Chapter 4
Isabelle

ABSTRACT

Isabelle is the sister of Delbert and the daughter of Sharmaine. She is also the mother of 10 children of her own: six biological children fathered by four different men in addition to the four children of her deceased younger sister. Having survived a succession of abusive relationships with various men, this mother hen has been the sole provider for her large brood for most of the time that the author has known her. In many respects, Isabelle can be called the “white sheep” of the Benally family. While the rest of her siblings have battled alcoholism and chronic unemployment for most of their adult lives, she has never imbibed alcohol and has been gainfully employed for the past 40 years. She is not unlike a Native American version of Horatio Alger: a girl from the rez who, through diligence and determination, vowed to raise herself up from her bootstraps and overcome any obstacles placed in front of her. This chapter introduces Isabelle.

PROFILE

Isabelle put herself through college as a single mother on welfare. After graduating with an Associate’s degree in accounting, she found an entry-level job in the tribal government and steadily worked her way up the ladder to her present position as the supervisor of credit services for the Navajo Nation. Indeed, the reason she was granted custody of her slain sister’s children was because she was the only one in her family deemed financially and emotionally stable enough to undertake the task.

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In other respects, Isabelle is perceived as elitist and sanctimonious—or, as some of her relatives disparagingly refer to her, “Miss High and Mighty.” She has a tendency to look down on her brothers and sisters for their problems precisely because she has succeeded where they have failed. Isabelle has all but completely segregated herself from her siblings and mother, preferring instead an insular existence confined to her live-in boyfriend and children. In fact, she even chooses to celebrate the holidays separately.

Isabelle also has a well-deserved reputation for being selfish and materialistic. She makes no attempt to hide her longing for money and material possessions, and she takes great pride in flaunting her relative excess of both in the presence of others. Along the same lines, Isabelle steadfastly refuses to share any of her belongings with those outside her inner circle, whether it is the use of her telephone or the food on her dinner table.

**Nature of Relationship**

Isabelle refers to me as “son” and she has embraced me as an adopted member of her inner circle. Shortly after we first met, she invited me to live with her family. For intermittent periods since, I have taken her up on this uncharacteristically generous offer. Her benevolence towards me, however, is less the result of affection than appropriation. For instance, Isabelle takes great pride in parading me in front of her friends and acquaintances and introducing me as “[her] Chinese son.” During these uncomfortable moments, I feel like another one of her flaunted possessions.

While others frequently complain about Isabelle’s moodiness and stinginess, I have rarely been the recipient of such displays. I suspect that this is due to the fact that ours is not a reciprocal relationship in that I have given her much more than I have received. Although she claims to be my surrogate parent, we actually operate more as peers. She will consult my opinion on matters ranging from her relationship problems to her financial difficulties. In certain situations, she will even defer to my authority. When her sister’s murderer was about to be released from prison, Isabelle asked me for suggestions as to how the family should respond. I also detect a desire on her part to convince me that she is “not like everybody else around here.” As such, Isabelle will often exaggerate, withhold information, or blatantly lie in order to maintain her carefully crafted persona—all of which were evident throughout the interviews.
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