side with my elbow. Secured. I could not lose this bag.

I looked around the apartment for a notepad. Spotted one on the fridge and jotted a quick note.

Lynne,

This has been nice. I've enjoyed our time together. Like I said at the start and last night, being a couple is not my thing. It's best that we stop now.

Mae

My eyes slid back to Lynne for a final drink of her exotic beauty. I inhaled, smiled at the lingering musky scents of sex and closed the apartment door.

During my ride to the airport, I left the necessary messages to keep production moving forward at the agency for the few days I would be away. After six months of careful research, strategy and development, everything was in place for the client's IPO. We were down to reviews and executive rehearsals. I would be back before the final rehearsal—before the big day. I reassured my client, Richard, that my agency had everything handled.

From there my morning turned into a game of hurry up to get from one flight to the next only to end up waiting at the Lawton airport for Grandpa. It felt like I had been stuck for hours

waiting in this over-chilled airport listening to the baggage room's AC as it buzzed loudly, valiantly pushing back the wall of heat and humidity just outside its doors.

The call that had summoned me was on my mind again as I scanned the few people lingering around the baggage area in the small Lawton-Ft. Sill Regional Airport. What kind of bad feeling did he have? Was Grandpa sick?

I still had not been able to reach my Grandfather. All calls went straight to voicemail.

I paced, tugged my rolling suitcase behind me from one end of the airport to the other, my phone grasped tightly in my free hand.

Startled by the phone's sudden buzz, I released my rolling suitcase handle with the messenger bag perched on top. Top heavy, the ensemble teetered and toppled over as I quickly answered the buzzing phone, "Grandpa, is that you?"

"Mae, where are you"

The gruff voice was unexpected. I stood still, leaving the bag pile on the floor.

"Tommy, I—"

His sharp "It is Thomas" cut me off. "How can you leave in the middle of *this* company launch? The biggest we've ever done."

I clenched my jaw; I hated that superior tone. "You mean, *I've* ever done."

I forced my jaw to relax. I was not going to let Thomas get to me. "I have everything managed. Bernie and Marcus have production handled. I talked to Richard, *my* client, we're good."

I turned to look at the airport's front door. "And may I remind you, that I brought this client in—as I have the last five. You're not much of a partner with your constant disappearing act."

"I'm here now, and you're not."

“Don’t tell me you’re at the office.” I pulled at my curls causing them to spring loose and wild.

“Yes, and it’s a good thing I am.” I could imagine Thomas puffing himself up, getting into full superior rich boy mode.

I released my breath, enunciated hard and clear, “Thomas,” took another deep breath, and continued, “don’t touch or direct anyone on *my* client’s launch. I have worked with the client for over six months. We have everything approved and moving forward. Bernie is in charge. You touch anything and that is it.”

I jabbed at the phone’s end button, turned, and toppled over my fallen bags onto my knees with a thud.

Partnership with Thomas had been a mistake. Originally, he funded the agency’s start while I brought in the clients. It seemed a good match ... then. The business had grown steadily the last six years, but two happy years of partnership had been it. Thomas no longer contributed to the business, just reaped the rewards. Rewards I worked fourteen plus hours a day to make happen.

I crawled to my messenger bag, dragged it up with me, pulled its strap over my head and settled it on my shoulder. Enough! Thomas was a distraction. I needed to find Grandpa, help with his problem and get back to my agency.

Once upright, I scanned the small airport—again. Not much of a crowd. Mostly military personnel with country folks scattered here and there. To one corner I noticed a man in a dress shirt and tie in an intense conversation with a small Kiowa woman. His yellow tie with, yes, matching yellow cowboy boots stood out in the sea of military green and faded jeans. Obviously, this guy was someone passing through playing at cowboy.

My eyes returned to a digital display of the outside temperature and time. It claimed it was 102 degrees outside. That seemed impossible, it was only ten in the morning.

By the luggage conveyor I spotted the back of my Grandfather, his grey and black braids hanging below his collar.

I waved and called out, “Hey Grandpa.” The elderly Kiowa turned; before he was fully around, I knew he wasn’t my grandfather. “Sorry, wrong grandpa.” I chuckled to myself, wondered how many other “grandpas” had turned with my call.

