



# STANDING STRONG

**PathFinders**

**Gary Robinson**

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# CONTENTS

- CHAPTER 1 **Where Did the Happiness Go?**
- CHAPTER 2 **Saying Goodbye**
- CHAPTER 3 **A Flock of Crows**
- CHAPTER 4 **A New Plan Is Hatched**
- CHAPTER 5 **Unspoken Words**
- CHAPTER 6 **The Elder Speaks**
- CHAPTER 7 **Shedding the Old Skin**
- CHAPTER 8 **Dawn of a New Day**
- CHAPTER 9 **A Victory and a Warning**
- CHAPTER 10 **Breaking News**
- CHAPTER 11 **Tasers, Batons, and Rubber Bullets**
- CHAPTER 12 **What Do We Do Now?**
- CHAPTER 13 **The Final Blow**
- CHAPTER 14 **Water Protector Forever**

*Resources*

*About the Author*

## Where Did the Happiness Go?

The sun was setting beyond the Backbone of the World, the Rocky Mountain Range that ran along the western edge of the Blackfeet Reservation. Rhonda Runningcrane, a red bandana keeping her long brown hair tied back, was finishing up a carburetor she was adjusting in her uncle Floyd's repair shop in downtown Browning, Montana.

"Got any plans for the summer?" Floyd, a fairly fit Native man in his mid-forties, asked as he rolled out from under the 1985 Chevy pickup he'd just finished working on. "A tour of Europe? A cruise of the Pacific?"

"Ha-ha. Very funny," Rhonda replied. "More like working the graveyard shift at the Towne Pump convenience store to earn some money."

"You know you could earn some cash helping me a few hours a week," her uncle said. "Fixing cars, repairing houses, chopping wood for elders—the kind of stuff you and I have been doing ever since you were little."

"How could you afford to pay me anything?" she asked. "You don't even charge for half the work you do for people on this rez."

"My veterans disability checks keep me in fry bread and beans," he replied. "My mobile home is paid for, so I don't need much else."

He wiped his hands on a shop rag and opened the driver's side door of the truck.

"Let's take her for a test drive. I need to run out to the house and check on that sick mare."

He gestured for her to slide into the driver's seat, and the seventeen-year-old climbed in behind the wheel. Rhonda knew the way to her uncle's place like she knew the back of her hand. His little mini-ranch sitting next to Cut Bank Creek

had been a place of refuge since she was a kid.

Rhonda's uncle Floyd, her mother's brother, had often taken up the slack when the girl's own mother and father had failed her as parents. Rhonda knew what he was up to now, trying to keep her busy so she wouldn't have time for suicidal thoughts or bouts of depression.

Back in March, Rhonda had attempted suicide. There's no way to sugarcoat it or pretend it didn't happen. Truth is, she and her best friend, Claudia, had made a pact, an agreement, to kill themselves. Actually, they weren't the only ones in on the pact. A few other Native teens at their high school had also made a vow to end their own lives.

Understanding how or why they all came to such a desperate decision is nearly impossible unless you've been there, done that, so to speak. Their main goal was to escape. Escape the deadend feelings they all shared. Escape what they considered to be a hopeless situation. Escape any way you could. They dared one another to do it.

The thing is, Claudia succeeded in her suicide attempt, whereas Rhonda had failed. In her own mind, Rhonda added this failure to the long list of failures in her life. Claudia's life ended just three days ago, so Rhonda's own feelings were rather raw.

Rhonda now drove the stick-shift Chevy pickup north on Boundary Road about three miles, then turned northeast onto the asphalt-topped Boarding School Road. The darkening, late-May sky hovered overhead like a smothering mother bear clinging too tightly to her cubs. At least that's how it felt to Rhonda.

"How are you and your grandmother getting along?" Floyd asked from the passenger seat. "Any improvement on the home front?"

Last year, the Blackfeet Tribal Court awarded custody of Rhonda to her father's mother, Geraldine Runningcrane, in spite of the objections of Rhonda's legal representative. Rhonda's lawyer argued that Geraldine was verbally and physically abusive, and the elderly woman's aging frame house was an unsafe residence. Rhonda lost that court battle.

