

*The Mark of the  
Guardian*



*Regina Paul*

## Praise for the writing of Regina Paul

### *Getting Out Alive*

Regina Paul has penned an absolutely intriguing novel, giving us a far reaching tale of betrayal, love and the pitfalls of prejudice... Excellent job for Regina Paul. I look forward to reading more of her books in the future. I highly recommend *Getting Out Alive*.

--Elise Lyn, ecataRomance Reviews

Ms. Paul has done a fantastic job in not only world-building, but creating memorable characters who leave you sitting on the edge of your seat... the theme and tone of story was smooth and engaging drawing you into a well-developed and original twist on alien abductions. I would enjoy seeing a sequel to *Getting Out Alive*.

--Kimber, Reviewer for Coffee Time Romance

*Getting Out Alive* is a phenomenal adventure with layer after layer of surprise... I look forward to many years enjoying the books by Regina Paul!

--Valerie CJ McGee, Author of *Insight*

*Getting Out Alive* is a mystical journey of one woman's yearning for absolution, written in a style to rival one of the greatest paranormal writers of our time, Dean Koontz... Only a profoundly talented writer could lead us on a journey where we truly begin to believe the unbelievable. Ms. Paul has proven herself to be a writer of such qualities.

--B.R. Jones, Author of *All Things Sacred*

# **THE MARK OF THE GUARDIAN**

**Regina Paul**

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As the small woman stalked into the living room, she kicked off her royal purple high heels in a fit of pique before she flung off her coat and dropped her bag on the floor; flopping into the nearest armchair, she brooded some more. Hadn't the creep ever heard of the Winter Solstice! Obviously not from his reaction. And that whole thing about it being too "witchy". It would have given her great pleasure to inform her jerk of a boss that she was a "witch" and that it went back several generations on her mother's side, but one didn't talk about such things with such ignorant toads! She could've really blown his ass away when she told him that to top it off, on her father's side which was her Native American side, there were traditional healers that went back just as far.

One foot swung back and forth, back and forth. It had been such a beautiful display. She'd decorated the tree with silver and purple tinsel, and ornaments of her mixed heritage; eagle feathers and pentagrams. They were ornaments that had been given to her by members of her family on both sides. It had begun as a game when one of her Aunts had given her a silver pentagram when she was five. Then one of her paternal Aunts had given her a fully beaded eagle feather ornament. From that day forward it had become a tradition for her relatives to give her something to hang on the tree each year. She now had over two hundred ornaments. The fifty or so she'd put on the display tree had been some of her favorites. She grimaced. It was such a shame the creep hadn't been able to appreciate her ingenuity and her giving. The display would have brought in more customers even if

it was just out of curiosity. Her boss hadn't seen it that way. No, instead he'd made her take it all down, and had assigned her a helper so that when she redid it next week she couldn't stray from what was considered appropriate for the holiday.

Her foot began to swing angrily. Who was he to decide what was or was not a custom? She leaned her head back on the armrest swinging her other leg around to rest next to the one that had been swinging. It was days like today she felt like such a throwback. Her vision blurred as she stared at the lights on her own Christmas tree. What would it have been like to live five hundred years ago? Would she have fit in better there? Which tradition would she choose, the Celtic or the Native American? Slowly her eyes closed and her foot stopped swinging. It was so easy to just drift away into mindless nothingness for a time, to just close her eyes and pretend bosses with bad tempers and no imagination existed, and just drift.

The Guardian watched her from the ethers. He smiled. Her anger had finally worn her down. Not that he blamed her. He'd seen the stupid wasichu yelling at his charge.

In fact he'd stepped between them and formed a barrier of protection when it had become clear the wasichu's aura was radiating the possibility of physical violence. As if sensing the presence of the Guardian, the wasichu moved away. Displaying the only intelligence he was capable of he quickly assigned someone to make sure his charge did it the "right way" the second time.

Eartha's pain had been palpable to him at the time, and he'd attempted to send healing energy to her, but her anger and battered emotions prevented her from noticing it. He crossed his arms over his chest and thought affectionately of how that was so like her. She got mad first and it was always quick and fiery, but there was also a soft side to her if one looked for it. He could see it in her now.

Her black hair was cut in a short pixie style which curled gently around her face, and she had violet eyes, which were a gift from her mother's people. Those beautiful eyes were framed by long lashes. Her face in soft repose, he exulted again in how beautiful his charge was.

Something tickled in his heart, something he rarely allowed himself to acknowledge. The soft flutter came again and as usual he chose to ignore it. Yes, she was beautiful. Those long legs and slim waist didn't hurt his eyes either, but he was her protector, her "Guardian".

He'd revealed himself to her only once, stepping out of his secret place to comfort her when she was four and her beloved grandfather had died. He wasn't even sure if she remembered the incident. There were times like now he wished he knew if she did. He would like to reveal himself to her again to comfort her as he had when she was a child. However, since she'd grown into a young woman something had prevented him from having too close of physical contact with her. Some part of him was concerned she would not know him, or be afraid of him. It was quite hard for many humans to realize they had unseen help from beyond the

physical. To learn the unseen help had the ability to walk among them could be something of a shock. So as always the Guardian continued to watch unnoticed from his hiding place.

Eartha woke up with a jerk, and groaned; her neck was stiff. It was no wonder since she'd fallen asleep in the armchair. It served her right for doing such a stupid thing.

The clock said she'd been asleep for two hours. Dinner would look good about now, she thought, walking slowly into the bedroom to get out of her work clothes.

As she began to undress, she felt something strange. The hair on the back of her neck stood straight up on end! There was someone behind her! She slowly pulled her sweater back over her head, covering the slip beneath. She turned around; no one was there, and yet she could feel a presence.

"Who's there?" She called softly. Whoever it was, the presence was a strong one.

"Why are you hiding from me?" She called again. She'd dealt with ghosts before, but this seemed to be different. Ghosts eventually revealed themselves when called upon to do so. Whoever this was didn't want to be seen and had no intention of revealing him or herself.

The Guardian felt a chill down his nonexistent spine. She'd never questioned his presence before! *Why would she do so now?* He'd always protected her, watched over her. He thought she'd recognize his presence by now and feel comforted by it, not frightened! He knew he had two choices. He could either withdraw deeper into his secret realm and hope she could no longer detect

his presence, or he could reveal himself, step out of the protective layer of the Spirit World and hope she didn't scream. The thoughts whirled in his mind like a tornado. Finally he decided. It would be better to reveal himself to her now so she would recognize his presence in the future and not be frightened by it. With luck, once he explained she would accept his presence readily. However, she still could scream till someone came to help her. Humans were so strange that way, especially in these modern times. It was one thing to believe in the Spirit World, quite another to be confronted face to face with it. Most humans didn't take that so well.

