

Not Your Mascot



A Crooked Rock Prequel Story



Pamela Sanderson

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INTRODUCTION

This story takes place approximately ten years before the events of Heartbeat Braves.

As Linda Bird climbed the stairs to the multi-cultural lounge in the student union, a loud voice rang through the quiet building.

"Tribal people have to be political. We don't want to be invisible." It was a confident, commanding voice that expected to be heard. She had a hunch she knew who it was.

Sure enough, Arnie Jackson stood at the front of the room. He always dressed as if he were going to an internship, or to talk to a dean, never in jeans, always a shirt with a collar. Tonight he wore a tucked-in flannel shirt, sleeves buttoned at the wrist, and gray pants.

He gave her a half-smile when she came in, and kept talking. "A state college not far from here uses Big Brave Wampum as a mascot. This is an Indian caricature that's sanctioned by a school administration. How do we feel about that?"

When Linda took over as President of the Native American Student Association ("I'm the leader of NASA," she liked to tell people) the group did little more than meet once a month for happy hour. Linda organized activities and speakers. She taped invitations to dorm room doors and waited outside Native American studies classes with fliers. Now the group was double in size. The thirty or so students in the room had their eyes on Arnie.

"That's terrible," Ruth said from her seat in the front. She and her cousin Jackie, White Mountain Apache, were part of the core group of regulars.

Arnie gave her a grateful look and continued, "At least one school benefactor has pledged a huge donation—six figures—to their school as long as the mascot doesn't change."

"I wish I had six figures worth of extra money sitting around that I could give away with crazy rules attached," Linda said, loud enough so that the group would know she was there.

Everything else in the room faded when he nodded at her. His eyes said: *We're together on this.* They had so much in common, wanting to make a difference for Indian people. He'd appeared at the beginning of the school year, and introduced himself by standing up in a

meeting and giving them an overview of everything Arnie, as if he were running for office. He had dark hair, dark eyes, and radiated good-natured charm with his wide smile and easy humor. She and every other woman in that room—and possibly a few of the guys—had been instantly smitten. That's how she'd met Arnie from Oregon. Later she looked up his rez, Warm Springs, and pictured him taking her there and showing her around.

Another of the regulars, Russell, Pomo, called out, "Yeah. Call the team the Colonizers. The mascot would have a dumb cartoon face and hold a scroll that says manifest destiny."

Everyone laughed, even Arnie. Linda liked the way he looked when he wasn't so serious. She imagined the two of them exploring local hiking trails or trying out cheap tacos. She stayed in the back of the room to let him finish.

"I've got a few more things to say." His voice grew serious again. "Big Brave Wampum is nothing less than an attack on our people. We need to do something. This is our chance. We need to make a statement that people will remember."

"Like what are you suggesting?" Linda asked.

"A protest," Arnie said. "Signs, chants. Full media coverage."

"It's not even our mascot," Jackie said.

"I know. That makes our participation even more meaningful," Arnie said. "One of us could talk to the leader of their Ind'n organization. I'm sure they'd appreciate the support."

He gestured for Linda to come up front. At the beginning, he'd acted like he was auditioning to run the group, but once he met Linda, he deferred to her. She was embarrassed to find her cheeks warm from the attention.

"That's a good idea," she said. Her gut was uncertain, but Arnie's confidence buoyed her. "What do people think? Should we offer our support?"

The assent wasn't enthusiastic but more talk about real-world experience together with promises of post-protest pizza would rally them.

"This is great," Arnie said. "The game is Saturday. We could go over

to the stadium together." He let the focus shift back to her. "What do you think about making posters?"

"I love making posters," Linda said, choosing to read something extra into that inquiry. He wanted to spend time with her, too. "We have budget for materials." She didn't take her eyes off him until he glanced at the group. She followed his gaze. "Wednesday night?" she asked. "I'll contact the group with the time. If you have flags from your nations bring those, too."

Linda took a few quick breaths, energized by the rapid turn of events. A surge of joy shot through her at the thought of spending so much time with him. Maybe they could buy the supplies together.

"Your meeting?" Arnie said, moving to take a seat in the back. When he sat down, Ruth leaned over to whisper something in his ear and he laughed.

Linda pushed back the silly stab of jealousy and started the regular meeting.



LINDA CARRIED the poster boards from her roommate's car up to the multi-cultural lounge. Ruth trailed behind her with plastic shopping bags filled with poster paints and brushes. When they arrived, the room was empty except for a study group from a different organization.

No one had bothered to show up.

No surprise when you planned something at the last minute and the only time the room was available was 10pm. She could go out and try to round up a few others but that would take longer than doing it themselves.

"Zero help?" Ruth said with a groan.