The hiss of the automatic doors opening pulled my eyes to the front of the airport. A solid, fifty-something Kiowa woman marched in, her head swiveled as she looked quickly around the airport.

The woman looked familiar to me. She had the typical middle-aged Kiowa woman look; one dark braid pulled back tight as if centering a long straight nose on a scowling face. She aimed her scowl at me and strode over. She announced, “You’re James Sawpole’s Granddaughter.”

Before I could say yes, she continued, “I see you still got that curly hair.”

The old jab was a direct hit. I was different. I was born with natural curly hair amid a reservation full of TV-Indian straight hair. Even in my family, I was the only one born with this wild hair. My curly hair branded me a mixed-breed to the tribes while my high cheek-bones and long hook nose marked me Indian to *Thybows*, the non-Indians.

In spite of the jab, I smiled. My Grandfather had called my hair “buffalo hair” to make me feel special rather than an outsider in my family and Tribe.

I dropped my messenger bag from my shoulder, aimed my smile at her. “Yes, James Sawpole is my Grandfather. Have we met?”

She faced me, but her eyes scanned the area, searching. She seemed anxious, looking for something, someone. Then she did something very un-Kiowa: she did not formally introduce herself reciting her ancestors, so that I could then reply noting our cross points through the generations. She simply launched into, “I’m Anna ManyHorse. I am a legislator for the Kiowa Tribe. Your Grandpa and I were supposed to meet this morning. James made it sound urgent, but he didn’t show up.”

Grandpa’s words echoed in my mind, “*I have a bad feeling.*”

Anna’s eyes finally settled on me. In typical Kiowa fashion, she waited for me to consider what she had said.

“I’ve been waiting for Grandpa for over an hour. What were you meeting my Grandfather about? Do you know what he—?”

I was interrupted by a shrill voice, “Is he here, where is he?”

The screeching voice came from a small Kiowa woman. She pushed in alongside Anna. The woman placed hands on hips and aggressively leaned forward—at me. “Well, where is he? Just like him to call a meeting and not show. He’s always been full of himself.”

Before I could respond to the small woman, Anna faced her, she lifted her left palm up while making a horizontal swiping motion with her right hand across the left’s upturn palm, the Plains Indian sign language Stop NOW motion. One I was very familiar with from my childhood.

Anna followed with, “*Ohdayhah*, Enough. James is a Tribal Elder, our Sacred StoryKeeper. I was talking with his granddaughter before you interrupted—”

I heard a low harrumph behind me, it came from the man that I had thought was Grandpa earlier. He seemed to know the two women. “Anna, what are you doing here?”

Before Anna could answer, the smaller woman shot back, “Anna’s on important business. Tribe business.”

At that comment, I remembered. Anna was one of the seven Legislators in the Kiowa Nation Government. I had met her years ago with my Grandfather. She was one of the few in the Kiowa Tribal government that my Grandpa actually liked and more important, respected.

The man that I had mistaken for Grandpa cracked a smile at Anna and the small woman. “Tribe business at the airport? You all runnin’ off?”

Up close, I recognized Wilson. He had been a Tribe Legislator years ago. One my Grandpa had known since their shared childhood, yet Grandpa made a point to never vote for Wilson.

Anna scowled at the two intruders and turned back to me. “As I said, I’m Anna.” She shifted to include the others. “This is Nita Yee, an admin at the Kiowa Tribal Complex, and you may know Wilson Crow.”

Crow ... My eyes shifted from Anna to Wilson Crow. I knew a Crow Nita moved closer to Wilson, under her breath, barely audible she hissed, “Just stop!”

Anna went on, not noticing the exchange, “Wilson, you are no longer on the Kiowa Tribal Council or a Legislator, why *I* am here is none of your concern.”

“More than hers,” Wilson used his chin to point at Nita Yee. “She’s never been a Legislator. Just a lifetime hanger on, always got a job at the tribe, don’t you, Nita?” Wilson smiled with no humor at the small woman.

Nita scowled back at Wilson while Anna glared at them both. All three seemed to have forgotten me. I stayed silent standing to the side. No one seemed happy to see the other. Even though I had been gone for years, I knew this display of hostility was wrong—Kiwos usually behaved better than this—in public anyway.