Eartha watched in fascination as an oval circle of swirling light became larger and larger until it encompassed nearly a quarter of her bedroom. Seconds later she could see the outline of a figure, and then a man stepped through as the glowing portal disappeared with a strange zipping sound.

She knew her mouth was hanging open, she could feel it. Astonishment swept through her blood and froze it. Truth be told, she felt like a statue, just standing there with her hands hanging limply at her sides, her mouth open. Come to think of it, her knees didn't feel too good either. She wondered if she was going to faint, because it was a sure bet her head was starting to swirl like the concentric ribbons of light in the strange portal he'd come from.

"Great Goddess!" she thought, "He's got to be at least six foot five! And that hair." Her mind thought dreamily. The man had long pitch black hair that ran down his back to his waist.

She thought she saw a couple of eagle feathers tied in there somewhere. He was wearing a breechcloth and leggings with quilled moccasins on his feet. His chest was bare but for a bear claw necklace. Her eyes wandered back up his tremendous length until they came to rest on his face.

The man had the gentlest eyes she'd ever seen. Black orbs that seemed to see and know everything about her right down to the last secret.

She nearly jumped when the Indian came closer and gently took her hands, urging her to sit down on the edge of her bed.

"Washte." He murmured.

The poor woman looked like she might pass out on the spot. The Guardian watched her carefully. She didn't seem to be frightened of him, but then he hadn't dealt with a human female on a one to one basis in many centuries. He could be reading this one completely wrong. His senses were never quite as reliable in the physical as they were in the Spirit World.

In some still functioning part of Eartha's brain she recognized the man was speaking an ancient form of Lakota. Her father was Oglala so she recognized that much, and the quill work on his moccasins was done in the plains style, though it seemed older than the style her aunts did. *Why was the man wearing a breechcloth and leggings?* He was dressed almost like he would be for a powwow, but less elaborately than her male cousins who were both fancy dancers, and the more traditional grass dancers. *What was going on here?*

"Who are you?" She whispered.

His charge was speaking in the white man's tongue, and ever one to be resistant to the changes the whites brought, it took him a second to figure out what she was asking.

"Eh?" He tipped his head to the side.

"Don't you speak English?" She fired more of the strange words at the Guardian.

"Little." He found the word he was looking for, dredging it up from long ago when the black robes had come, bringing with them their strange religion and beliefs.

Eartha pondered his answer, her eyes intent. As far as she knew there were very few Indians these days who didn't speak English. *Who was this guy and where had he come from?*

"Who are you?" she asked. "What's your name?"

She was speaking too quickly, her words firing like gunshots. He caught the word "name" and realized she wanted to know what he was called. Again there was a problem, he hadn't used that name in so long he almost couldn't remember it. He'd simply called himself "Guardian" as the old ones did, his name denoting his purpose.

He shook his head. He had only thought to reassure her, but realized now it would have been better to withdraw farther rather than speak with her. There were some things he just couldn't explain and his lack of understanding the white man's tongue wasn't helping matters.

"Guardian." It was the only word he could think of to explain to her. Giving her his spirit name from when he was alive would mean little to her. He nearly groaned aloud, he should have

gone with his first instinct, for she was now looking at him with suspicion.

Eartha didn't like what she'd just heard. Maybe she couldn't explain the portal, but science was advancing very quickly and she was beginning to wonder if her guest might be someone's idea of a practical joke.

She stood and removed her hands from his in a decisive gesture, walking around the bed to put it between them.

"What do you mean, Guardian?"

*What was the matter with her?* The Guardian huffed silently. He'd known her relatives had taught her about Guardians, he'd made sure of it. He'd been there when her grandfather told her stories of their people and how everyone had a Spirit Guardian.

He turned his back on her. *He would have to prove it to her, so there would be no doubts!* He would withdraw back into the light and then return. It would sap his energy, but it would be worth it to prove his point.

"Protector." He repeated.

Eartha watched from her bedside. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was trying to tell her that he was her Guide. *That couldn't be though, could it?*

He couldn't return! The Guardian tried again, but he seemed unable to do so.

Eartha watched in stunned silence as the man before her shimmered; colors sparking off his body. Nothing else happened though. A few seconds later the lightshow stopped, and the man was staring at his hands as though he'd never seen them before.

"What's wrong?"

The Guardian looked up utter surprise in his eyes. Then his eyes seemed to register his understanding of her words.

"Cannot return." He told her.

"What do you mean, cannot return? You mean you can't go back to where ever it is that you come from?" Her voice rose to a shriek, and she raised one hand to her ear and tugged on her earlobe. It was a nervous habit she'd had since she was a child.

The Guardian stared at her in growing horror, his eyes wide and his pupils dialated. *He had to get back!* It was one thing to drop into the physical every now and again to offer comfort or help a lost child home. It was quite another to be stuck in the mortal world permanently.

"Must return." He stated emphatically, trying to make her understand.

Eartha narrowed her eyes at him, "Well, which is it Protector?" She sneered at him, "Cannot return or must return?"

*How dare she mock him!* The Guardian drew himself up to his full height. *His English might not be the best, but he could make himself understood!*

"Both, I cannot return now, but I must return!" He thundered.

Eartha rolled her eyes as if to say, *Yeah, right.*

"Well, I don't know which one of my cousins put you up to this pal, but you're outta here!"

*Did that mean what he thought it did? Did she presume to throw him from her home? How dare she! He had once been a great*

*Lakota healer, respected by his entire tribe. His best friend had been one of her grandfathers, although several times removed. All had welcomed him into their homes! What was more, he was her Guardian. He wasn't going anywhere. It was about time she understood that.*

"I go nowhere Eartha. I am Guardian, I will stay and protect as is my right."

*He had the most interesting accent! When he said her name it was without the r, because the Lakota language had no r sound. It came out sounding like Etta. Just for a second, she entertained the thought he might be who he said he was.*

He saw the doubt begin to creep into her violet eyes. It was the opening he was looking for.

"I not hurt Eartha. I protect you for always. You know me. I always with you. I come to you one other time. You are four or five I think, grandfather had died."

Eartha started, she had never told anyone about the man who had come to her room when her grandfather had died. The man had spoken only Lakota but she had understood enough to know he was trying to comfort her. She'd been on a window seat with her knees drawn up and her face buried in her lap. She hadn't seen the man come in, but he'd come in and picked her up and held her on his lap until she'd gone to sleep. When she'd woken up the next morning he was gone. She'd always assumed it was a relative from the reservation that she'd never met before then. With a child's easy understanding she'd never again questioned it. Now she wondered though. *Could it truly have been this man?* She looked at

him more closely. *Could he really be her Guide?* She'd always believed she had personal protection but she'd never realized they could just pop in and out like this.

