

David The Painter Boy

Part One

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*I*t was a pleasant evening after a long summer's day. The sun was slowly sinking behind the trees as a woman hurriedly walked into the outskirts of town, nervously glancing around her as she went. In her hand she carried a large woven basket covered in cloth. The woman stopped and looked around, gazing at the many buildings lining both sides of the street. After a moment of thought, she headed in the direction of an old Inn, climbed up the front steps and disappeared into the darkness of the interior. An hour later, a man came up riding at a fast gallop, his horse breathing hard. The man, practically tripping over his feet, hastened into the Inn with a clear urgency.

It would appear to the average observer that although there was urgency to the man's haste, there was no connection between the woman who carried the basket and the man who ran into the Inn. In fact, a connection was being made between the two that would shape the path for the future. Presently, the man and woman hurried out of the Inn and together they set off into the deepening twilight in the direction of Cumber Ranch.

12 Years Later ...

David Cumber opened his eyes to see sunlight filtering through the window, dust motes floating in and out of the patches of light. He groaned and rolled over, trying to figure out what had woken him from a most wonderful dream. "David!" The shout came again and David knew at once what had woken him. "Coming!" He shouted back as he rolled out of bed and hurriedly dressed.

As David rounded the stable corner he came face to face with the cook Miss Wendale. Miss Wendale was a woman with a loving face and kind smile (most of the time), but she had a zero tolerance for laziness.

"Where have you been?" she asked with a small frown on her face. "Surely you can't still have been sleeping? The sun has been up for nearly four hours!" All David could do was look at his feet in shame.

"Well don't just stand there looking at your feet, get going!" she said with a chuckle.

“Yes ma’am,” said David and he turned with a smile on his face, toward the barn to start on his chores.

David could never understand why Miss Wendale had stayed on as cook after she helped to deliver him 12 years ago. Life at the Cumber ranch was toilsome, and being a midwife was certainly a better paying job than a cook, especially when your employer was someone like Mr. Cumber, who payed her next to nothing. Whenever David asked Miss Wendale why she wasn’t still a midwife, she would respond by scolding him for asking about such nonsense.

Ever since he was little, David’s parents had spent little time with him, and he mostly spent his time in the company of the cook. He had always hoped that as he got older, they would notice him more, but as time passed he only felt more invisible. The only time they really paid attention to him was when they had another task for him, or else found something to complain about. His mother spent most of her time running the ranch and embroidering tapestries as a side job. His father, on the other hand, was fond of gambling and drinking, so people were always coming to the Cumber ranch to collect unpaid debts. All in all, David Cumber lived a humble and hard working life but he was never one to complain and he was certainly better off than some.

It was nearly ten o’clock by the time David, sweaty and sunburned, came into the kitchen.

“Have you finished?” asked the cook with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes ma’am.” said David as he pulled a steaming plate of eggs and bacon across the wooden table toward him.

“Is Ember all fed?” she asked, “She’s an old horse. It’s a surprise that she will be having a foal at her age.” David nodded, unable to answer with his mouth full of eggs.

After breakfast, David walked into the barn and grabbed his longbow and a quiver of arrows. David opened the stable door and crouched down.

“Come on Basil, time to get going,” he said as he patted his leg. A coal black dog bounded up and ran to David, licking his face happily.

“All right, come on, we need to check the traps,” said David chuckling as he walked out and started up the road leading to the mountains. As they were climbing, the dog would run up ahead, then come bounding back happily and wag his heavy tail against David’s legs.

Together they checked all the traps, David managed to catch a small deer (which he released), three rabbits, and a dangerous looking raccoon. After checking the traps David remembered he had set one further up the mountain, so with Basil trotting at his heels David started to climb the steepest part. As David climbed the last ridge he heard a low humming noise. When he came nearer and saw what was in the trap he fell back in shock. There, humming angrily, was a lavomuh. A lavomuh is a very, very rare creature. Lavomuhs’ are dark red, almost brown with four little soft hooved feet and resemble a fluffy round rock. After David got over some of his shock, he went forward and quickly bent down to untie the poor creature.

“Shh, It’s okay.” David whispered as he stroked it’s soft fur.

Cradling the lavomuh in his arms, David made his way back down the mountain, forgetting all about the other creatures. The sun was just dipping below the western horizon, as the wind started to pick up and the light quickly faded. David took off his coat and wrapped it around the little lavomuh. The darkness outside was complete, as David walked into the dimly lit kitchen, still hugging the lavomuh to his chest. Then out of nowhere, a figure came at him from the dark table and wrapped him in a bone breaking embrace.

“Where have you been! I have been so worried about you!” cried the cook, sounding both angry and relieved at the same time.

“I’m fine,” replied David in a half suffocated croak. “I found this lavomuh stuck in one of my traps way up in the mountains.” “Is father back yet?” added David eagerly.

“Oh, I wouldn’t bother him right now dear, you know how he gets when he’s in one of his moods,” replied the cook. “He went upstairs to look for you, when you didn’t show up for dinner and he caught sight of one of your paintings.”

“I suppose he threw it in the lake again,” David said glumly.

“You know how much your father dislikes your paintings. Maybe next time you should put them somewhere else.” Said the cook in a sympathetic voice. “It’s just that your parents would rather you do something useful, rather than waste your time on such silly things.”

That night, after putting the lavomuh in the barn David lay in his bed looking at the stars through his window, wondering for the hundredth time if he really belonged there. In the morning he would look for his painting, but not now, it was too dark to see. Right now what he needed was sleep.

