

Prologue

Tom McKay stared at the acceptance letter in his hand. The exact words were hard to read as his hand was shaking, but a quick scan gave him the confirmation he had waited nearly six months to hear. It came through! Finally. It had only taken him three years of grant writing, tweaking, rewriting, developing, planning - and praying - and then starting all over again at the beginning to get to this point, and it was critical that he get started as soon as possible. The information gathered from this summer intern project would later be presented in his doctoral dissertation, marking the end of a very long journey. By this time next year, he would be Dr. Tom McKay, Ph. D.

Public history was a fairly recent program. Not many schools offered a degree program for it, although the demand for public historians was clearly growing. Still, anytime someone asked him what he was studying, he had to explain it. He'd gotten pretty good at it, too, since most people wouldn't listen to more than a few sentences before their eyes glazed over and they got that "I'm sorry I asked" look. The simplest explanation that he gave most people was that Public History referred to jobs for historians besides teaching.

It used to be that history majors could only become history teachers. That presented a very narrow view of history, one that was mostly focused on memorizing facts and regurgitating them back to a new group of students year after year after year. No wonder why average citizens knew almost nothing about the rich history that was theirs!

Now a lot of places were looking for historians. Businesses hired historians to work with their senior staff to produce the history of their product, to be presented in brochures, books, or film. Government offices hired historians to conduct educational tours. Historians worked at museums, historic sites or societies, archives, libraries, consulting firms... the list was growing all the time.

His dream job didn't even exist yet, but he hoped that after he published his dissertation, the job would open up for him. He wanted to build living history programs throughout the national park system. This summer, he would focus on just one. He was going to develop a living history program for Fort Laramie and hire twelve undergraduate students from a variety of departments

to fill various roles. History majors, of course, to man the posts, but he already had a student in mind for the blacksmith's position. A friend of his, an art major, had done some impressive three-dimensional sculptures with wrought iron. He might consider a few education majors to help with creating programs for younger children, who would benefit from an entire program all their own, instead of just a simplified version of the adult program. It wasn't so much a matter of "dumbing it down" to their level. He hated that expression and all it implied! Children were not dumb, but easily bored. A two-hour demonstration on how to bake bread from scratch over an open campfire was not going to cut it. But a ten-minute hands-on activity, where they could make their own fry bread over a hot rock was perfect.

He was so excited; he couldn't contain it! He tossed the letter in the air and gave a loud whoop, although no one was around to hear it. He had a key to the building and preferred to work late into the night when the halls were empty and silent. Only now, whom could he call to share his good news?

Adrian, the art major, might still be awake. He kept weird hours, only instead of just preferring to work nights, like Tom, he would work "when genius burned." Tom wasn't exactly sure what he meant by that, but guessed it had something to do with whether or not his muse was inspired. When it was, he might work for forty-eight hours non-stop! Then he would crash and sleep for several days. Tom didn't know how he could maintain his health on such a bizarre schedule, but it seemed to work for him.

Taking a chance, Tom pulled his cellphone from his pocket and punched in Number 4. Number 2 was his academic advisor, and Mom was Number 3. He didn't currently have a girlfriend, but Number 5 was reserved for her, when he finally got her to say "yes" to going out with him. The rest of the numbers remained blissfully blank. He hated phones. They were nothing but a major interruption.

The phone rang four, five, six times. Once more and the answering machine would pick up. Tom almost disconnected when he heard a familiar, although sleepy, voice.

"Hey," Adrian said. "This better be important."

"Hi," Tom said. "I think it is. Sorry, buddy. I didn't mean to wake you, but I never know when's a good time to call."

Adrian perked up at hearing his voice. "Tom! What's up? Did you get it?"

A little of the excitement wilted away. He couldn't even tell his friend about it, as he'd already guessed. "Yeah. Just came today. And I just got around to opening today's mail." He glanced at the wall clock, something he should have done before he called. It was three o'clock in the morning.