"The old woman is meaner than ever," Rhonda said. "Why the court awarded custody to her instead of you, I still don't understand."

"Like the judge said, it wouldn't look right for a teen girl to be staying with an unmarried older uncle," Floyd answered in a quiet, firm voice. "Especially after Claudia's uncle molested her right before she killed herself."

"But you are nothing like Claudia's uncle," Rhonda protested. "Everybody knows that."

“But, later on, if something like that happened to you, the judge could be held responsible for not properly protecting teen girls here on the rez,” Floyd explained. “The court thinks of a grandmother as a closer relative than an uncle.”

Seeing that the topic brought back anger and frustration to his niece, Floyd shrugged and just said, “It is what it is.”

They rode in silence for a moment.

“I added a little solar-powered light to the top of the fence post to make the gate easier to see at night,” he said as they approached the turnoff to his property in the growing darkness. “It stores up power during the day. There it is up ahead.”

Rhonda slowed the truck and made the left turn onto the gravel road leading to Floyd’s place. When she pulled up to the gate, Floyd jumped down and opened it. After the truck passed through, he closed the gate and climbed back into the truck’s cab.

Just then, Rhonda’s cell phone rang. Looking at the phone’s screen, she saw the caller was her grandmother. She swiped downward on the screen to let the call go to voicemail. A few moments later, Floyd’s phone rang. This call was also from Rhonda’s grandmother. He took the call, much to his niece’s disappointment, and turned on the speaker.

“Hello, Geraldine,” he said politely. “How are you this fine Blackfeet evening?”

“Cut the crap, Floyd,” Rhonda’s grandmother said angrily. Her speech was slightly slurred from the effects of alcohol. “You and Rhonda both know she’s supposed to be home by dark! Court orders. Send her home right now!”

“She’s probably hanging out with her friends, but if I see her, I’ll tell her to get on home,” he assured her, giving Rhonda a sly little smile. “You better believe it.”

“I don’t believe anything you say, mister,” Geraldine barked. “She’s probably right there listening to me! Rhonda, you’d better get your butt home quick. I swear I’ll call the tribal cops on your uncle. I’ll tell ’em he’s a pedophile.”

“All right then, Geraldine,” Floyd replied as he tried to maintain a polite tone of voice. “You have yourself a good evening.”

He ended the call and looked at his niece.

“She sounds pissed,” Rhonda said. “As usual.”

“I’m sorry, Rhonda, but I’d better get you home,” Floyd said. “Knowing her, she *will* call the cops on me and make up some kind of false accusation.”

“Okay. If you say so,” she said, accepting her fate. “You drive.”

They switched seats, and Floyd steered the truck southward toward the Blackfeet housing development where Rhonda's grandmother lived. Meanwhile, Rhonda escaped into the social media world provided by her cell phone as they passed through the pitted streets of the capital of the Blackfeet Nation.

In a few minutes, the truck came to a stop in front of a gray, wood-frame house that looked like every other wood-frame house in the tribal neighborhood. A dying tree and a yard full of unmowed grass greeted them at the curb.

Knowing what waited for her inside that house, Rhonda wordlessly exited the truck and briskly walked away. Floyd watched her open the door and go inside.

"Dammit, girl, get in here and fix my dinner!" were the words Rhonda's grandmother hurled at her before the door had even closed behind the teen.

The thin, elderly Native woman held a glass of iced whiskey in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

"You know this diabetes could kill me if I go too long without food!" she added.

Rhonda rushed past her and headed straight for the kitchen. Geraldine followed her granddaughter into the room as the girl opened the freezer and withdrew two frozen dinners.

"You need to spend more time here with me instead of doing God-knows-what with your worthless friends or that loser uncle of yours," the woman advised. "It'll be my rear end they come after if you get in trouble or try to off yourself again."

"You're so kind and understanding," Rhonda said sarcastically. "No wonder my father drank and took drugs!"