The Guardian was smiling now. He came towards her and picked up one of her hands.

"You remember now, yes?" He asked.

She had to tip her head back to look up at him. "I think so, but I always just thought that was one of Dad's relatives from the reservation." She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue nervously.

"Yes, I know you thought this. It was easier to let you think that. Did not want to frighten you. I wanted to offer, what is the word? Comfort?"

"Yes, that's the word, and you did you know, comfort me I mean. You gave me such peace, I didn't grieve so badly for grandfather once you came."

"I am glad." He squeezed her hand then let it go.

Eartha couldn't believe it, but she had to accept this man was truly a Guide. There was no other explanation for his knowing about what happened when her grandfather died.

"Do you know why you're having trouble returning to the Spirit World?" She asked. Maybe there was something she could do to help him like he'd helped her once.

She'd always had a kind heart, his little Eartha. Unlike some Guides, he had only one charge, and there had always been a deep affection in his heart for her. He watched the light glint off her black hair, the blue highlights flashing when she tilted

her head waiting for his answer.

He sighed. "I do not know. This has never happened before. But you misunderstand, I not in Spirit World. I am in ethers while doing protection work. That way, I am always with you."

"What are the ethers?" Eartha had never heard of these before, she'd always assumed Guides watched over their charges from the Spirit World.

The Guardian saw her puzzlement, and he almost smiled again. "Ethers are an in between place. I chose to reside there to watch over you rather than the Spirit World."

Now she was really confused. She'd never heard of this in between place before. "I don't get it. Why would it matter? I mean you Guides are all powerful aren't you?"

Eartha watched the Guardian. He was staring off into the distance; his body was in her room, but his mind was far away.

The Guardian was remembering. Eartha didn't know it, but he was a Guide like no other. Unlike other Guides he'd been a man who'd never suffered a physical death, but had simply been granted the ability to cross over into the ethers along with his other special powers. To his knowledge once her life cycle was done he would go on to the Spirit World as he would've had he died a normal death. He remembered the day two hundred years before like it was yesterday, and the conversation he'd had with Wolf.

It was the season of falling leaves, and winter would be upon the small band of Lakota soon.

"I have dreamt of my granddaughter again." Wolf's voice was

solemn.

Wolf had come to the teepee of Gray Eagle the tribe's medicine person for advice about a recurring dream.

He'd taken another puff from the ceremonial pipe they were smoking before asking.

"What images did the dream contain this time?" He'd heard of the dream on two other occasions.

"The same images, the same feeling of danger for my granddaughter. There was one difference. This time I saw the face of her protector."

The Guardian formerly called Gray Eagle recalled his reaction to this. He'd been curious, but had not been ready for his friend's next words.

"And whose face did the Guardian wear?" He'd asked.

"Yours my friend. Yours."

Stunned, he'd looked at his friend blankly. "How can this be? This granddaughter will not be born for many generations. I will be long dead before this child's spirit makes her appearance among the People."

Wolf had only shook his head in puzzlement, for he had no more understood the dream's portent than his friend.

"I will have to pray and sweat for the answer to this. Perhaps there is something I can do for this descendant of yours."

"I hope so, old friend. I hope so, for she is in great danger."

The answer came five years later at the death of Wolf in a

Crow raid. Sleepless and hungry he'd taken care of wounded people for days. When he'd finally fallen asleep, he'd awakened to find himself in the ethers and hearing the voices of the old ones quite clearly. At the time it had been explained to him they would take him to Wolf's descendant and he was to protect her.

True to their word they'd delivered him to the room where Eartha had been born seconds before. He'd done as the old ones had asked, he'd watched over and protected Eartha from that point on.

Over time, he discovered he'd been given the ability to leave his sanctuary at will and regain his physical body, and then to return to there. He'd gained other powers as well, the power to sense danger to his charge, the power to read her emotions, and thoughts so he'd know if she needed him, as well as many others.

While he hadn't seen the People moved onto reservations, and their children taken away, nor the systematic attempted destruction of his people's culture, he'd been made aware of the changes between his time and hers by observing Eartha's family and the interaction between them and those still living on the reservation. She was a child of her time and a product of two cultures.

Eartha snapped her fingers in front of his face again. She sighed angrily for she hated to do that, but she'd been trying to gain his attention for several minutes.

He grabbed her hand, and looked down at her angrily. "Why do you do this thing?"

"I have been trying to get your attention for ten minutes. Geez. Where were you?" He could get angry all he wanted, they needed to figure out what they were going to do.

"Far away. It need not concern you." He stated adamantly. There would be time enough later to explain to her their true connection, if he couldn't get back.

The Guardian began to wonder if his friend's dreams had something to do with his not being able to return. He'd simply thought this a special quest to complete before he would be allowed into the deeper realms of the Spirit World, but now he wondered if there was not more.

"Well, if you are who you say, I'm going to have to call you something. And while I may love that get-up you have on, we've got to get you some modern clothes."

The wheels were whirling in her brain, and she was pacing back and forth in front of the bed. The Guardian watched her, stupefied. *What was wrong with his clothing!*

"I will stay as I am." He told her bluntly, crossing his arms across his massive chest.

Eartha rolled her eyes, and threw up her hands. "Then I can't take you anywhere with me, you won't be able to protect me." She told him.

He hadn't thought about that. Perhaps he could allow her to change his dress some, but only enough to blend into this strange society.

"I will keep my moccasins, and my feathers." He told her, pointing to the eagle feathers tied into his hair.

She'd have a hard time explaining that, but maybe if she told people he was a very traditional relative visiting from the reservation she could pull it off. A very distant cousin would probably work. She didn't want anyone questioning her about him once he was able to get back where he belonged.

"All right," she sighed, "but I'm going to have to think fast to explain you. Goddess knows what I'm going to tell my parents, Dad will know right off you aren't one of our cousins. Which is how I'm going to explain you. Do you understand? You're going to be a distant cousin, visiting from the reservation for a few days. We can figure something out if you're here longer."

The Guardian thought for a moment. In actuality she was not that far from the truth. He'd been very close with her grandfather and his family. They'd considered him a family member.

"It will suffice."

*His English was getting better by the minute, he must be a fast learner, she thought to herself.*

Eartha went over to a dressing table by the bed, she was fairly certain she had a tape measure in there. She was also certain he would have no idea what his size was. She snickered to herself softly, *where he came from they made clothes to fit!*

*What in the world was his charge doing?* She had some funny long thin white stripe with black lines on it, and she was putting it around his waist.

"What are you doing?" He felt her hands brush his skin, and he realized she had very soft hands. She also smelled like, he

took another sniff, wild flowers, *but how could that be?* It was the time of winter snows.

