

LONE WOLF

By Tracy Krauss

Chapter One

Thomas Lone Wolf poured himself a cup of coffee, inhaling the heavenly scent as he clattered the pot back into place on its burner. He cradled the mug in his hands and sniffed, enjoying the warmth and the aroma before taking a tentative sip. He winced and touched his cheek, then let out a whispered oath. Good thing the kids were still sleeping. He didn't usually swear, but he'd had a toothache for days and the hot liquid touched a nerve. He took another sip, bracing himself against the pain. Once the steaming brew was past the tooth and down his throat he expelled a groan. It was a toss up which was worse. The pain in his tooth or going without his morning coffee. He opted for the latter.

The third sip went down much better. Once the initial shock was past, it didn't hurt so much. He took another larger gulp and stopped to gaze out the kitchen window. He lifted the faded sheer material away from the frame just a bit more so his view wouldn't be obstructed.

He'd come to love the vastness of the view before him. Wide open prairie. Some people said it was boring. Table flat with nothing to see. Thomas saw it differently. There was subtleness to the land. It wasn't flashy or brash, yelling to get attention. Instead the grasses rippled like the waves on a calm ocean, just barely discernible, but moving none the less. He loved the change in color, too. Muted browns, rich ochers, vibrant greens, each taking their cue as the seasons morphed against a backdrop of sky. Perhaps this was the most impressive of all. The sky was a living thing here, awe inspiring in its vastness; sometimes clear and blue, sometimes filled with fluffy cumulus clouds, sometimes flashing with powerful forks of lightning. Magnificent.

Thomas let the curtain drop back into place. He downed the rest of his coffee and

set the empty cup in the sink. It was time to wake his children. His daughter, Whisper, was in Grade Two at the Marshdale Elementary School. She'd been in Kindergarten when they moved here. His son Ryder was in his senior year at the high school, ready to graduate in just a couple months' time. Then he'd be off to college. Time sure had a way of flying.

Thomas had decided when he first moved to Marshdale almost three years ago that they would stay put, at least until Ryder graduated. His children had been through enough upheaval in the last five years since their mother passed away from cancer. When they moved to Marshdale so that Thomas could oversee the opening of a First Nation's cultural center, he decided then and there that it would be their home until the center was complete. As it turned out, it was perfect timing. The grand opening was taking place this summer. He felt a melancholy mix of relief and sadness. He would no longer have an excuse to stay.

Not that life in Marshdale was ideal. Initial resistance to the center and thinly veiled racism had been a hard obstacle to overcome. There weren't very many other aboriginal families in the small farming community and he tended to stick out. At well over six feet, with his long, black braid and dark complexion, it was hard to mistake his indigenous heritage for anything else. Still, they had managed, despite some rough spots, and had since settled into the life of the community.

The fact that Thomas had a strong faith was partly what got him through the first few months. Without God on his side he wasn't sure he could have weathered the opposition. His biggest adversary turned out to be a lunatic of sorts, who had stabbed him on the steps of the church shortly after Christmas the first year they lived here. Thankfully, he'd recovered fully. The incident might even have swayed public opinion in his favor, since the culprit was also the chair of the heritage committee.

It had been a tough first few months. He'd even thought he was in love at one point, with his daughter's teacher no less. Just when he thought he was ready to love

again she'd rejected him. He was over it now, of course. In hindsight he saw it was for the best. He wasn't ready for a relationship at the time and she ended up marrying a local farmer. It had been awkward at times, since he and Con McKinley, the man in question, were also good friends.

Thankfully, he'd had his work to keep him occupied. He'd been a hired liaison between indigenous groups and communities all over the western provinces. Each project was different, but this one had special meaning for Thomas. His ancestors had lived in this area, displaced after the land was sectioned off for agricultural purposes. But he had heard the stories. His great grandfather was a well known medicine man and the archaeological site that had spurred the creation of the cultural center was of both historical and personal importance. He'd put his heart and soul into this project and now all his hard work was coming to fruition. Too bad it would also force a change in his personal life. At least Ryder would be finished school by the time they had to move.