"Fan-freakin'-tastic! I'm so happy for you! And for me, since that means I now have a summer job. Hey, thanks, by the way."

"You'll be great. And can you put together a short list of art students that you think might be good at weaving, knitting, spinning, those types of girly things?"

"What are you, prehistoric?" Adrian chuckled at his own joke. "Don't be so sexist. Guys knit, too."

"Yes, of course, but this is a living history, and guys didn't knit back then. I have to hire a girl for that."

"Good luck with that. I'll ask around, but girls today aren't very "girly." They don't know anything - most of them don't even cook."

It was an old horse they often debated. Adrian was more casual. He didn't care if the girl he dated could cook, or sew, or do anything domestic, as long as she could appreciate his art and his work schedule. Tom wanted someone a lot more old-fashioned, which was why he was currently not in a relationship.

"I know," Adrian exploded, in his typical fashion that was either super-enthused or unconscious. "You should check the theater department! They have to sew their own costumes, and they might be able to pull off pretending to be old-fashioned."

Tom had considered and rejected that idea months ago. He wanted historians, not actors. He wanted people who were passionate about their topic, and not someone just spewing a bunch of memorized lines. But if he had to, he could hire one female theater major - if she could do all the domestic arts involved. Knit, weave, spin, sew, and teach it to children.

"We should go out and celebrate," Adrian continued.

Yeah, but what was open at this hour? The student union was available twenty-four hours, but he didn't care if he never set foot in there again. The kids kept getting younger and younger, more and more immature, making him feel positively ancient at twenty-eight.

"I'll pick you up," Adrian said, still on his enthusiastic high. "I found a great little all-night truck stop out past the belt line. And since it's so far off campus, there shouldn't be any students. It'll be great. You'll love it."

"Okay," Tom grunted, unsure now why he'd called Adrian at all.

He made a copy of his acceptance letter, then tucked the original into the thick folder where he stored all the paperwork for his dissertation. The copy he placed in an equally thick binder with "Fort Laramie" stamped on the front and spine. Inside was the bones of this project. A list of the positions he hoped to fill, the material they would be presenting to the various age groups, a map of the fort, a list of the buildings they would need to add to the fort to house some of the educational programs they would be offering, a camping guide, a blank review form for customers to fill out, and more. He'd tried to show it to Adrian before, but he hadn't seemed interested. Maybe tonight would be different.

Sometimes he wasn't sure why he and Adrian were such good friends at all. He didn't understand a thing about art. He could see the welds that Adrian had made in his sculpture, and could tell that he knew how to work with metal, but as for interpreting what the god-awful monstrosity of metal was supposed to represent, he was lost. He just nodded and smiled and told Adrian that his sculpture was "cool."

Tom locked up his office and sprinted down four flights of stairs to wait in the lobby. Before long, he saw headlights pull into the parking lot. Assuming that no one else would be arriving at that hour, he jogged outside, the door locking securely behind him. Once the headlights turned so they weren't shining right in his eyes, he recognized Adrian's banana-yellow conversion van, with garish swirls of color screaming off the paint. He tugged open the passenger side door and climbed in.

Adrian waited until he fastened his seatbelt - one of the few rules that Adrian actually followed - before he pulled back onto the street. During the day, it could have taken almost an hour to get to the truck stop, because of the high volume of traffic that often traveled the belt line, but it only took them eighteen minutes, and two minutes after that they each had steaming cups of fresh-brewed coffee in front of them.

Adrian added flavored cream and two packets of sugar to his. Tom drank it only black, the stronger the better. They scanned the menus - both breakfast and dinner menus were available. Adrian wanted pancakes and eggs. Tom was a meat-and-potatoes man. Adrian was tall and lanky,

a strawberry blond with a light complexion and still a bit of lingering acne. His eyes were clear blue. Everything he felt was clearly displayed in his expression one-hundred percent of the time. No one had to wonder what he felt - because he'd never learned the art of tact.