"Measuring you, so I know what size of clothes to buy." Her voice was muffled by a length of the tape she'd stuck into her mouth.

"And this strip of cloth you hold with the black lines will tell you how I am sized?" He asked, puzzled.

"Yes, you see these black lines measure inches and when I know how many inches your waist, the length of your legs, and the width of your shoulders is this will give me a good enough idea of what size clothes to buy you."

He had a masculine, earthy smell. Not musty as a part of her mind thought he might smell after not having been in the physical for so many years. *But then what did she know, he might have slipped into the physical often. Just because she didn't see him, didn't mean it didn't happen.*

He understood the word buy and it galled him that a woman had to trade for goods for him. "I will repay you." He said stiffly. There had been a time when he had owned many horses and had much wealth to give away or trade as he saw fit.

Eartha could see it bothered him. Before she could stop herself, she reached up and touched his face. "It doesn't matter, you know," she told him quietly, "it's just money. It only has the value we give it."

*His charge was touching him!* He remembered the last time he'd felt her tentative touch, she'd only been a small child then. But it wasn't a child's hand touching him now, but a

woman's. It had been so long since he'd felt the gentle hand of a woman he'd somehow forgotten how pleasant it was.

"It is my pride that is hurt little one, but you are right, we must do this thing. Still I would like to repay you." His hand cupped hers. She had such tiny hands.

Her face was still tilted way back so she could look into his eyes when she said, her violet eyes soft. "You already did, long ago."

He knew she was referring to the time he'd come to her when her grandfather died. He nodded, it would be dishonorable for him not to allow her to repay him in this fashion, and it salvaged his pride.

Her head tipped back, her hand still captured by his, she watched the storms pass in his black eyes. For the first time she noticed how handsome he was. His face was long with a square jaw; his cheekbones were high as most Indians were, but she thought she liked his eyes best for they were so gentle. Then abruptly he turned from her as though her touch and watching had disturbed him somehow.

"You should go and do your buying so that I can protect you. I will watch to be sure you are safe." The Guardian told her gruffly, his back to her.

"Yes, but you still haven't told me your name." Eartha reminded him.

"I was once called Gray Eagle." He told her in the same gruff tone.

"Then that is what I will call you." She turned to go. "I'll

be back soon."

He didn't turn but waved her off distantly.

Finally she was gone, and he struggled for control. Eartha as a child had been loving and a delight. Eartha as a young woman was dangerous. She had grown into all he could've hoped for his charge. She was still loving, but she also had the strong independence, and sense of strength he'd instilled in her from the sidelines. She of course did not know that he'd influenced her at all, but he'd always had the ability to "communicate" with her mentally. He could do it now if he chose, but it somehow felt wrong to do it when he was in a physical capacity.

Gray Eagle sighed deeply and walked about the room. It had many strange devices.

Eartha arrived at the Big and Tall store only to discover it was closed for the night. She would have to go to the mall. *She hated the mall!* She usually avoided the place at all costs, but in this case she knew at least a few stores were open until 9:00 pm. She looked at her watch, 8:15 pm, she didn't have much time.

The mall was crowded with people starting early Christmas shopping. Jostled and bumped she remembered again why she usually avoided the place like the plague. It didn't matter because she had to get the big guy some clothes. There was no way she was going to be able to explain him otherwise. It took a surprisingly short amount of time to find what she wanted, and an hour later she was back on the road again and heading for her house.

Gray Eagle had watched her mentally the whole time to be sure she was safe, but at the same time he'd been examining her home. He grinned when he saw the microwave in her kitchen. He'd spied her using it once before when he'd been checking up on her. It never ceased to amaze him how much in a hurry white people were. Not that Eartha was white, but she'd learned to survive in this society by necessity, as had all of the People. There had been no choice for them but to adapt.

He opened her refrigerator to find it almost empty. Then he discovered where she really kept all her food, the box with ice in it at the top! He almost laughed out loud when he saw the selection of frozen dinners, not that he could even imagine what such fare tasted like. The one time he'd seen her heat and consume one he'd decided he didn't really want to know. He grimaced, he would have to find some way to talk her into getting him some fresh meat if he was here for a while. *There was no way he was eating those blocks of ice in her little ice box!*

The Guardian saw her in his mind drive up in the strange vehicle. She had returned quickly just as she'd said. He returned to the living room to find her already inside and carrying two large bags with handles.

Eartha could feel him behind her but when he touched her shoulder she jumped a bit.

"Are you all right?" He asked, surprised he'd startled her when she'd obviously been able to sense him quite well even when he was not in the physical.

She turned to look at him, and found herself face to face with his bare chest. She looked up. "I'm fine. I think I found clothes that will fit you. You're going to have to wear your moccasins a while longer though, I wasn't sure of your shoe size."

Eartha had moved around him and was taking items out of the bags. He saw there were a great number of items, some of which he could only guess at the purpose of. He picked up a package of men's underwear.

"What are these?" He asked puzzled.

Eartha looked up and saw that he was holding up a package with a pair of white men's briefs, and her dusky skin promptly took on a reddish tone. "Those are underwear." She mumbled, and snatched it out of his hand.

His brows drew down in a crease, he still didn't understand what they were, not that he'd ever been able to figure out even half of what the whites considered clothing. He never could understand why they felt the need to restrict the body with so much cloth. He'd felt even more sorry for the women who oftentimes seemed to wear five or six layers of clothing before they were even considered presentable.

Eartha looked up and caught his puzzled expression. "You know, underwear," she wiggled her eyebrows, "you wear it under your clothes."

Now he was really confused, "But why?" He asked.

Eartha rolled her eyes, "How the hell should I know, it's just how things are done now. Just put them on under the jeans,

and I think you can figure out a T-shirt without my help, hm?" She tossed a large pair of button-fly jeans and a T-shirt, as well as the still not understood underwear at him, and proceeded to shoo him off to the bedroom.

Normally Gray Eagle wouldn't have countenanced her disrespect, but he could see the nervousness in her eyes; she wasn't quite sure how to take him. So, he went into the bedroom to try and figure out the strange clothing again. Quickly he shifted out of his breechcloth and leggings, and as an afterthought took off his moccasins. He didn't want the quillwork to get caught in the strange leggings she'd bought him.

Standing naked next to her bed, he held the strange white "underwear" that he'd ripped from the plastic up to himself, and shook his head. She honestly expected him to bind himself into such a thing.

Eartha still stood next to her couch. She'd been a little rude to him, but he'd embarrassed her asking about what underwear was for. Not that she really knew, she'd never thought about it before, now that she did, she could see how he might view such a thing. Clothing in the old days of the People was very non-restrictive. The underwear must seem terribly binding to someone who'd lived with loose clothing that allowed the skin to breath. Maybe she should go and tell him he didn't have to wear it if he didn't want to.

