



RAPID READS



HIM STANDING

RICHARD WAGAMESE

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Summary: When a Native carver agrees to produce a spirit mask for a mysterious stranger, he falls under the spell of a dangerous sorcerer from the Dream World.

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For Debra—The magic in my world.

CHAPTER ONE

I got a trick with a knife I learned to do pretty good. It's not what you think. Despite all the crap about gangbangers and the gangbanger lifestyle, I got no part of that. No, the trick I do with a blade is that I make people. I can look at a perfect stranger for, like, maybe a minute, then turn around and carve his likeness into a hunk of wood. A perfect likeness. I've done it for lots of people. It's like I see them there. In the wood. Like they were there all the time. Like they were just waiting for me and my blade to come along and create them. It's a good trick.

Now, I ain't what you'd call established in a major way or anything. But this talent, or whatever it is, got me a regular gig on the boardwalk. Thing is, I didn't even have to get a permit like the rest of the buskers and the charcoal sketchers. No, me, I lucked out. I chose the one guy out of a thousand, that summer day, who could help me. I sat him down and did him for free. I didn't know who he was at the time. Took me half an hour. Turned out the cat was with the city licensing department. When I finished, he said he was willing to give me the license in a straight swap for the carving. I'm no stooge. I took it. I been working the boardwalk ever since.

It's a pretty good nickel. Once your name gets out, people actually come looking for you. Lucas Smoke. Imagine that? Straight shootin', regular citizens calling my name. Seeking me out. Anyway, I started turning out, like, four of these a day for fifty bucks apiece.

That's a two-hundred-dollar day, and that's nothing to sniff at. Beats freakin' workin', if you know what I mean.

Don't get me wrong. I never had anything against sweatin' and grindin' for a dollar if that's what a guy's gotta do. But there had to be options. It was my grandfather who turned me on to it. He was a carver. Did all these spooky faces he called spirit masks. They were big with the tourists. And then big with the galleries and collectors. Pretty soon my grandfather was rollin' in the dough. He was the only Ojibway on our reserve that had a house with three stories. Great big cedar-log house with floor-to-ceiling windows, overlooking the lake.

Then he handed me a knife one day and told me to make him in wood. I laughed. I was thirteen, and I had better things to do with knives. Like skinning a moose or filleting a fish. Something that had a purpose.

But he looked square at me the way grandfathers do and told me again to make him in wood. I don't know what happened. I know that I looked at him and I just saw him different. I saw angles and shadows and places where his face was irregular. I saw dips and planes and hollows. I started to carve. I had no idea what I was doing, but it was like my hands had a mind of their own. He said it was amazing. It was my grandfather who taught me everything I know about how to handle a blade. In fact, he gave me the knife. It's got a turtle-shell handle, and it's old. Really old. That's what he said. It was a traditional carver's knife. He said using it would connect me to the old-time magic of carvers. It's the knife I still use today.

That was seven years ago. My grandfather died when I was sixteen. Then the whole family started fighting over who got what. It made me sick. I missed the old man

so much I ached all over. But all they could think about was the money, the house, the art and what it was worth. All I could think about was his hands. When he worked, they were a part of him but...not. That sounds crazy, but it was like they had their own spirit. They moved elegantly. That's a word he taught me. It means "energy set free." That's what he said. I could see that when he worked. And on a good day, I can see it in mine. Spirit moving in its own time.

So while the family squabbled, the whole thing ended up in court. And I booked it for the city. I didn't want any of my grandfather's things. I didn't want his money. I wanted him, and since I couldn't have him anymore, the reserve started to feel like some empty little backwater in the middle of nowhere. So I came to the city looking for any kind of job I could find. I was down to my last few bucks when I found the boardwalk.

Everywhere you looked, there were people doing weird and wonderful things. There were magicians, jugglers, a one-man band, contortionists and even a guy who drove nails into his head. They did it for the money and the applause. One day I sat on an empty bench and picked up a soft-looking piece of wood. I turned it over in my hands and started making a pretty woman in a hat who was looking out at the water a few yards away from me. Shavings were laid around my feet. There was a crowd gathered around me when I finished. The lady with the hat gave me thirty dollars. I did a couple more before the crowd drifted away. I came back to the rooming house where I live with almost a hundred bucks.

I met my girl on that boardwalk. Amy One Sky. She's a drop-dead gorgeous Ojib girl who works as a model and loves my work. She didn't even mind that I had next to nothing. She said I had a gift.

She said she knew people who could get me my own show in a gallery. So I started working on pieces. Amy even got a few sold for me, and it looked like I was on the fast road to being a real artist.

Then Gareth Knight showed up on the boardwalk, and everything got weird real fast.