"Come on kids," he called down the narrow hallway that led to the bedrooms. "It's a long drive into the city and we can't be late." Actually, he almost wished he could. Except for the fact that his tooth ached incessantly, he'd avoid the trip altogether. He'd made dental appointments for all three of them. No use wasting a trip to the city. He hadn't been to a dentist himself in a very long time. He hated dentists. But he had to set a good example for his kids. What people wouldn't do for their children.

Thomas parked his SUV in the lot behind the square three story building. Regina wasn't big, as cities went, but it was a site bigger than Marshdale. At least in Regina you could go out for a pizza late at night if you wanted to. Or get gas, or a tire fixed, or buy a birthday card after hours... These mundane activities weren't always an option in Marshdale. And there was certainly no way to see the dentist without making it a family outing. It meant a full day off from school and work, something the kids were

happy about. But him? Not so much.

"Okay, everybody out." Thomas turned around to smile at Whisper in the back seat. She was beginning to resemble her mother more and more as she grew. Of course, Whisper had the same dark hair and complexion as both he and his late wife, but there was gentleness around the eyes, Rhea's slim face, and her ready smile. Both his children resembled her, actually. Even five years later, he missed her terribly.

Whisper unbuckled her seatbelt. "I hate the dentist." It was more a statement than a complaint.

"How do you know that?" Ryder asked. "I bet you don't even remember the last time you saw a real dentist."

"I just know. My friend Bethany says they put needles in your mouth and it hurts."

"I'm sure there's nothing to worry about." Thomas undid his own belt. "You've been to the dental hygienist at school and she said your teeth were perfect."

"I hope so," Whisper said in a worried tone.

"Maybe you'll get a sucker or something," Thomas suggested.

Seventeen year old Ryder rolled his eyes. "At the dentist? That seems like a contradiction, don't you think?"

"Okay, a sticker then," Thomas conceded with a laugh.

They all bailed out of the SUV. Thomas locked the doors with a click of his key toggle and they headed around the side of the building to the front entrance. A spacious foyer with tiled floors led to a bank of elevators on one wall and a wide set of stairs on the other. There was a large black billboard behind glass near the front entrance that listed all the offices in the building. Thomas headed straight for it.

"Hm... let's see. Dr. Ducharme." He scanned the names.

"Here it is." Ryder reached over his father's shoulder and pointed. "Second floor."

"I knew that," Thomas said with a grin. When had his son become so tall? They

could see eye to eye.

"Race you up the stairs," Ryder dared. He was off without giving his father a chance to respond, taking the stairs two at a time. Thomas smiled. Despite his height, Ryder was still a kid. It wouldn't be long now, though, and he would be a man.

Thomas took Whisper's hand and they ascended the steps at a more reasonable pace. Ryder was already down the hall and standing in front of the dentist's office, grinning widely, when Thomas and Whisper joined him.

The second floor was not as bright as the main level. The hallway seemed narrow and the woodwork around each door frame was stained in a dark, turn of the century, hue. Corrugated glass panels in each door proclaimed the name of the occupants.

Thomas opened the door and held it while Ryder and Whisper entered. "You kids have a seat. I'll tell the receptionist we're here." They shuffled to a bank of chairs while he stepped up to a blue Formica counter. A young woman with a slicked back ponytail and wearing nurse's scrubs sat on the other side. "Hi. I'm Thomas Lone Wolf. I'm here with my children, Ryder and Whisper, to see Dr. Ducharme."

The woman scanned her appointment book and nodded. "Yes. Just a routine check up for all three of you?" She looked up and smiled pleasantly.

"That's right." Thomas hesitated. "For the kids at least. I... I've been having a bit of a toothache. If it needs a filling I'd like to get it done today, if possible."

"We'll see what we can do. When was your last visit?"

Thomas cleared his throat. "This is our first visit here. The kids have had check ups at school, but they haven't been to a dentist in... oh, three years."

"And you?" She looked up again, her eyebrows raised in question.

Thomas let out a puff of air and looked at the ceiling. "Let's see. It's been awhile. Eight, ten years?"

"Alright." Her face remained poker straight, but he had a hunch she was silently chastising him as she checked off a few boxes on a clipboard. "Do you have insurance?"