She headed for the bedroom, not realizing her guest would have already shucked his clothes.

She opened the door to find her "Guardian" standing next to the bed buck naked and staring in puzzlement at the hated underwear. Belatedly, she realized she should've knocked. First she turned hot all over, and then she felt her face flame. For some reason she couldn't move and shut the door. She just stood there staring at him like an idiot. He was without a doubt beautiful. In some sane corner of her mind she realized she could never have called any other man beautiful but the one standing before her. He was all hard muscle, and bronze angles. His face was in darkness turned from the lamplight, but she knew he knew she was there.

The Guardian did indeed know she was there, but he couldn't understand why she'd frozen in place with her violet eyes wide. She looked as though she'd seen a winagi or ghost. He put the underwear down on the bed, and totally unconcerned with his nudity walked up to her. "What is wrong, has something happened?" He asked her gently, grasping her shoulders.

Eartha knew she looked like a complete idiot, but she couldn't seem to catch her breath, and her mouth gaped open and closed just like a fish. Now that he was standing in front of her she looked up into his face. *He was just so damned big!* Then she made the mistake of looking away from those black eyes and looking down. To her further embarrassment she saw something else had awakened as well. She tore her eyes away from his body and then her shoulders as well, and mumbled. "I'll wait for you in the living room."

*What was the matter with her? Surely his nudity hadn't*

*bothered her? And what had she come into the bedroom for anyway? Suddenly he felt a twitch in a body part that hadn't been used in centuries, and looked down. He thought maybe he knew now what had upset her. As her personal Guardian, he of course knew she was still a maiden, but surely someone at some time had explained such things to her? Of course now that he thought about it, he didn't remember such a discussion ever taking place. He took a deep breath, apparently he was going to have to explain a few life facts to his charge.*

*Eartha couldn't believe she'd gone in there. What ever had possessed her to enter that room when she knew there was a possibility he would be undressed? She must have been out of her mind. She put her head in her hands. She didn't know how she was going to handle this. Wait a minute. He was a Guardian, how come his body had reacted that way? I wasn't a real physical body, was it? At the thought of his body's reaction she felt liquid heat flow inside. She was in trouble here! Oh, yeah, she was in big trouble, because when all this was over he was going to go back to where he came from. She couldn't afford to get involved. What about his powers, oh God, she couldn't stand it if he knew she was attracted to him!*

After putting on the ridiculous clothing, Gray Eagle entered the living room to find Eartha with her face in her hands, and groaning with what he could only conclude was embarrassment.

Eartha felt the couch dip. She lifted her face, her hands still covering it, and peaked through her fingers. What she saw made her groan again. Gentle black eyes stared at her with deep

compassion. To her astonishment he carefully removed her hands, and held them in his.

*Oh, yeah, she was in the deep stuff here! Right up to her hips and wading in it! If he kept looking at her like that she was going to do one of two things, either melt into a puddle of she didn't know what or jump him.* At these early stages neither option was particularly welcome.

"What you saw..." Gray Eagle started to say. However, before he could finish she wrenched one of her hands away and slapped it onto his mouth. "Don't say it!" She pleaded, her face still a dusky red. "I know all about it!" *Oh, yes, yes, yes, her body certainly knew all about it!* Now on top of the melting heat she was feeling inside, her fingers were tingling.

Gray Eagle smiled behind her fingers. *So, she knew all about it did she? Well, what she didn't know, and he was certain there were a few things, he would be happy to teach her. His body certainly didn't mind the thought!* In some far corner of his mind, he was shocked he was thinking and feeling such things again, and wondered about them. He removed her hand.

"Well, if you have any questions..." He left the sentence hanging, and Eartha rolled her eyes for the second time that night.

"Oh, please..." She muttered beneath her breath.

Gray Eagle decided to let it go for now. There would be plenty of time later to explain if explanations were still needed.

Eartha took one look at his face and sighed. He wasn't going to discuss it for now. *What a relief!* She was still horribly embarrassed she'd walked in on him like that. *At least he wasn't going to make her feel like a real idiot and try to explain the birds and the bees to her!*

She walked into the kitchen and then called, "Are you hungry?" *Did Guardian's eat when they were in the physical?* She didn't know but asked the question anyway out of habit.

Gray Eagle was a bit astonished to discover he was. That had never happened before when he'd been in the physical. *What was going on here?* He'd never had any of these kind of bodily reactions before. He'd always assumed it was because this physical body wasn't truly a physical body. He'd just figured it appeared as such so he could be there for Eartha if she needed him in such a capacity. There was also the fact he was unable to return to the ethers, that also had never happened before. *How long is this transformation going to last?* He'd retained all his powers, but everything else was the same as it was when he'd been alive. *Had he really even died, or had he been somehow preserved until this moment?* He shook his head tiredly, only the Spirits knew for sure. Now it was imperative he regain contact with them to find out why he was here.

He hadn't answered her question, so she'd returned to the living room to see what was the matter. She found him standing in front of the window staring out into the night. *He won't be able to see the stars,* she thought, wondering if he would notice. In a big city such as this it was a fact all the city lights covered

up the beauty of the heavens. It was one thing she'd always hated about living in the city.

"Gray Eagle, are you hungry?" She asked again, right behind him now.

He turned to look at her blankly, "Hm?"

She could see he'd been very preoccupied with something, "Are you hungry?" She repeated.

"Yes, I don't suppose you have any elk?" He asked hopefully. She'd obviously gotten over her embarrassment because she was standing very close to him again. So close in fact he could kiss her easily if he bent down. His eyes widened, *where had that thought come from?* She was his charge, he was her Guardian, he wasn't supposed to have these kind of feelings for her.

*Oh, oh!* Something was definitely not right. Eartha saw his eyes widen. There was a need to step closer to him, to hug him as she'd done when she was little and grieving, but something else kept her frozen in place. The something was the desire she saw filling his eyes. *Oh no, this was bad, this was very bad!* It was bad enough she wanted him, but it was even worse he wanted her too. She'd just figured what had happened before was a reaction to being in the ethers so long. The desire filling his eyes was very real though, and she wasn't sure she was ready to handle such a thing from her Guardian. She took a step back and then two more. "I'll go look in the freezer, I think I have a couple of elk steaks left from Dad's last hunting trip." Quickly she turned around and raced back into the kitchen. *Please, Great Spirit, let there be elk steaks in the freezer!* She thought.

