

Willowmist!
by Lesley L. Smith

I was about to take a break for my morning water ration when Uncle Hector sauntered into my City Hall office.

"Morning, Cassie." He folded his lanky frame into the chair on the other side of my desk, and took off his sweat-soaked straw hat.

"Morning, Uncle Hector. How does it look for the name-change vote tonight?"

He scowled. "Not good."

"Heat it!" I said.

"Language, young lady," Uncle Hector said, shaking his head. "What would your folks have said if they heard you talking like that?"

I sighed. "My mom would have said our family has a reputation to uphold, and it doesn't include swearing."

"She was a smart lady, your mama," he said.

"It's just so frustrating," I said. "How can they vote to change the name of the town on its bicentenary?"

"Some of the folks I talked to this morning said, 'Who's ever seen mist 'round here?' or 'All we have is that one sickly willow.'"

"Where's their sense of history?" I asked.

"Guess it's limited to drinking and dancing on Founder's Day" he said.

"Our poor great-great-whatever grandpa Jake must be turning over in his grave."

"I feel like I failed him." I pushed some papers around on my desk to avoid his gaze.

"Don't worry, Cass, I know you tried your best to talk the Mayor out of this."

I nodded. "For once, he didn't listen to me at all."

Uncle Hector picked up his hat, rotating it in his hands. "He's got a lot on his mind these days."

Doc Gomez burst through the door. "Cassie." His eyes drilled right into mine.

"Come on in," I said, "everyone else does."

Uncle Hector stood. "I should be going."

"Okay, Uncle Hector. Thanks. Let me know if you hear anything else."

Uncle Hector tipped his hat as he passed the doctor. "Doc."

"Hector." Doc Gomez nodded back and approached my desk. "The medical shipment isn't coming. I called down to Denver and they said they hadn't gotten their shipments because of the fuel shortages." He paused. "We at least need some aspirin or something similar," he said. "I'm not sure Mayor Tinde's son is going to pull through if we don't get it."

"He--." I cleared my throat. There was no way kids were going to die on my watch. "Okay. Here's what we do. You call around the neighboring towns and see if anyone has what you need. I'll send someone out on horseback to get it. I'll go myself if it comes down to it."

Doc Gomez breathed easier. "I knew you'd come up with something, Cassie. I'll go start calling." He fairly ran out of the room.

I took a deep breath. Days like today made me wonder why I'd ever agreed to be Deputy Mayor. Heat my mom and her family-responsibility lectures.

It was definitely time for a break. I got up and strolled out the front door of Town Hall on my way to The Watering Hole.

"Deputy Mayor!" Armando Green had apparently been waiting for me to come out so he could pounce.

"Morning, Mr. Green. Is there something I can do for you?" As if there

was any question.

"Yes. Look at this tree." He pointed at the town's sole surviving willow tree. "You have to water it. It's dying. It's the town's namesake, for heat's sake!"

"Don't tell me it's the town's namesake! I'm a Stratton! I know the name of the town!" At least until the vote at the pow-wow tonight.

"Quit yelling at me!"

"You yelled at me first!" A bead of sweat streamed down my face.

"You're giving me a headache," Armando said quietly, fiddling with his pocketknife. His expressive eyes were framed by long, dark lashes. He was quite handsome when he wasn't screaming.

"Well, you're giving me a headache." I sighed. "I would love to save this tree. I swear. But how? Are we going to take water away from human beings to give to it? Or do you have some magical way to make it rain?"

Armando cut a strip of bark off the tree and popped it in his mouth. "The ecosystem is all tied together. We need all of it. The trees and bushes and flowers depend on the insects and birds and so on, all the way to human beings." He pointed at the bark. "Do you want some?"

My mouth fell open for a moment. "Do I want some bark? Do I look like some kind of bug to you? Why would I want some bark? Why are you eating bark? That can't be good for the tree."

"For the headache." Armando squinted. "I thought you said you were getting a headache, too?"

"Huh?" I said intelligently.

"The Latin name of willows is Salix. Their bark contains Salicin, which our digestive system turns into salicylic acid."

"Uh, acid? Why would that be good?"

"I guess Deputy Mayors don't need to know much science." He grinned. "Salicylic acid is also known as aspirin."

"You're kidding."

His grin got even wider. "Nope."

"That's so cool, Armando!" I grabbed him for a hug, and I may have held on a little longer than was strictly necessary.

"Wow, you're welcome, Ms. Deputy Mayor."

"Call me Cassie." That sexy grin of his was infectious. "I need you to take some bark to Doc Gomez and explain to him how to use it. And I need to find Uncle Hector and get the word out about our fabulous tree. We're going to save this tree, Armando! And the name of the town!"

As I stepped into The Watering Hole, Uncle Hector greeted me. "Hey, Cassie. Do you want your usual?"

"Yes." I wiped the sweat from my face as I looked around the crowded room, lit by sunlight streaming in through the windows. "Listen up, everyone. I have an announcement to make. That sickly willow in front of town hall has medicine that can help John Tinde and everyone else in town. We have to save it. I'm going to give it some of my water ration, and I'm asking the rest of you to do the same."

A soft buzz of conversation filled the bar.