Thomas shook his head. "Not at the moment. Probably why I haven't been to the dentist in a while." He smiled, trying to appear at ease. If the truth be told, he was slightly phobic about dentists. It was more of an unreasonable fear than any costs that had kept him away. But the pain in his tooth could no longer be denied.

She checked a few more boxes and then set the clipboard up on the counter. "I just need you to finish filling in this form. Standard stuff about your general medical condition as well as that of the children."

Thomas took the clipboard and headed to the chairs across from the reception desk. Ryder had his ear buds in place and was listening to his music with his eyes shut. Whisper was just sitting there, swinging her legs back and forth. There were two other people waiting; an older gentleman and a woman of about thirty. They were both reading magazines.

Thomas sat down in the chair beside Whisper. "Hey, my girl. Why don't you go play with those toys over there while I fill this out?"

"Is it gonna hurt?" She turned soulful eyes to her father.

He patted her knee. "I doubt it." He leaned a little closer and whispered into her ear. "Would it help if you knew I was scared, too?"

Her eyes got round. "Really? But you're not scared of anything."

Thomas laughed. "Oh, yes I am. But I just choose not to show it, that's all. Now go play. It'll take your mind off things."

Whisper slid off the chair and scampered to the small play area. There was a low table with lots of interlocking bricks and she immediately began constructing something.

Thomas watched for a moment with a smile and then turned his attention back to the clipboard. A few minutes later he had filled out the forms and handed them to the receptionist. He went back to his chair and picked up a magazine. It didn't take long after that for another woman in uniform to enter the reception area. She glanced at the

file folder in her hands. "Ryder Lone Wolf?"

"You're up." Thomas gave Ryder's knee a little shake and he opened his eyes, looking around in bewilderment. "Your turn," Thomas repeated, gesturing to the waiting nurse with his head. Ryder unfolded his lanky frame and followed the dental assistant past the reception desk into a back room.

Thomas went back to reading the magazine - an interesting article about the rise in cancer rates among a small First Nation's band in the northern part of the province. According to the article, cancer rates had doubled among the population in the past fifteen years after an oil processing facility had been opened upstream.

"Whisper Lone Wolf?"

Thomas jerked his head up at the mention of his daughter's name. He looked over to see her frozen in place at the play table. He folded the magazine so as to keep his place and set it on the side table. "Come on, my girl." He stood up and held out his hand until she came slithering to his side, grabbing hold of his hand. Thomas looked up at the nurse with a lopsided grin. "She's decided she's afraid of the dentist..."

"Really?" The dental assistant came further out into the waiting area and bent over in front of Whisper. "The last patient said it tickled."

Whisper looked down at her toes.

"What's your favorite flavor? Bubble gum, mint, or cherry?"

Whisper let her gaze swing up to the nurse again. "Um... cherry."

"Great! Cause we have cherry flavored stuff that helps us see all the bugs on your teeth."

"I have bugs on my teeth?" Whisper's eyes were wide.

"Well, not bugs exactly. It's called plaque. You get to swish the cherry juice all over your teeth and then we can see how good you've been brushing. Wanna see?"

Whisper nodded. She let go of her father's hand and took the nurse's outstretched one.

Thomas nodded his thanks before turning back to find his magazine. A frown crossed his features. The woman in the chair one over had picked it up and was now reading it. She looked up. "Oh, sorry. Were you still reading this?"

He shook his head. "It's okay. You go ahead." He sat down and rested one booted foot on the opposite knee. He picked up the next magazine in the stack and began flipping. Same old political rambling. His began to bounce his foot. Flipping, bouncing. Flipping, bouncing. A whizzing sound from back in the depths of the office made him flinch. He flipped faster, bounced harder.

Ryder sauntered back to the waiting area and took a seat beside his father.

"So?" Thomas asked, glad for a change of pace. He tossed the magazine on the pile with its fellows.

"Perfect." Ryder gave an exaggerated smile, showing his teeth which stood out whitely against his dark complexion.

"Thomas Lone Wolf?"