Sure enough when she dug into the back of the freezer she found one plastic freezer bag with two medium sized elk steaks in it. She'd have to thaw them out in the microwave, but she was sure she could cook them in a way he'd like. While the steaks were thawing she pulled two cans of corn from the cupboard opened and emptied them into a pan, putting it on the stove to heat. A few minutes later she felt his presence in the kitchen. She stiffened for a minute then shrugged her shoulders and continued making dinner.

The Guardian watched her, she was nervous around him now, that wasn't good. If he was here to protect her from something, he needed her to trust him. She wouldn't even let him explain what happened in the bedroom. He crossed his arms over his chest taking an authoritative stance without realizing it.

A short time later, they ate in silence. Eartha wouldn't even look at him now. Saddened he watched her from beneath his lashes so she wouldn't know she was being observed. *When had she become a woman?* It seemed like just yesterday he'd been cuddling her on his lap, and murmuring broken Lakota phrases to help ease her grief. This little bundle of heavy emotions was not quite what he'd expected. Oh, he'd watched her grow up, guided her. She'd even called on him a few times without realizing it, and he'd unselfishly given his help, only wanting his charge to be happy. However, somehow in this one day their relationship had changed drastically. To his astonishment he found himself responding to her as he would to a woman he would court.

He was giving her the "look" again. Eartha found she could barely swallow her food. Oh, he was trying to be discreet about it, but she'd had the Guardian's eyes on her whole life, and while she hadn't always known who was watching her, she recognized his gaze. His gaze made her feel first cold and then hot. She chanced a glance up, *yeah, he was watching her.*

She swallowed the last of her corn, and muttered, "See anything interesting?"

Gray Eagle's eyes wandered down to her backside. Oh, *he saw something interesting all right*, he thought, watching her slim backside sway back and forth as she took her plate to the sink. He didn't think she'd appreciate what he found interesting at the moment though. He'd thought she was over her embarrassment, but apparently he'd been wrong.

That night Eartha installed her "Guardian" on the couch, showing him how to work the remote for the television and retired to her room. After taking a hot shower her muscles felt positively sore, as if she'd taken a beating. Well she had, just not a physical one. *Perhaps her poor mind was transferring its confusion to her muscles*, she thought with a wry grin of self censure.

In the living room Gray Eagle watched the evening news. *So much violence*, he thought despairingly. He'd known there was violence of course, but in the ethers he only observed Eartha and hadn't been privy to what was truly going on around and in her world. She could be prone to any number of dangers, at the moment there was even a serial rapist on the loose. *Whatever a serial*

*rapist* was. From the sound of the newscaster it was a man who sexually violated women. He would have to ask Eartha to be sure. He couldn't take the chance of this being the thing that was why he was here.

The Guardian had been living in her home for two weeks now, and though they were never completely comfortable with each other, it was bearable now. They'd actually fallen into a routine. Like many Indian men, Gray Eagle didn't have any qualms about helping around the house. He'd learned to use all the devices and could even put together a decent meal now. It was that evening when she'd come into the house and found Gray Eagle in the kitchen micro waving dinner when he'd sprung the question on her.

His back still turned to her he'd asked, "What is a serial rapist?"

Eartha had stood there in shock for a moment and then remembered Gray Eagle had been watching the news a lot. He must've been following the reports of the serial rapist who was loose in town. So far he'd attacked and raped five women. It made Eartha glad Gray Eagle was here, she found she didn't want to be alone right now. Also she figured Gray Eagle's continued and obvious presence in her home would deter any attacker. At least she hoped it would, because she knew Gray Eagle cared deeply about her, and she didn't want to know what he'd do if something like the serial rapist happened to her.

She set her backpack down and slowly took off her coat before she answered him. "It's a man that attacks a woman and forces her to have sex with him. Serial means that he really gets a kick out of it, and rapes many women. It means once he's started raping he can't stop."

He didn't say anything for a moment. "Thank you, I will know better now what I am protecting you against." He finally said, setting a plate down with her dinner in front of her.

She'd finally sat down, and was looking up at him before she reached out and covered his hand with hers. "I'm glad you're here." She told him quietly looking into his liquid black eyes. At the same moment a foreign sensation ran through her heart, and belatedly she realized she loved him. She wasn't sure exactly when it happened, but it had. Oh, she'd always loved him before, with a four year old's love for a gentle Guide, but that had changed and blossomed into love for him as a man. She could never tell him of course because once his work here was done, he'd go back to the Spirit World. She doubted she'd ever see him again. Oh, he would always watch over her, but he would never again appear to her in the physical.

He turned his hand over and squeezed hers gently, smiling down at her. She had a rather bemused expression on her face, as though she'd discovered something she hadn't known was there. But for once her mind was closed to his. Not that he would ever deliberately intrude now unless he felt she was in danger. However, usually he could feel the force of her thoughts knocking at the door he put up in his mind to keep himself from invading

her mental space. *The thoughts were no longer there*, he thought with surprise. He wasn't sure if this was good or bad. He'd been able to keep all his special powers up to this point. Perhaps like his ability to enter the ethers he would slowly begin to lose his other powers as well.

Sitting across from her while they ate dinner in silence, he watched her. In a kind of stunned realization he knew he wanted to stay with her. If they'd been living in his own time he would have started the courting process almost immediately; his reaction to her was very strong. He also knew in a flash of insight he loved her, the love for his charge had changed into love for her as a woman. But he didn't know if he was going to be allowed to stay, and so he kept these thoughts and feelings to himself.

Gray Eagle finished watching the news and was staring out the living room window, as was his wont to do now before sleep. He put his hands in his pockets and tipped his head up looking for the lights in the sky. It had disturbed him at first, because he hadn't been able to see them. Standing there, he wished he could see them now. *Perhaps he would get a sign as to where to go from here*. Confusion was reigning his life now, because while he was fairly certain he was here to prevent Eartha from being attacked, so far nothing had happened. Not that he wanted the attack to happen, but at least he would know then this was why he was here. With a sigh, he chucked his jeans and lay down on Eartha's sofa. He hated the thing and would have preferred to

sleep on the floor, but he didn't want to hurt her feelings and so he put up with the uncomfortable contraption. Why whites insisted on raising their sleeping areas up from the floor amazed him. He'd fallen off the damned thing three times that first week before his mind learned he was a few feet off of the floor.

