

THE QUARRY

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Chapter Eight, from *Desert Rose*

Desert Rose is a realistic fiction piece that is primarily set in the central national forests of Arizona, North America. Samara's father, Steven Banik, has been found dead inside his lapidary business in Gerringong after a suspicious fire. While Samara grieves and tries to make sense of her family's secrets, she begins to unravel the complex relationship she'd had with her father. In Steven's testament, he leaves behind a letter and a small desert rose (gypsum mineral). These items lead Samara to Arizona where Stevens' old friend, Honani, reappears. While the remaining Banik family members pursue the fleeing Samara across the Pacific Ocean, she discovers the real reason her father fell in love with Arizona.

Everyone fights their own skin in the beginning. Honani had the same argument himself a long time ago. But he wasn't about to tell Samara that just yet. Through the corner of his eye, Honani could see tears falling onto Sam's parching skin as thick coils of smoking sage spun into the air. Honani turned away and bent over the smouldering fire pit, chanting quietly to himself. The more he feigned disinterest, the louder Sam's frustrated curses became. And as Sam's tears and sweat smeared into white salty plane trails down her face, Honani grinned.

The fire sputtered as a gritty wind picked up. Samara tossed the sagging skin onto a rock as she left the circle. The man was infuriating! All he did was hum and chatter to the earth or himself — she never quite knew which. Her stupid deerskin was too dry, yet again, and becoming impossible to stretch over her lopsided frame. Damn man, she seethed as she sat on a nearby rock, closing her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, the sun had run half-way across the sky. A shadow loomed over her.

‘Back to work Sam. Unless you have magic mice in your satchel, that drum won’t make itself.’

She followed his gaze towards the blackening mountains. ‘There’s not bad weather coming is there?’ She looked back at her tortured skin dangling off the rock. Her heart sank at the thought of trying to finish her drum in a desert downpour.

‘If the weather turns,’ Honani smiled, ‘as it always seems to with you around, then you need to be finished. That’s the way it is.’ He returned to his side of the fire pit, busying himself with an embryonic rattle. His efficient fingers managed to stretch the reluctant skin while holding and smoothing it out all at once.

‘That’s ridiculous!’ Samara was seething as she prodded the fire savagely. ‘I have no control over the weather! Maybe I’m not cut out for this Honani. Maybe I can’t piece the bits back. Maybe —’

‘Maybe you should stop talking and start stretching.’ Honani studied the withering skin. ‘It needs soaking again.’ He nodded over her shoulder. ‘You’ll need some water from the river. The pot’s empty.’

Samara felt like screaming. After two days cleaning the dead smelling skin, a traumatic four-hour ordeal nailing ninety-three holes, cutting the tough hide, collecting water from the polar river and kneading it feather-soft until her hands were drooping like the print on her mum’s wall of Munch’s *The Scream*, she felt defeated. Almost. Sighing, she grabbed the water pot and headed down the gravelly slope to the snow-fed river. She felt Honani’s steady gaze following her as she suddenly lost balance, skidding down the slope on her backside.

‘Watch the loose gravel,’ Honani yelled.

‘Oh hah bloody hah. Aren’t you supposed to be my teacher and spirit guide or something? What happened to timing?’ She glared up at Honani. His gnarled fingers

wrapped around several strings as he pulled the skin tight, downwards over a balloon shaped bundle of dried weeds.

‘I’d say my timing was just about perfect, Sam,’ he laughed. ‘I give you the essentials, watch out for a scorpion or two and the stars give you everything else.’

‘Stars? Seriously? I don’t want stars up my bloody arse!’ she said, pulling bits of grit from her knee.

‘Just get some water on that skin before it turns into jerky.’ Honani heaved himself upright, disappearing behind a rocky outcrop.

Numb and knee-deep, Samara pushed the pot under the water. At least the iciness seemed to help with her graze. She had to admit that the nature-spirit aspect of life seemed to evade her. Honani’s faith in her and something greater was even more unnerving. She shook her head. As she headed back to the fire, she wondered what her dad would have said, watching her and Honani’s bonding of animal skins. Another soaking with the freshly boiled water made the skin workable again. Samara knew Honani was right. She waited in silence at the fire pit: threading, tugging, holding, hauling the skin closer, readjusting it along the frame and repeating.

Honani was silent as he returned. Samara’s thoughts rumbled through her ears. They seemed so irritatingly loud; she wished she could take the nail hammer to her own head just to create a new noise. A stick suddenly cracked off to her right as she spun around, searching for the offender. Something small bounced through the scrub.