"We can do it." Linda tossed the poster boards onto the floor and spread them out, a mixture of fury and disappointment roiling in her belly. She'd taken time away from studying to prepare for this—for Arnie—and he wasn't even here. She got down on the floor with a

ruler and pencil and lettered the first sign: *Tribal People: Not Your Mascot.*

"Can I do the paint? I can't print like you do," Ruth said.

Linda slid the sign to her and started the next one. Doubt crowded out all other thought. If he didn't show up now, would he show up for the protest?

She'd protested once before when her Tribe traveled to Sacramento to bring attention to its fishing rights. On that trip, she'd been with her family and people from her community. This thing Arnie proposed was different: a student group protesting the mascot of a beloved team at a sporting event. She had no idea what to expect.

Jackie showed up with a regular club member named Carlos. Linda's relief turned into annoyance when they pulled a six pack from a paper bag.

"Wait until we're done," she said.

"Yeah, yeah," Jackie agreed, then they hid the drinks where they thought Linda couldn't see.

Carlos followed Linda's lead and lettered his own sign. It said: *Disrespectful.*

She pointed at the missing letter and he gave a half-hearted shrug. "Do we have an eraser?" he asked.

"Look in those desk drawers, I don't know," Linda snapped. The uncertainty about Arnie had her at a slow boil.

"He'll be here," Ruth said, as if reading her mind. "I talked to him in the quad this afternoon."

The news should have been comforting, but instead it added a new level of irritation when she had the image of them chatting away in the golden sunlight, laughing at each other's jokes. Did they just run into each other or were they friends? She didn't want to know.

Jackie didn't bother to pencil the letters first. She blobbed black paint into giant capital letters that spelled: *RACIST.* The word splattered across the sign looking like an ad for a horror movie. Linda didn't want to admit it, but it looked great.

"You're still here." Arnie arrived at the top of the stairs, breathless

as if he'd run across campus. He had on dark pants and a crisp button down and his hair tied back.

His smile of relief at seeing her melted every bit of her rage.

"Did you have another meeting?" Linda asked.

Arnie smoothed the front of his shirt. "Something like that. I don't want to paint, but I have ideas for slogans."

"Let's hear 'em," Linda said.

He pulled up a chair and handed her a list.

"We're people, not cartoons.' It's not an honor'—these are good," Linda said. "Do you have more information for us?"

"Game starts at one. We'll meet the others at the stadium. North end. Not too early. They said we would see them." Arnie leaned forward as if trying to learn something from her careful lettering. His attention made her nervous. She focused on the task as if it were more complex than it was.

"Have they done other protests? What should we expect?" Linda asked.

"I think they protested an alumni meeting but I'm not sure how that went," Arnie said. His eyes darted around the room at the others. "How many you think we'll have?"

"The five of us and maybe four more. How many will they have?"

"They didn't say," Arnie said. "I'm making calls for media coverage. We need a press release."

"I can do that," Ruth said. She'd come over to stand next to him.

"Thanks," he said. The two of them exchanged ideas of what it should say, zinging playful remarks back and forth.

"Get a room," Linda muttered under her breath. She handed Ruth another poster board, ready for painting.

"Don't we have enough already?" Ruth said.

Linda smiled gratefully when Arnie said, "Doesn't hurt to have extras."

There were voices in the hall. More participants, this would be a success after all.

"In here," Arnie called.

Two women Linda didn't know appeared in the doorway. They

were both pretty and projected calm self-assurance. The taller one strode into the room, her big smile aimed at Arnie. She gracefully tiptoed through the signs and gave him a hug. She was about an inch taller than he was. Linda glanced at her shoes: flats.

"You made it," Arnie said. He gave her the smile she wanted for herself. "This is Linda," he said. "She's the one who's in charge of this."

"I'm Heather. This is Erica. We're from the newspaper." She held up a camera to confirm that business was the purpose of their arrival.

Linda cringed, conscious of the droopy old T-shirt and stained jeans she'd worn for painting. "I don't need to be in the photos," she said.

"Yeah you do. You're the most important one," Arnie said.

"Keep doing what you're doing," Heather said, confidently moving around the room to snap photos. Erica asked Arnie to explain why the protest was important.

He took time choosing his words. "A lot of people mistakenly believe that these mascots are an honor. But they're caricatures. And when we see fans at a game doing things like play war dancing. It's demeaning."

Linda painted the last poster and pushed it out of the way so no one would step on it while it dried. She'd return in the morning and move the signs to a safe place. A fresh flare of uncertainty shot through her.

"You need to talk to Linda, too," Arnie said, motioning to her. She was reassured by his confidence in her. His arm went around her waist and he pulled her close when Heather pointed the camera at them. He gave her a squeeze before dropping his arm. "Tell them what you've done for this club," he said.