Eartha rolled over in bed for the fourth time. She was overtired, and whenever that happened it took her awhile to drop off. Finally, about two in the morning she fell into a deep sleep and began to dream. It was a lovely dream and she smiled in her sleep. She was sitting in her claw footed bathtub in a cloud of bubbles. There was no light but what the candles threw, and they were all over the bathroom. Her brow crinkled, that was a nice touch but she never lit that many candles in the bathroom, as she'd always been afraid she'd start a fire. The water was just the right temperature to relax her, it was hot, but not too hot. She leaned her head back and propped her feet at the other end of the tub to keep herself from slipping. Her body felt like melting wax, her muscles were so relaxed. In a fuzzy corner of her mind she realized someone else was in the room with her, but the presence didn't frighten her; *she knew who it was*. It was strange because he was behind her but she could see his shadow hidden from the candlelight with her mind. *That was weird, but then she was dreaming, and anything could happen in a dream...*

Gray Eagle had dropped off not too long after Eartha, her restless movements alerting him to the fact she wasn't asleep. Like Eartha he began to dream. In the dream he saw his best

friend, Eartha's old grandfather and he was smiling. In the dream Gray Eagle asked, "What are you doing here old friend?" But the man merely smiled and beckoned. Gray Eagle found himself inside the bathing room, and Eartha was there in the bathtub surrounded by bubbles. There were candles all over the room, on the shelves, above the toilet, along the sides of the bathtub in places where she couldn't knock them over. Her head was resting on the back of the tub, and she looked so peaceful. *Why was he here?* While the idea of watching Eartha bathe was something he would love to observe if he had the right, he felt like an intruder knowing she was not aware of him. Suddenly she shifted a bit, and he got a look at some of her body, namely the top portion. She was beautifully made, small, but just the right size to fit in his hands. He felt his mouth go dry, and then to his astonishment she murmured his name, "Gray Eagle..." with a sigh of contentment. Seconds later he heard his friend murmur, "Do this thing for her." Gray Eagle knew his friend was gone, but he was still in the bathing room. *Why?* Then Eartha sat up and turned in the bathtub, her form again revealed to him. Her violet eyes were luminous, and she reached out a hand to him, "I love you..." she whispered. Then like so much smoke the dream evaporated, and Gray Eagle came awake with a jerk. Something was rustling by his ear; he sat up. On his pillow was a pink piece of paper, and on it was a picture of a woman in a bubble bath, just as Eartha had been in the dream. *Was this a sign? Was it all right for him to love Eartha as a woman? Was it a sign the Spirits would allow him to stay?*

Eartha woke with a jerk! *Had he truly been there in her dream?* It sure felt like it. *Was he going to be allowed to stay with her?* She turned over in bed and stared morosely at the wall. She wished she knew. *Had she really told him she loved him?* There was no shame in her actions, but it really felt like he was there, and she didn't know if she wanted him to know that about her yet.

Another three weeks slid by quickly. Gray Eagle was sitting on the couch as usual staring at the crumpled piece of pink paper. He'd debated with himself several times about whether or not to set up the bubble bath for her as he'd seen in his dream. He'd even gone so far as to ask Eartha if he could borrow some money. Then he'd gone to the store and bought bergamot scented bubble bath. It didn't smell exactly like the plant as he'd remembered it, but it was close enough. He had yet to actually do the bubble bath for her though. It wouldn't be fair to her if he suddenly disappeared into the ethers, to resume his role as her Guardian if he'd done something to show her how much he loved her. He pushed the hair back from his face. He didn't know what the answer was, all he could do was wait and hope. At some point another sign had to show up.

Eartha had opened a window in her room to let some fresh air in. It had been an unusually warm winter day with the temperatures soaring into the upper 60's. The air in the house was stale from having to leave the windows closed to keep out the winter air.

She stood at the window just breathing in deep breaths of fresh air into her lungs. She loved Spring and this day in winter was mimicking it to perfection. She turned and quietly crawled into bed leaving the window open, but the screen closed. They still hadn't caught the serial rapist, but he hadn't struck for weeks. With Gray Eagle in the house she felt safe leaving the windows open. He would hear her if she called. *It was strange how she'd become so dependent upon him these last weeks*, she thought before falling asleep.

Gray Eagle was sleeping when he suddenly heard a strange sound. It wasn't enough to disturb his sleep yet, but enough to make him shift on the couch. Then for the first time in weeks he felt Eartha's thoughts brush the door in his mind. Only they weren't just brushing, they were banging insistently! He awoke swiftly, and opened the door. She was still sleeping but there was some part of her mind that was terrified. *Was she having a nightmare?* He raced to her room and quickly assessed two things. Eartha was still asleep but moving restlessly, and the second was the screen had been cut! He scanned the room looking for the intruder. He couldn't see one, but scanning the room with his mind he detected a presence. *This was the serial rapist, he could feel the man's ugliness!* Only this time he'd decided that raping wasn't enough of a thrill, this time he was going to kill his victim! Scouring the man's mind he discovered he'd already raped and killed one poor woman, she just hadn't been found yet! He continued to probe the room looking for the source of evil. Suddenly Eartha sat straight up in bed and let

out a blood curdling scream! Her finger was pointing at the closet. The ugliness touched Gray Eagle's mind full force. The creature leaped from the closet as Eartha screamed, obviously intending to shut her up.

Eartha watched at what seemed like slow motion in a movie take place. The intruder leapt from his hiding place, but out of the corner of her eye she could see Gray Eagle. *He was racing to stop the intruder!* The man was almost upon her when Gray Eagle tackled him to the floor.

The man was masked, but she could see his eyes. He had the eyes of an angel, blue as the sky, but there was pure evil radiating out from them. They were struggling now, Gray Eagle trying to wrest a knife from the intruder. She sat there motionless, unable to speak for fear of interrupting his concentration. Suddenly she watched as he gave a mighty shove and threw the intruder against a back wall.

*He felt his power returning! It was gathering strength inside him!* Before the intruder could move, he lifted his palm, pinning the man to the wall by the sheer power of his thoughts. Seconds later what looked like waves of colored lightning shot out of his palm, and the intruder looked as if he was plugged into a light socket. His hair stood on end, his eyeballs bugged out, and a few moments later she could actually smell his flesh burning! She looked at Gray Eagle and his eyes were a terrible thing to see, pure rage was reflected in them, and they looked like hard chips of obsidian. She knew then he wouldn't stop until the intruder was incinerated. She had to stop him, the man

couldn't hurt her anymore, and was long dead. She walked up to him, but didn't touch him lest the force of his power turn on her before he realized who it was.

"Gray Eagle! Gray Eagle!" She shouted, trying desperately to get his attention.

*He wanted to do more than kill the man! He wanted to burn his soul, destroy him!* Gray Eagle felt the rage pour through him and into his palm. *He wouldn't stop until the creature was disintegrated and destroyed forever!* Something was knocking at the door in his mind, but the rage he was feeling overcame everything.

"Gray Eagle! Gray Eagle! He's dead! You can stop now, I'm fine! He didn't hurt me!" She yelled urgently. She had to get his attention, otherwise there wouldn't be anything left for the police to identify.