Finally, Anna pushed at Wilson. “And you, Wilson, why are you here?”

Wilson coughed, cleared his throat, and muttered, “Guess, same as you. Lookin’ for James.”

Anna moved closer to Wilson. “And why would you be looking here for James?”

I thought it was strange *any* of them was here at the airport looking for my Grandfather. Grandpa hated coming into town.

Wilson cleared his throat again, looked directly at Nita then over to Anna. “We’d been talkin.’ You know me and James and a few others got land over by the Slick Hills, well, we think they’re frackin’ way out in the back country, out of sight. Me and James want to talk to the tribe about it. Those oil boys won’t listen none.”

My head pulled up. Was Grandpa having problems with wildcatters out in his back pastures? Much of the backcountry pasture lands were miles from the nearest house. Anything could happen out in that solitude. It would be days, maybe weeks before unwanted activities would be discovered. I watched the two closely.

Anna blurted. “Who knows about this?” She studied Wilson’s surprised face, glanced at Nita and back to Wilson. Wilson coughed, sputtered and cleared his throat. Before he could choke an answer out, Anna’s face shifted, relaxed. She shot another question at Wilson. “Is that why James wanted to meet with me this morning?”

Wilson’s eyes moved, focused over Anna’s shoulder. “Well, I know they been messin’ with James’ Spring water. We wanted to talk to the legislators ‘bout it.” He looked back at Anna. “Those oil boys ... *Bow anh tah geah daw.*”

A chill shot down my back, raised hair bristled up my neck. *Bow anh tah geah daw*, I have a bad feeling. It’s what Grandpa said in his message. The last thing I had heard from him.

My stomach tightened. “Mr. Crow ... Wilson, is my Grandfather OK?”

Anna and Nita leaned in.

Wilson cleared his throat. “He ... yea”

Anna reached toward Wilson. “You talked to James?”

“He said his granddaughter was coming in.”

Wilson’s eyes slid across Anna to me. “Time’s wasting. We gotta go.”

He stooped, took my roller suitcase with my precious messenger bag on top and marched out of the airport. The door hissed behind him.

I stared. We all stared at where Wilson had been—each thrown off balance.

Grandpa’s recorded words, “*Bow anh tah geah daw*, I have a bad feeling,” drummed through my head.

Was Grandpa in danger? What was going on with fracking on Grandpa’s land?

I needed information from Wilson, now. I couldn’t let him leave without me.

I nodded to the two women. Turned and chased Wilson, my suitcases and I hoped a ride to my Grandpa and answers.

“*Aim ah*. Come now,” added its beat through my worried mind down to my running feet.

Chapter 3

I caught up with Wilson as he slung my messenger bag into a faded blue 1963 Chevy pickup truck that looked like it still did daily chores on a small farm. My roller case followed the messenger bag sliding across a long bench seat. Wilson grunted, grabbed the steering wheel and pulled himself up into the old truck. I opened the passenger door, jumped inside as the truck's engine coughed to life.

Wilson jammed the floor stick shift into reverse, this shoved my suitcase further down the bench seat and pushed me into the metal door. I spotted my messenger bag in the footwell, then started a futile search for a seat belt. "Grandfather ... Wilson, right? I think we met when I was younger." We both jostled forward as Wilson found and engaged first gear.

Sweat collected and dropped down my forehead as I waited for a reply. I tried again to get a conversation started. "Did my Grandpa send you for me?" My questions met silence. Fishing for a response, I muttered, "strange with all the family around ..."

Wilson bit. "I told James I was headed to town. No sense wasting good rubber."

I looked around my suitcase at the driver of the old pickup. Wilson had the typical look of a full-blood Kiowa elder. Long hook nose, braids more grey than black and the Kiowa long ear lobes. Cursed with growing longer and longer as we aged. I was in fear of my ear lobes eventually sitting on my shoulders at the rate they were stretching.

Since I had Wilson talking, I threw another question at him. "What's going on with fracking in the area?"

"Your granddaddy will have to tell you about it, but it's not good." Wilson slammed the truck into third gear. It bucked forward.

This shook a bit more out of Wilson. “They’re messing with the Spring. That hurts everyone farming down river.” He nodded his head in agreement with his statement. “But I ain’t got nothing to say, you’ll have to talk to your Granddaddy ‘bout them oil boys messin’ with him.”