The unexpected contact garbled her thoughts. She took a deep breath and searched her memory for her usual pitch. The only thing her brain would process was that unexpected embrace and possible implications.

Arnie leaned over and stage whispered, "Cultural activities...networking events...scholarship resources..."

"I got it," she said, nudging him back with a laugh. She reeled off a

list of their various activities and goals. Heather snapped photos of the two of them while she spoke.

"We always welcome new members to stop by a meeting," Linda added.

"That sounded great," Arnie said. "I'll help bring the signs to the stadium. You need a ride?"

Linda nodded, relieved now that she was certain he would be there.

"I need a ride," Ruth said.

"We'll all meet here," Arnie said. "See you then."

"You ready to go?" Heather said, herding Arnie to the door. "See you tomorrow," she said to Erica.

There was no mistaking their cozy body language. In an instant, the warm glow vanished. She caught Ruth staring wistfully after them. No doubt she had the same look on her own face.



LINDA SAT CRAMMED in the back of Russell's ancient Corolla—one of five people in their car—trying not to think about the dust and dog hair collecting on her skirt. They followed Arnie who had shown up in a beige pickup truck with two seats. Ruth had jumped in the passenger seat while Linda helped Arnie secure the poster boards in the truck bed.

She'd cheerfully made her way to Russell's car while fuming inside. Her temper hadn't settled during the drive. Those two were probably talking about their favorite bands and sharing memories of home. Russell played loud rock music that reminded her of terrible parties in high school. There was no talking over that noise.

The stadium loomed ahead and traffic slowed. Arnie made a series of turns that made no sense.

Russell swore, trying to keep up with him. "What kind of Ind'n doesn't know which way north is?"

They joined a long line of cars waiting to get into a parking lot.

A steady stream of bikes traveled along a path parallel to the road.

"Go Warriors!" their riders shouted. Fists flew out of open car windows. A guy slapped his hand over his open mouth, formed into a circle. "OH OH OH oh oh oh."

More shouts joined them. "Warriors!"

Every shout caused a fresh burst of nerves that she struggled to ignore. They parked their cars and gathered their signs. Linda brushed the worst of the grime from her skirt.

"Sorry about that," Arnie said in a low voice, his eyes flicking to Ruth.

Linda suppressed a smile. She shrugged like it was no big deal, and helped him pass out the signs. They found the other protesters, six people, near the north entrance as instructed. She'd emailed with their leader, Gavin, who turned out to be a slender, bookish guy from an East Coast tribe.

Linda introduced herself and Arnie. "How many more do you expect?" she asked.

Gavin blinked, his eyes large and watery. "This is it. We're glad you're here. You ready for this?"

"I thought there would be more," Linda said, the nerves back in full force.

"This is a good group," Arnie said, his voice uncertain.

"We're going to spread out along the entrance line," Gavin said, gesturing to his group.

"Then what?" Linda asked.

"I'll lead the chants," Gavin said. He didn't sound convinced himself.

Linda stared at Arnie. He nodded reassuringly and raised his sign overhead.

Fans streamed into the entrance. Many of them wore the cartoony red face of Big Brave Wampum on their shirts and hats.

The group spread out and waved their signs.

Linda's sign said, *Big Brave Wampum Insults My Culture*. She held it up. "No racist mascots," she called.

No one responded. They could have been protesting paper versus plastic or the shape of donuts for all anyone cared.

"Big Brave Wampum insults Indian People," Gavin chanted, his fist grinding through the air. The group repeated after him and their chant fell into a steady rhythm. This caught the fans' attention.

A group of older people gave them a wave of disgust. One of them, a lady with tight gray curls, waved at student security but the guy ignored her. "That's enough," someone shouted. The line moved them closer to the gates, and they turned their backs on the protesters.

Without anyone calling for it, Linda's group drew close together again. The back of Russell's shirt was damp with sweat.

"Go home!" someone shouted at him.

"You go home," he shouted back.

Linda missed what happened next but a woman in Gavin's group stepped closer to the line and burst out, "Your mascot sucks," in a raggedy voice. She took an unsteady step and Linda realized she was drunk. "He's not even a real Indian," she yelled.

"This isn't good," Arnie muttered.

Gavin grabbed her arm, but she shook him off. A fan with paint striped across his cheeks and a big phony headdress walked over and spit on the ground in front of her.

"Go back to the reservation," he said with a laugh.

Linda wanted to beat him across the face with her sign. The crowd retreated into a blur of smirking faces and loud voices. She snuck a look at Arnie. A beer can sailed through the air and grazed him on the head.

"You okay?" Linda mouthed. Arnie rubbed the back of his head and waved that he was fine. Their group huddled even closer together. Time slowed. The fans continued to stream in; most of them ignored the protesters.

"Respect for Indian people," Linda shouted, not clear if she was growing braver or more terrified.