‘Desert squirrel?’ Honani offered.

‘Squirrel? You sure? That just looked like furry dirt flying across more dirt.’

Honani smiled and pointed to the mess in her lap. ‘Skin. Today. Please.’

‘Right! But can we talk as I weave?’ Her fingers crunched together as she held the last few woven loops tight in her bottom three fingers while weaving the opposite side through with white string. Each of the ninety-three tiny holes around the edge of the circular skin had to be threaded from one side to the opposite side, drawing it in around the frame one painful centimetre at a time. The skin faced down with the frame on top so Samara could work from the bottom. It weaved like a flattened figure eight. Glancing across at Honani, Samara saw his brow crease. She knew he was watching her fingers twist clumsily over each other. The bottom three kept a good tension. She thought so anyway, even if the skin was a little saggy on this side.

‘This is land time,’ he finally said. ‘I understand that you want to chat, but this—’ he waved his hands at the exposed valley, ‘this should be done in silence.’

‘Right. Well, I’m not so good with up here at the moment.’ She tapped her head. ‘I don’t know how Dad survived all those years out here. Silent.’ Two days of very little talking was enough for Samara. Her vocal chords were getting rusty and her brain was threatening to disembark completely.

‘Steven was a unique man,’ said Honani. ‘He wasn’t silent the whole time though.’ He looked across the flames at her, his eyes glistening. ‘But this isn’t his journey now. Even though we follow the trail of others, we walk with fresh feet on entirely new ground. You are not your father but you are definitely his resilient kind-hearted daughter. We all lose our way sometimes, Sam. We wouldn’t be alive if we didn’t.’

Samara nodded tearfully, thankful for Honani’s presence over the past months. Words were lost as her throat clamped shut yet again; she felt her ears roaring with unshed tears and her jaw clenching. Her chest thumped painfully as she focused on an eagle soaring overhead, calling to her mate across the sandy ridge. The descending sun shot bright pinks like a laser into her stinging eyes. It hurt; it all hurt.

‘Let it out Sam.’ Honani was smiling at her with those clear blue eyes. ‘A skin will crack and sag if holding too much heat or moisture. We aren’t designed to withhold.’ His eyes left her face and resumed the intricate weaving of the rattle. She shuddered with resistance, letting out a splitting cry that was instantly answered by tiny startled shrieks. Samara laughed. Poor desert squirrels, she thought.

‘Better?’ Honani asked. Samara nodded before picking up her frame and half attached skin. ‘Good, because you just gave all the squirrels a coronary.’ She burst into a hiccupping laughter. ‘I’m serious Sam, check your hide because you may have brought that deer back from the dead,’ Honani chuckled.

Lightning streaked across the distant peaks. Honani felt relieved as he watched Sam hold her creation up to the fading light. His heart bloomed as her small smile broadened. He hobbled around the fire to inspect her handiwork. He lifted it up, searching the bottom and tugging the weavings. From the underside, with the drum

held high, each lightning strike illuminated the veins and vessels within the hide, sizzling them into new life. It wasn't too bad for her first drum. He grinned.

‘Congratulations, Sam. He’s perfect.’

Sam wrapped her arm around him. ‘*She* was definitely worth the trouble.’

Thunder began to rumble in acquiescence. Honani nodded in some shared agreement at the advancing clouds. He poked at their loyal fire, sending sparks high. After a moment, he retrieved his own first-made drum from his bag.

‘Let’s play!’ Honani bellowed, spinning around with a playful smile, drum in hand.

Beating a steady, cavernous pulse on his prairie-painted drum, Honani began shuffling around the fire. He noticed Sam hesitate, likely wondering what people back home would think of her dancing around a fire pit, playing a deerskin drum with an oncoming storm in the middle of a desert. Her dad would have been proud, that much he was certain. There was not a soul in sight except Sam and himself and maybe a few recovering desert squirrels.

‘What the hell!’ Samara shrugged and picked up the beat.

Sam’s new drum, exceptionally taut and not yet reposed, reached a significantly higher pitch than his moderately aged skin. Honani knew the young skin resisted its containment at first, reverberating off the surrounding rock with a hair-electrifying *ping*. Little stones along the camp floor danced with each beat as the two resonant drums — one baritone, the other like little Christmas bells through a megaphone — slowly began to synchronise. Two twinkling lights appeared on the distant track, followed by the faint hum of a truck. With Sam’s complete focus on him, Honani stopped circling but maintained an ear numbing beat, keeping Sam facing him.

Good. The boys are here.