Tom was his polar opposite. He was tall enough, but about four inches shorter than his friend, who could have played basketball if he'd been at all athletic. Tom was a little stockier. Not heavy - he kept in shape by not even owning a car. He rode his bicycle everywhere. But his shoulders were so broad that he had to buy his dress shirts in the big-and-tall department, and then the extra fabric billowed around his trim waist. He preferred wearing tee shirts, which were soft and comfortable, and would stretch to fit any body type. Tom's hair was dark and unruly, not exactly brown, but not quite black either. His mom loved his blue-green eyes, although he could have wished for 20-20 vision. Instead, because his near-sightedness was complicated by a prism imbalance, he couldn't even wear contacts. His plastic frames were thick and heavy, and prone to break, which was why this pair had a strip of adhesive tape over the bridge.

They had met in cub scouts, and had been friends ever since.

"So, tell me about this project," Adrian began as he swooped a forkful of pancakes into his mouth, dripping syrup on the edge of the table. Tom glared at it, wondering if Adrian saw it, or if he'd be wearing a matching sticky spot on his shirt the rest of the night. "What will I be doing?"

Tom launched into the short version. "We're going to create a living history at the Fort Laramie Historic Site. There are a few antique cabins we can use, but we will have to build a few facilities as well. You'll be all set. There already is a blacksmith's shop, complete with antique tools for you to use. Your character, Henry McBride, is an Irish immigrant, who settled near the fort around 1852. You'll have a wife."

"Thanks, Buddy, but I'd rather find one on my own," Adrian interrupted.

Tom shook his head. "Just for the summer. An actor, or historian, playing a role as your wife. Mrs. McBride will give a guided tour of Old Bedlam, and maybe give bread-making demonstrations. Although she's your wife, you shouldn't really have any interactions with her."

Adrian shrugged his shoulders. A wife without benefits wasn't interesting.

"I'll have a rough script for you, and together we can work on it, practice it, until you find what feels comfortable. Then you'll memorize it. You'll have two different presentations - one for upper elementary students, and one for teens and adults. The younger kids aren't going anywhere near the forge."

"Who are you going to be?" Adrian asked.

Tom cleared his throat, squaring his shoulders for effect. He offered a passable salute. "I'm Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Sheridan Burt, post commander from 1887-1888."

"Wow, top dog. It figures. Did you pick out the prettiest applicant for your wife?"

Tom grinned. "You know I haven't posted the applications yet."

"I know. But you had already chosen me for the blacksmith, I figured for sure you'd have picked your wife already."

Tom tried to keep a straight face, but failed. Adrian snorted, reached across the table and punched his shoulder playfully. "It's her again, isn't it? The girl you keep asking out, but she keeps turning you down. Why do you bother?"

"I don't know. I guess it's an old adage my mom used to say. 'Good things come to those who wait.'"

"And she's a good thing? I don't know, man. Any girl who is too blind to see what a great guy you are can't be that smart."

"Well, I've got the entire summer to change her mind."

"If she even applies, once she realizes the job you have in mind for her."

"Oh, she'll do it. I know she wants this more than anything. You forget I had her in my class last year."

"Did she pass?"

Tom smiled. "She's smart enough, Adrian. A little flighty, like a lot of undergrads. They seem to feel that they have all the time in the world, and don't take these years of learning seriously."

"Well, if you ask me, all she needs is a good spanking. That will bring her around. The kind like my mom and dad used to give. You know, you step one foot out of line, and they were right there to put you right back in your place."

"I have thought of it," Tom admitted. "Of course, we can't really do that these days. Women are too quick to cry abuse."

"You could make it part of the internship. I'm sure husbands kept their wives in control back then, didn't they?"

Tom just smiled... but later that night it did give him something to think about. Something that made it extremely difficult to get to sleep. He kept imagining her plump, shapely bottom over his lap, as he delivered stinging swats to her pale flesh, listening to her heartfelt pleas for mercy.