

Looking for Redfeather

by Linda Collison

Chapter 1

Ramie left Cheyenne in a hailstorm, tramping up the on-ramp to Interstate 25, right past the *No Hitchhiking* sign, his thumb in the air. A raging, purple sky hurled hailstones and forks of lightening at him but the boy pulled his hat down and kept on walking.

A driving guitar rhythm from the off brand MP3 player in his pocket filled his head. The thunder of *Audioslave* matched the wrathful weather and infused him with energy and purpose, propelling his feet forward, lifting his thumb even as it lifted his heart. Hitchhiking was like knocking at a door; it felt hopeful, it was a question (going my way?) somehow more potent than lifting the middle finger, a digit he was more familiar with using. *Fuck you* had become a feeble cliché, a cheap shot in the dark.

Just as suddenly as it had come on, the storm was over, leaving the air scrubbed clean, smelling of wet dirt and sage. The sun reappeared like nothing had happened and a southbound semi roared by, throwing a rainbow of slush from its wheels. Ramie shivered, his wet shirt clinging to his back. Tumbleweeds skipped across the highway, piling up against a barbed wire fence. A shredded Walmart bag caught on a roadside thistle, *how I feel*. Hail stones, melting, crunching underfoot. His new shoes burned blisters with every step.

Blue skies now, and fresh-washed chicory. To the west, the Medicine Bow Mountains were stark cut-outs on the horizon. But Ramie was headed south. Redfeather, had he been in Denver all along? Then again, the name could be a coincidence. Didn't matter. School was out and Cheyenne had become too small to contain him.

Though he had often imagined his exodus when it came right down to it, Ramie had left on a whim. So many times he had searched for Redfeather on the library's computer. Redfeather -- Raymond Redfeather -- his own name, but it wasn't himself he was looking for. This time he had come up with a lead, just a hundred miles south in Denver, Colorado, a place he had never been. That had been the clincher. Ramie had stuffed a change of clothes in his pack, scribbled a few words to his mother on the back of a past due notice, grabbed a fistful of bills from her tip jar and lit out for the highway.

His recklessness warmed and expanded him. Cornell's voice and Morello's guitar riffs drove him, encouraged him, comforted him, gave rhythm to his step and filled his skull with SOUND. Inside his head, still largely unexplored, he spun through the universe like some unnamed comet, a meteorite, or an asteroid yet to be discovered.

A car passed him. The brake lights flashed red, a squeal of tires and a spray of gravel as it veered to a stop on the shoulder of the highway, fifty yards ahead. It was a big land yacht, an old Eldorado Cadillac, the rear chrome bumper and the Maryland antique license plate splattered with mud. Whoever sees Maryland license plates out here? Even though there was an Air Force Base in Cheyenne, airmen and officers from all over the country, Ramie couldn't recall ever seeing Maryland tags on a vehicle. And where is Maryland anyhow? Somewhere between Rhode Island and Virginia, or maybe next to Ohio? He remembered the puzzle his mother had

gotten him from the thrift store years ago; it had been missing a state. He was pretty sure it was Maryland that had been lost.

How weird that he should catch a ride in this collector's car, a rich old man's car, a ride from the past, a white Cadillac covered with mud and road tar. His breath came in gulps, he tried to gain control of it as he slouched his way toward the vehicle. Like he was in no particular rush. He almost changed his mind but something drove him on. Approaching the car he reached into his pocket and silenced the music.

The driver lowered the passenger window and grinned across the expansive seat. It was a young face, a face that hadn't seen much sun. Wrap-around shades obscured his eyes. He was wearing a black felt cowboy hat that screamed *poseur*.

"Hey bro, where you headed?" the driver said.

Ramie sized him up. He wasn't very big. Unless he had a gun Ramie felt sure he could handle him. If it came to that.

"Denver." Ramie said with a slight shrug. Like, whatever. He wasn't begging, he wasn't desperate. Give me a ride or not, I don't really care. He maintained his punk face, as his mother called it, lowering his eyelids lazily and pulling the corner of his shapely bottom lip into a give-a-shit sneer that said, *Go on, fuck with me. I dare you.* But his fingertips tingled and his heart made itself known to him, shaking the bars of its cage.

"Ha! Denver! What serendipity! That's just where I was going! Hop in!" The driver, no more than a teenager himself, swept a mound of ketchup-stained fast food wrappers and empty Red Bull cans from the passenger's side of the front seat onto the floor.

"Don't mind the mess, I've been on the road for like, twenty hours straight. Glad you came along, I was getting bored. Hey, you got caught in that hailstorm, didn't you? That was

freaking awesome! Like being shot at, like being strafed. Insanely loud on the roof of the car, I'm talking incredible." The driver showered him with a flood of words and a wave of exuberance nearly as torrential as the cloudburst had been.

"Yeah. Uh, sorry. I'm a little wet," Ramie said. Water dripped from the bill of his backwards cap, trickling down his neck.

The young driver grinned. "No problem-o. Won't hurt those leather seats, they're bullet-proof. Throw your shit in the back and hop in!"

Ramie had never ridden in a Cadillac. He felt like he was in a movie, like he was getting into a limousine, or maybe a time machine. He put his guitar in the back as instructed then slid onto the big, wide seat, like a leather couch. The smells of cigarette smoke and cold French fries were thick in the air. He took off his cap and ran his hand through his wild shock of hair.

Glanced in the rear view mirror at his reflection, which always startled him. *Can that be me?*

Who would have thought it would be so damn easy? The highway had been there his whole life just waiting for him to pack his shit and go stand on the ramp, stick his thumb in the breeze and catch the first carpet ride out of town.