Finally he seemed to hear her because still holding the intruder to the wall with his strange lightening, he turned to her. Eartha was safe, he could see her, and she was calling him. His big body shuddered twice, the shakes going all the way down to his toes, and then his hand dropped.

*He was looking at her, thank Goddess!* She continued to tell him she was safe and he could stop now. The rage left his eyes to be replaced by relief. He moved towards her shakily and wrapped his arms around her.

*He leaned on her, he must've used a lot of energy to need to lean on her!*

"You are safe?" He asked in a whisper, for his voice could project no more.

"I'm fine," she told him, "you really fried that guy!"

He already knew what the intruder looked like, he didn't need to glance that way. He just continued to hug Eartha to him, so relieved she hadn't been harmed. Some part of his still functioning mind knew it would be difficult to explain how he'd killed the intruder, but they would think of something.

They stood there wrapped in each others arms, and he knew he had to tell her. It didn't matter if he got sent back to the ethers, which could be what his return of powers meant. He wanted her to know.

"I love you." He told her quietly, "No matter what happens remember this."

"I love you too." She replied.

He bent down and she knew he was reaching to kiss her forehead, but she lifted her face.

He'd only meant to give her a gentle kiss, but then she'd moved, and he'd found her lips beneath his. He continued to watch her, but her eyes had closed. She didn't do anything else, just stood there with her lips pressed to his. He hugged her close to him, and pressed back. Her lips parted a bit and he drank her sweet breath not knowing if he would ever do so again. Then he stepped back.

"You'd better call the police." He said, turning his back on her and viewing the carnage behind them.

Feeling like a wooden marionette, Eartha stumbled over to the bedside phone and called 911. The police arrived five minutes later.

Eartha and Gray Eagle presented a united front; they each knew were they even to explain what had happened the police wouldn't believe them. In the end the police were so glad to catch the guy they didn't ask too many questions about how he'd died. It was ruled he'd died by a random lightening strike, although everyone in the room knew random lightening wouldn't turn someone into a burned crisp, and there'd been no storm. The description even with what was left of the man matched from the other victims, and the police took the body and within an hour were gone.

Gray Eagle had expected to be sent to the ethers immediately, but it didn't happen. Several days passed and Eartha and Gray Eagle had taken to sleeping together, their arms wrapped around one another.

It was on one such night that Gray Eagle was holding Eartha while she slept, and wondering how much longer they could go on like this. The need to consummate their love was growing rather strong, and he didn't know how much longer he could wait. Oh, he kissed her often enough, stroked and petted her, but he'd stopped short of the actual consummation. In some ways he thought it was bad enough he'd touched her at all, he knew she was going to grieve when he was gone. Finally he'd dropped off to sleep, his arms still tightly around her. *If he had his way he'd never let her go again.*

Eartha opened her eyes groggily, *where was she?* Then she felt Gray Eagle's strong heartbeat beneath her ear and knew exactly where she was. She sighed, he'd been absolutely adamant about not making love to her, still afraid he'd be returned to the ethers. She kept trying to explain to him it didn't matter, it was going to hurt as much as ever whether they made love or not. He was hard headed though, and on this subject refused to back down. She kissed his chest, and felt his arms tighten around her and a contented rumble move through him. She wished she knew what they were going to do.

Gray Eagle was dreaming again or so he thought. He'd opened his eyes to see his old friend and Eartha's grandfather standing at the foot of the bed. He was smiling and thoughts began to pass back and forth between them.

"She is everything you could've hoped for in a wife?"

Gray Eagle looked down at Eartha and his features softened.

"Yes." He thought back. "But I could be returned to the ethers anytime. I do not want her to grieve."

"You still don't understand, do you?"

"What do you mean, old friend?"

"You will never be returned to the ethers. You never really died Gray Eagle. You were simply suspended for a time until your true mate was born. We knew you would have to have something to do in that time, so we allowed you to be her Guardian, to watch over her." His friend gestured with his hands.

"What do you mean, true mate?" He was puzzled again. He saw his friend roll his eyes, and realized this was where Eartha got

it from.

"Eartha was born in our time, and had she survived you would have found each other, but something happened and she died. There were suspicions she had been killed, but no one knew for sure. I began to have an idea what was going on while I was alive. The dreams you see. But I didn't truly understand until I died, and met Eartha's spirit. It was then it was explained to me. She had made agreements with both of us prior to birth that she would be born into this time, and that you would be her Guardian. It all happened exactly as she said it would. You see she knew the evil was going to reach out and try to destroy her again. If that happened you would both have to live another life cycle before you found each other again. It was easier to send you into the ethers and have you be her Guardian, and prevent the death that would be hers if you were not there. Now that it has been prevented you will each live out your lives as you were supposed to. Unless of course you wish to return to the ethers." His friend gave him a sly look.

"I have no desire to ever return to the ethers. I only desire to be with her." He looked down at Eartha again and kissed her gently.

He heard a gentle swish of wind, and words, "And so it shall be." When he looked up his friend was gone.

Gray Eagle's arms tightened around Eartha, and she mumbled in her sleep. He was going to be able to stay with her. For the first time in centuries the burden that had been his was lifted. He knew what he had to do. He carefully eased his arms

from Eartha and went into the bathroom. He found as many candles as he could, and lit them all until the room was nothing but flickering lights. Then he filled the tub with hot water and the bergamot bubble bath solution he'd bought weeks ago. When the preparations were completed, he went back to Eartha.

For the first time he felt permission to be as close to her as he wanted. She was going to be his wife, of that he had no doubt. Carefully, so as not to wake her up, he removed her clothing, staring down for a minute at her gently rounded body. She was more than just a body to him, it was her spirit he truly loved. He lifted her gently trying not to jar her too much, and took her into the bathroom.

Eartha felt very warm water all around her, as well as Gray Eagle's arms holding her upright. She sighed, and murmured, still half asleep.

Now he wanted her to wake up, he wanted to tell her he was staying. With one hand still holding her upright so she didn't slip down into the water, the other began to wash her gently.

"Eartha." He said quietly. Seconds later her eyes opened.

*What was she doing in the bathtub?* She'd tried to get Gray Eagle in here several times, but he'd claimed it was too much of a temptation.

"What's happened?" She asked worriedly, afraid he'd changed his mind because he knew he was going back.

"I'm staying." He told her gently, still rubbing the cloth

over her.

"Forever?" She asked, still afraid to believe.

"Forever." He answered, looking down into her beautiful eyes.

She sat up quickly and put her arms around his neck. He could feel her tears wetting his chest, and his arms tightened fiercely around her.

"I love you." She said, her arms also tightening.

"I love you also." He told her again. He had her now, and he was never going to let her go! His mission was accomplished, and his life complete. He was no longer Guardian, but a man as he'd always been meant to be.