Thomas started. Butterflies started in his stomach as he unfolded himself from his sitting position. He couldn't believe how nervous he felt now that it was his turn. So much for being brave for the kids.

A different woman waited for him just inside the line of the reception desk. She had dark hair smoothed into a neat bun at the nape of her neck and large brown eyes which followed his progress from the chair to the counter. If he wasn't mistaken, she was First Nation's, like him. He smiled, feeling suddenly more at ease, which was a silly reaction, but what he felt none the less. "This way." She directed him to follow her with a sweep of her hand. No problem. The view was amazing from back here, despite her nondescript lab coat.

They walked down a small hallway and she stopped in front of an open door.

"Just climb into the chair. Lana will be with you shortly to prep you and then I'll be back. She's with your daughter right now, but they were almost finished."

Thomas just nodded, inexplicably tongue tied. He watched the beautiful new woman retreat and then sank into the firm cushioning of the dental chair. He heard Whisper's giggle and the friendly dental assistant directing her to go sit with her brother. Then he heard the whizzing sound of a drill in the next room and he clamped his jaw and closed his eyes.

"Hello."

Thomas's eyes popped open. It was the dental assistant who had helped Whisper.

"You've got a great little girl there," her sing song voice continued as she busied herself at a nearby counter.

"Um... yes." He closed his eyes again.

The sound of a stool rolling toward him told him she had moved closer. "I take it Dad isn't as brave as the kids." There was a smile in her voice.

"How can you tell?" He opened one eye just a crack.

She shrugged. "Oh, I've been at this awhile. The signs are usually pretty easy to spot. Now, if you can just relax and open your mouth really wide, I'll do a preliminary cleaning before the doctor gets here."

Thomas did as he was told, willing himself to relax. The procedure wasn't as bad as he remembered, except for his sensitive tooth. He jumped when she touched it.

"Sorry. We're almost done and then the doctor will be right in to address that."

Thomas made a gurgling noise in the back of his throat since he couldn't acknowledge her any other way. Some rinsing and spitting later and he was finally alone again. Maybe he should just get up from the chair and leave. The toothache wasn't really that bad. Some sensitivity toothpaste would probably do the trick.

"Mr. Lone Wolf?"

He started again and opened his eyes. It was the pretty native woman. "Hi."

"So, you have a toothache. Let's take a look." She donned a fresh pair of gloves

and a face mask.

"The other girl said the dentist would be right in."

She nodded. "And she was right. I'm Dr. Ducharme."

Thomas's eyebrows shot up. He was about to apologize or at least make some kind of comment that didn't make him look like an utter idiot, but she was already gesturing for him to open his mouth and he complied.

"It's okay. Most people are a bit surprised when they find out I'm the doctor, not the nurse."

Thomas grunted his agreement.

"Not just because I'm a woman, although that's part of it. But people aren't expecting an Indian dentist."

Thomas raised his brows in surprise but couldn't respond.

She winked directly at him and then carried on with her scraping and prodding. "I'm allowed to say that to you, from one 'Indian' to another. With anyone else I'd use the politically correct terminology."

"Oh," was all he could manage.

She continued to carry on her one-sided conversation. "I like your name, by the way. Lone Wolf. You born with it or did you pick it?"

He managed to make a sound that came off like the first part of the word 'orange'.

She nodded. "Born. I often wished I had a name like that. One that sounded authentic. Not that Ducharme is bad. Probably goes back to some French voyageur. But Lone Wolf? That is classic."

His thanks was a guttural sound that didn't resemble the word at all.

"Hm. Looks like a cavity alright. You're willing to get it done today?" she asked. Thomas nodded. "Good. Best to get it looked after right away. Other than that, you have really good teeth for a guy your age." Thomas's eyebrows rose and she laughed. "Don't

look so surprised. I'm not checking you out, if that's what's worrying you. I look at all patients' information before I see them."

"Oh."

She sat back and removed the face mask. "Well, that about does it. I'll just prep the freezing and then we'll get this over with."

"Thanks." Thomas was finally able to speak.

She flashed him a brilliant smile. "Be right back."

Thomas couldn't help the smile that crept across his own features. He suddenly had a brand new appreciation for going to the dentist.