The next morning David rose early to retrieve his painting from the lake. As he was searching he caught sight of his reflection in the lake and smiled. A face with light brown hair and hazel eyes that shimmered gold in the morning light smiled back. Looking down he noticed his painting lying in the reeds, damp, but not ruined. After hauling it out, he set it on the kitchen table to dry. His parents had already left the house, so he figured it would be safe while he went to get the game he had left in the mountains the previous evening. As soon as he got Basil, the two of them started off. It was soon apparent that wild animals had taken the rabbits he had so carelessly left behind. With dismay he headed back to Cumber ranch to finish his chores.

As David went to put Basil back in the barn he noticed a large carriage parked outside of the house, and what was worse, the cook's horse was gone which meant she had either gone into town or else was off visiting with friends. David quickly put Basil away and hastened into the house where he found the Duke of Nevenshire impatiently waiting. The Duke was a very tall and pleasant man but he did not tolerate nonsense and unfair play. David had only seen him once before and knew very little about him except that he occasionally played cards at the Chetting Inn where he stopped to rest during his travels.

More than once before, David's father had promised people money only to vanish later and wiggle his way out of promises. Because of this, Mr. Cumber had an unpleasant reputation and the Duke looked like his patience with Mr. Cumber was coming to an end.

“Who are you?” inquired the Duke as David entered the doorway.

“David Cumber sire.” answered David.

“Is your father here?” asked the Duke angrily.

“I don't know sire,” David replied nervously.

“He owes me quite a sum of money and assured me he would have it today if I came by,” said the Duke getting angrier still. How David wished Miss Wendale were here now. She would know what to do.

“He probably just went down to the river” he said, trying anxiously to calm down the Duke, though he knew his father had left on purpose. To David's dismay this remark only provoked the Duke into absolute rage.

“Your father is a no-good, cheating, rotten...” suddenly the Duke stopped. David looked up to find that all of the anger in the Duke's face had been replaced by a look of astonishment. He was staring at the painting David had left on the kitchen table to dry. The Duke quickly walked over to the kitchen table to examine it closer.

“Who painted this?” asked the Duke in obvious admiration.

“I-I did,” David stuttered in embarrassment. How could he have been so careless to leave his painting out?

“Why are you ashamed?” the Duke asked. “This is a better painting than most I have seen, and certainly the best for a mere boy of your age!”

“My parents say it's a waste of time and they say they're horrid anyway,” said David, still ashamed.

“You have more of them then?” the Duke inquired.

“I have some in my room sire, this one fell in the lake by accident and I was leaving it out to dry,” David replied, unsure of what else to say.

“I would very much like to see them,” remarked the Duke, now in a very pleasant mood.

The next hour was spent with the Duke admiring some of the paintings David had brought down and praising him for his workmanship. David was more than happy to exchange one of his paintings for all his father's unpaid debts when the Duke made it clear he wanted one. By the time the Duke's carriage rolled down the drive both felt they had gotten the better end of the bargain and David began to formulate a plan to sell some of his other paintings. His father need not know the Duke had been by. That would only give rise to questions. No, he would keep quiet and maybe, just maybe, his plan would work. If he asked his parents to let him go into town they would object, but if he asked the cook perhaps she would let him go. He just needed a good excuse. Suddenly an idea sprang into his mind. He would offer to do some shopping for her in Harrington. The cook hated making the long trip and if he brought back supplies he would have an excuse to tell his parents.

David's chores seemed to fly by and soon he heard Miss Wendale coming up the drive. She had been to Chetting to purchase flour and was sweaty from the long ride.

As soon as she had busied herself in the kitchen kneading dough David went in to ask her what he hardly dared to hope for. Before he had gone three feet into the kitchen he knew something was going to go wrong.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked when she saw his face.

"Nothing," he said hastily.

"Do you need anything from Brooking's tomorrow when I go into Harrington?" he blurted out. He could have kicked himself, this was not at all the way he had planned to ask her.

The cook stopped kneading. "Why are you going to Harrington and why would I need something at Brooking's?" she asked quizzingly.

David's palms were sweating but he decided for the truth, or at least part of it.

"I was going to try to sell one of my paintings at the morning market and I was just wondering, you know, if you needed something, then I could go instead and save you the trip". David waited as the cook examined his face.

"Well," she began slowly, "I suppose I could use some more salt and sugar, but you would have to get your chores done early mind you."

"I will," said David eagerly as a smile spread over his face. "I promise," and he raced out the door to get ready for the long trip to Harrington.

He didn't notice the cook quietly chuckling to herself as she watched him through the kitchen window, but he couldn't have cared less. He was finally going to Harrington.

That night after dinner, David wrapped his best painting for the long road. David loved his paintings, he had painted this one from a dream, and he hoped he could get a fair price for it at the marketplace. He was also hoping to see Mr. Bonford, the owner of Brooking's, although he couldn't bring himself to tell the cook. Mr. Bonford had always been kind, and he was hoping Mr. Bonford would give him a second opinion on his artwork before he tried to sell it. He knew Mr. Bonford wouldn't make fun of him if it turned out the Duke was pulling his leg, but there was another reason he wanted to speak to him. David had noticed on previous occasions that they shared a distinctly uncommon feature, the same golden hazel eyes. He didn't dare guess

what this similarity meant, but this time he had the chance to ask, and he intended to. In the morning, he thought as he drifted off to sleep, he would finally find the answer to the question which had burned inside of him for years...