That’s where he left it, “... them oil boys messin’ with him.” I started getting mad at them oil boys.

We bounced down the road, heat building and silence growing. Stereotype it may be, but it was true of my tribe—my family—the stoic, silent Indian lives. I returned Wilson’s silence. The old truck’s AC blew hot air about. I sweated and brooded while watching the town go past.

In the ten years since I had been in Lawton, a lot had changed. Lawton had been an early Cavalry town on the fringes of Fort Sill built to keep the red savages in line. The small town thrived and died depending on Fort Sill’s rollercoaster existence. Lawton now thrived with two Walmarts and too many to count restaurant chains catering to the always on-the-go military families. Cars streamed here and there; people went from one air-conditioned location to another. No one ventured outside in the mounting heat and humidity. Even the blackbirds stayed put, lined up on the wires above. They hunched forward with wings partially open in hopes of capturing a wayward puff of cool air. I swear I could see small black tongues hanging out of beaks as we drove by.

As a kid, we only came into town for our twice-a-month grocery shopping trips or to go to the Lawton Indian Hospital on one of the family’s numerous emergency room runs. I started treks to the hospital as soon as I could move on my own. Stitches were my specialty, at one point I counted over a hundred, half of them accomplished in one spectacular summer.

A vibration in my front pocket brought me back to reality. Wilson leaned forward to look at me around the suitcase barrier, “I got a quick stop. Is that you, or a new sound in my Bess?”

I pulled the phone from my pocket, waved it where I thought Wilson could see it. I leaned forward to be heard around the suitcase wall. “Stop where you need. I’ll take care of some business here.” Again, I waved the phone.

He replied with a grunt and shoved the case back at me, locked in barrier position.

I turned to the passenger window to answer the phone in search of some privacy. “This is Mae”

“Mae, you’ve picked a fine time to leave me.”

I smiled, shook my head mentally seeing Bernie, my five-foot two-inch office manager. She kept things running as smooth as an assembly line. Like a feral cat, she showed up one day and never left, insisted I needed her—and she was right.

I lowered my voice. “Hey Bernie, doing Ok. I’m headed to my grandfather’s house now.” I couldn’t see Wilson, but I felt his ears on me.

“You never explained what was going on. Why are you there and not here?”

I gave her the truth. “My Grandpa called me.”

I bounced and slid forward on the seat as the truck bucked over a driveway lip. My messenger bag flipped into the foot well. I reached into the foot well—cavern more like it in these old trucks—to retrieve my messenger bag. I could see Wilson’s jean clad legs down to his worn cowboy boots.

Bernie pushed for information. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know exactly ... maybe some problem with fracking.”

She shot back, “What the frick do you have to do with frackin’?”

Wilson drove down a single lane in a large parking lot facing the back of several businesses. I’d lost track of where we were. The town had changed so much since my last visit.

“Bernie, what do you need?”

I heard an intake of breath; she wasn’t used to me being abrupt with her.

She became direct. “Just wanted to let you know Richard is placated. We’re doing a run-through this afternoon. The only problem is Thomas. He’s looking over the artwork after Marcus has already given directions. It’s getting ugly and I don’t mean the art.”

Wilson made an abrupt right, nosed the pickup truck up tight to a seven-foot stucco wall. I watched Wilson’s brown work-worn hand shove the long stick shift into neutral, turn the key and pocket it. He muttered, “Right back. Don’t go anywhere.” The old metal door slammed close.

“HEY MAE, you hear me!”

Bernie’s voice pulled me back to the phone. “Bernie, yes. Ok, do this. Leave Thomas there with the crew. They know to do *only* what Marcus has directed. You—no, Marcus—take the latest version to Richard, do the run through at Richard’s place. He will love the personal attention.”

I paused a moment, then spilled. “I’m sorry. Things are confusing here. I haven’t seen my grandfather yet. There was a weird scene at the airport, I don’t really know the guy I’m riding with”

Looking around I realized that to the front of me was the stucco wall, to my right, too close to allow the truck’s passenger door to open, sat a garbage dumpster and on my left was a suitcase barrier blocking access to the driver’s door. I was trapped in this rapidly, heating metal cab.