Uncle Hector put my glass of water on the counter.

I picked it up, took one sip, and turned to the door. "I'm not just blowing smoke. Come on, I'll show you." I marched outside, across the street and right up to the willow.

Most of the clientele from the bar followed me.

I poured the water on the ground near the tree.

"Anyone else?" I asked.

People glanced at each other and muttered.

Uncle Hector stepped forward. "If a Stratton says this tree has medicine, that's good enough for me." He poured some water around the tree.

"Thanks, Uncle Hector." I squeezed his hand as he stepped over to stand next to me. "This willow tree is important, and the name of our town, Willowmist, is important. For two hundred years people have lived and loved in Willowmist."

Some joker in back yelled, "And died and hated."

I smiled. "Yes. Our parents and grandparents and their parents before them lived their lives, and lost them, in Willowmist. Our children were born in Willowmist. Don't you want your grandchildren to be born in Willowmist, too?"

Some people were nodding.

"I'm going to talk about this more tonight at the pow-wow. I hope to see you all there."

After thanking Uncle Hector again, I went looking for Doc Gomez. I found him at the Tindes house.

He sat at the kitchen table with the Mayor and his wife Judy. They were all smiling.

"Hi, folks. I hope you don't mind, Rob Jr. let me in. Is there good news?"

Judy jumped up from the table. "Oh, thank you, Cassandra." She threw her arms around me. There was a lot of her to hug.

The Mayor stood up as well. He was an imposing figure at over six feet tall. "Yes, thank you for helping our son, Cassandra."

Judy finally let me loose, so I could take a breath.

"He's doing better? That's wonderful. I'm relieved."

"We all are. I heard about your impromptu speech at the willow tree, earlier." Mayor Tinde held out his hand for a shake. "I know you do a lot, Cassie. Thank you."

The town square had been transformed for the pow-wow and party. Strings of colored lights cast a gentle glow over long picnic tables laden with food and drink. There was a large flat area for dancing and already-crowded bleachers set up behind it. A small raised wooden stage contained a large variety of instruments, including a piano, guitars, basses, and a huge selection of drums. Mayor Tinde stood near the stage and waved me over to him.

"Hi, Cassie," he said. "There's been a change of plans."

He was interrupted by another one of his staff whispering in his ear.

Armando appeared out of nowhere. "Hi, Cassie. Good turn-out tonight, huh? It bodes well for the willow tree. And the speech you're going to give about the town name bodes well for that."

"Hi, Armando. I'm glad you're here. I need your moral support."

He rubbed my arm. "You've got it."

The Mayor stepped onto the stage, holding his hand up for silence.

He got it immediately.

"Welcome to the special bicentenary celebration of the Willowmist Founder's Day."

This was met with a variety of hooting and hollering.

"I'm Mayor Tinde." He grinned.

As if we didn't know. Everyone laughed, including me.

"I called for a pow-wow this evening to discuss the issue of the town name. Some people say this name is too old-fashioned and doesn't represent our town any more. I, myself, may have said this."

I scowled.

"Some people may've also said this whole thing started because of some bad blood between the Strattons and the Tindes." The Mayor glanced at me. "That is absolutely not true. My Deputy Mayor, Cassandra Stratton, has been doing an excellent job. I say this despite the fact she has strongly opposed me on the name change."

There was some chuckling in the crowd.

The Mayor held his hand up again.

He was supposed to introduce me soon, and my stomach felt like a rattler was racing around in it.

"I promised to introduce her now, so she could have her say, but I'm not going to do that."

"Hey!" exploded out of me. I couldn't believe he would do this. Heat him!

He grinned at me. "She has recently convinced me that willow trees, our town's history, and our town's name are very important. I therefore withdraw my request for a vote over the town name. This town was, is, and will always be known as Willowmist. I also urge you to support her request to donate some of your water ration to the willow tree in front of city hall. Everyone in my family already has."

What?

Armando rubbed my shoulder. "You won," he whispered. "Congratulations."

"On a more personal note, I would really like to thank Doc Gomez, Arborist Green, and Cassandra for helping my son recover from his illness." Moisture filled his eyes. "My family thanks you all from the bottom of our hearts. In a related issue, I've decided this will be my last term as Mayor of our fine town. I want to focus on my family."

My mouth fell open. I had no idea he was even considering this.

Mayor Tinde turned to face me and grinned again. "In the fall, I will be endorsing Deputy Mayor Cassandra Stratton to take over as Mayor."

I couldn't breathe.

"But enough with the announcements. Let's party!"

The band started.

"Cassie, are you all right?" asked Armando.

I took a breath. "I think so. The Mayor totally surprised me."

Armando stepped very close and said, "You know, I've never kissed a Mayor."

I smiled. "What a coincidence, I've never kissed an arborist." I lifted my chin up.

Armando pressed his lips against mine and everything and everyone else faded away.

"Ahem," someone cleared his throat.

Armando and I reluctantly rejoined the world.

"I said, excuse me," Uncle Hector said. "I didn't mean to interrupt your ...celebrating. But I wanted to tell you that your folks, and even old Jake Stratton, would be very proud of what you did today, Cassie." He paused. "I'm very proud of you."

My eyes got misty.