"If you don't like it, stay home," another guy yelled. "This is our team spirit." He cut loose with a, "*Whoop! Whoop!*" war cry straight out of a John Wayne movie. Linda wiped away a tear that had slipped out.

"We need to get out of here," Arnie said.

"We need more people," Linda said. A drunk guy tottered toward

the group. He hopped on one foot in a slow, sloppy circle. A few people jeered and laughed. The security guy had disappeared.

Linda's chest grew tight. She'd never been treated like this. She'd never seen anything like this.

Gavin's friend burst out with a litany of off-topic expletives, and a couple more beer cans flew out of the crowd. One of them crashed at their feet and sprayed them with beer.

"This is wrong," Linda whispered.

"Let's go," Arnie said.

"It's hopeless," Linda said. The faces that weren't angry didn't care. No one was with them.

"Come with me, Lulu." Arnie grabbed her sign and took her arm and led her back to the parking lot.

They reached his truck. "You okay?" he asked.

"I don't think so," she said.

He sat her in the passenger seat and got in the driver's seat.

"The others?" Her hands were trembling.

"Full retreat. Gavin's group, too. We're out of here."



ON THE DRIVE BACK, Arnie kept up a steady stream of questions, asking about pets and favorite study spots. He traded stories about favorite family places back home.

Was this what he and Ruth talked about?

His pickup was old but it was clean inside and smelled faintly woody. Linda tried to answer, but she was too dazed for conversation. She had all of Arnie's attention and couldn't enjoy it. Her mind kept flashing back to the hostile retorts and the sound the beer cans made when they hit the ground.

Arnie told her a story about a dog that jumped into a moving truck that belonged to some cousins who were leaving town. They didn't discover it until miles later when they'd stopped for gas. Arnie had to drive out to get the dog back.

"What kind of dog?"

"Rez dog," he said. "White and brown. Loyal but barked a lot. I named him Barky."

She half smiled at that.

When they reached campus, Arnie insisted on taking her back to her dorm. They walked side-by-side which would have been thrilling if she wasn't so beat up and raw inside. She couldn't shake the bad feeling. She planned to curl up with her pillow and have a good sob.

"Can I come in for a minute?" Arnie said.

She'd been longing for Arnie since she'd met him and something could be happening between them except it was the wrong time.

"I want to make sure you're okay," he said, his expression painfully earnest. "I won't stay long."

Gratefully, her roommate was out. The dorm room was tiny and her side a mess, something that would have embarrassed her any other day. She scraped the clothes strewn across the bed into a laundry basket and slid the books to the floor.

"I need a nap." She curled up on the bed and waited to see what he would do.

He sat next to her, his face full of regret and not a trace of lust. She had Arnie half in her bed but not for any fun reason.

"There's a study," she said. Her voice came out garbled and she had to clear her throat. "It shows the mascots are harmful. Reduces us to stereotypes. Makes Ind'n kids feel shitty."

"I heard about it," he said. "I haven't read it."

"Did you think it would be like that?"

He shook his head. "Sorry. I should have prepared better." His eyes were wet and his voice low. "I'm really, really sorry."

Her own tears spilled out until he took her hand and held her gaze. He was going to kiss her. All the disappointments of the day faded away for this bright and sunny bubble of the two of them brought together by the day's terrible events.

Just as quickly, the bubble burst. There was no kiss. He squeezed her hand. "I'm not going come back to Native Students for a while."

"What happened wasn't your fault."

He shook his head. He wasn't going to be comforted.

A flutter of panic started in her. He still held her hand. "Nobody blames you," she said.

"Lulu, I need to know you're still my friend," Arnie said.

"Of course," she said. *More than friends, even.* She wished for the courage to say it but it didn't come.

Arnie heaved a relieved sigh. "Good," he said. He squeezed her hand one more time before he got up. "I'll see you around."

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading.

In 1999 the American Indian and Alaska Native Society of Indian Psychologists released a statement calling for Native American Mascots to be retired. They found, in part, "Stereotypical and historically inaccurate images of Indian in general interfere with learning about them by creating, supporting and maintaining oversimplified and inaccurate views of indigenous peoples and their cultures." You can download their statement at the "Indian Mascots" link at www.a-iansip.org.

The American Psychological Association has also called for retiring American Indian Mascots citing "the particularly harmful effects of American Indian sports mascots on the social identity development and self-esteem of American Indian young people." There is a summary of their position on their website at: <http://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/indian-mascots.aspx>

ALSO BY PAMELA SANDERSON

Crooked Rock Urban Indian Center

Book 1: Heartbeat Braves

Book 2: Lovesick Braves

Book 3: Tommy and Elizabeth

Book 4: Linda and Arnie

Stand Alone:

Season of Us

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