“You’re in a truck with someone you don’t know?”

“It’s not like that—he knows my Grandpa.” I shifted around in my seat, pushed and displaced the suitcase giving myself an extra inch or two of breathing room. The suitcase was wedged tight against the floor stick shift.

It felt like the heat had increased inside the metal cab ten degrees. Sweat trickled down between my breasts. Panic rose. I didn't like being trapped in small places. I needed to breathe moving air.

I cut Bernie off. "I really have to go. I know you've got this. Just do it away from Thomas."

Bernie cut in, "Wait, wait. Wait! There's also Lynne."

I sighed. Bernie heard me and let loose. "Do you think I like these calls? Do you! At least tell them good bye in person. Do you hear me?"

"I did tell her."

"Was that before or after sex?"

I could feel her glare across the air waves.

"Bernie, don't push me."

"I'm not pushing. I just don't want to deal with your test drives." I could hear her restless hands clicking away on a keyboard. "Stop giving your one night stands the office number." Bernie ended the call.

I knew it was pointless, but I tried to open my door. Not even a puff of air came through the inch-wide opening. I leaned forward; my shirt clung to my now sweat soaked back. I tried to control my rising panic.

The truck engine and its AC was off, both windows closed, my door blocked unable to open and my own suitcase formed a fourth wall in this oven. I couldn't stay inside the cab much longer, the heat continued to rise. I needed to get out.

I turned to examine the suitcase barrier. The stick shift blocked any attempt at crawling to the driver side from the floor wells. There wasn't enough room between the top of the case and the truck's ceiling to go over the suitcase. Squeezing between the bag and the bench seat looked

most promising. If I could get the driver's door open, I could push the suitcase out the door and I could then escape.

I burrowed under the case headfirst. Sweat rolled down my nose, dropped onto the rough seat cover. Glad no one could see me, I took a deep stench-filled breath before pulling my knees up and inch-wormed forward, freeing my arms to stretch out for the door handle. I could just graze the handle with my fingertips, not enough to grasp and pull down to get the door open.

I inch-wormed backwards and out from under the suitcase. Found my messenger bag and rummaged. Not far, because I needed it to always be in reach for those unexpected itches, I found my telescoping back scratcher. I returned to my worm crawl under the suitcase, lead with my arms this time and a fully extended, metal back scratcher. In no time, I heard the satisfying clunk of the door opening as my backscratcher's clawed hand pulled the door lever down.

I shoved the roller suitcase out the truck ahead of me and sat it down on the blacktop. The still air felt cool on my soaked back ... and front. I tried to take a deep breath but was blocked by the air, it was thick and heavy, impossible to suck in quickly. Still, it felt good to be free of that hot truck.

I slung my messenger bag over a shoulder and headed to the back of the truck. We were parked at the end of a single lane coming down the middle of a block of businesses back doors. I wasn't sure which side of the block Wilson had gone.

Half way down the lane, a van idled outside an open door. I headed in that direction.

As I got closer, I slowed. I could hear snatches of raised voices, "...has it, get it back..." A lower, barely audible, "Ger ... arranged."

I was pretty sure the lower voice was Wilson, but he sounded tense. I hung back.

Still far enough back, I peered under the van to see a pair of well-worn cowboy boots toe-to-toe with a set of near-new work boots.

I angled wide, stayed out of sight. I wanted a glimpse of who belonged to the boots. I was pretty sure the old cowboy boots were Wilson's and I didn't think Wilson wanted me to know who he was talking to. As I moved closer, I made out Wilson's low tones, "Don't worry about James"

James? My Grandpa!

Something was going on. Something was wrong!

Wilson's whispered comments propelled me forward at the same time as the wearer of the near-new work boots turned from Wilson with a whine loud enough for all to hear, "Grandpa, I need *it* now." I stopped in place, stared at a face I had last seen with peach fuzz. It now sported a ragged Duck-Dynasty inspired beard.

At twelve, after I had sent him home bleeding and crying, his mother had erupted from their house shouting obscenities. One name she hurled at me; I had never heard before—lesbian. I didn't know what the word meant, but there was truth in the sound of it.

Last thing I expected was to run into the man that had married my first love.