"Your father took drugs because that worthless woman he married, your mother, got him hooked on the stuff," Geraldine said angrily. "My son is dead because of her!"

It was true that Rhonda's mother had killed her father just over a year ago. But it wasn't true that Rhonda's mother got her father hooked on drugs. Rhonda's father had become an abusive alcoholic, and he beat her mother on a regular basis. When the woman finally had enough, she fought back, killing the man in self-defense. The judge sent her to jail anyway.

Standing in the kitchen, Rhonda was about to sling insults back at her grandmother when she remembered what her therapist said about not escalating a pointless argument. She took a couple of deep breaths, calmed herself, and decided not to engage in the fight about her parents one more time.



“What you told Uncle Floyd on the phone isn’t true anymore,” she said calmly. “My court-ordered curfew ended two days ago when my high school classes finished, so I can stay out as late as I want to with whoever I want to.”

“The days of no curfew don’t start until you officially graduate,” the elderly woman snarled. “That’s not until Saturday, but you’ll do as I say as long as you live under my roof!”

“That’ll end, too, in a month and a half when I turn eighteen,” the girl replied as she placed the two frozen trays of food in the microwave. She turned to face her grandmother.

“You want to know the real reason I tried to kill myself?” Rhonda said sharply, not waiting for an answer. “Because death has to be better than this hell I’m living here with you!”

With that, she stormed out of the kitchen, ran down the hall, and locked herself in her room. Overcome with a deep sadness, she flung herself on her unmade bed. Tears flowed freely as she hugged her pillow tightly. In a few moments, her sobbing subsided, and she reached for a tattered photo on her nightstand.

Wiping the tears away, she gazed at the image of her ten-year-old self, standing between her mother and father. The three smiling faces were the only evidence that Rhonda had once known happiness. Where did that happiness go? What happened to that bright, promising world?

Her phone pinged, and she put the photo down. So what if her therapist had recommended not spending so much time on Instagram and Facebook. Sure, the electronic world is filled with allies and bullies, friends and foes, just like the real world. But at least there, no one could physically harm you.

Spending time online also kept Rhonda from spiraling downward within her own thoughts. To prevent this, her therapist wanted her to do something called journaling. Rhonda tried it a couple of times, but she couldn’t keep from just writing down her negative opinions and attitudes.

In her first journaling effort, she wrote, *“Where do I start? So much has happened in my seventeen, almost eighteen years living on this reservation, and yet it seems like absolutely nothing has happened. Nothing has changed. I’m standing still. The Indians on this rez are just a bunch of broken-down, dysfunctional people with nothing to look forward to, nothing to live for. We’ve been beat to the bone and left for dead.”*

It was then she remembered it was that kind of thinking that got her to where she was these days—the survivor of attempted suicide. What a cliché she was:

another Native teen making the attempt. Those thoughts reminded her about tomorrow. Claudia's funeral. Two days after that would come high school graduation.

Rhonda's therapist said it was important to set goals, work to achieve them, and celebrate when you accomplish them. "So," Rhonda thought, "I'm graduating from high school—big frickin' deal. It's not like that's going to get me anywhere. Oops. There are those negative thoughts again. I just can't seem to escape them."

Therapy sessions began while Rhonda was still in the hospital recovering from her "attempt," as they called it. For the first few days, the woman therapist would show up in the girl's room, and for those first few days, the teen refused to talk to the woman. But the therapist kept coming, bringing little "bribes" of food that tasted far better than anything the hospital kitchen made.

The therapist began reading a young-adult novel out loud about a girl in Seattle who'd attempted suicide and failed. The girl in the book had avoided confrontation all her life and had always found ways to escape from uncomfortable situations. She couldn't face her fears or deal with her troubles—just like Rhonda.

Without sounding judgmental or preachy, the therapist began to reach beyond Rhonda's tough exterior into her wounded inner self, the little girl who had been scared all her life. That's when Rhonda began to really listen and respond to her therapy sessions. She realized her challenge was to begin valuing herself and confronting obstacles.

The therapist said it would be a long road to reach that goal, but it would never happen without taking the first steps.

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