

An excerpt from *Badge of Honor*

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Rattler Strike

Emerson's stomach growled as he herded the *dibe* into sheep camp for the night. The sun on the Navajo Reservation was intense and sweat trickled down his face. Grandpa Charlie had already opened the pole gates to the *bighans*, the corrals where the sheep were kept after grazing all day.

Man, I'm hungry! Maybe Shicheii will make fry bread for dinner. I'll ask him. He's the best grandpa. Emerson imagined hearing the dough sizzle as it hit the hot pan and smelling the delicious aroma when the bread puffed up.

Emerson's miniature dachshund, Lucky, darted off, yipping at the hooves of a lamb, a *dibe yazhi*, wandering away from its mother. Emerson stopped a moment to watch his dog. *I wonder if Lucky's the only dachshund on the Rez. Even if she's not, I bet she's the only one who herds sheep. I'll Google that when I get home.*

Emerson led the remaining *dibe* past his grandfather toward the third *bighan*. He noticed Old Jack closing in on Grandpa Charlie. Emerson narrowed his eyes. *That goat's*

dependable with the dibe. They follow him. But he's way too big and way too mean. I don't trust him.

Suddenly Old Jack bolted, slamming into Grandpa Charlie and knocking him to the ground.

“*Shicheii!*” Emerson darted around the *dibe* to reach him.

“*Dooda!* No!” His grandfather shouted, raising his hand to stop him. “Stay back! Rattlesnake.”

Emerson plowed to a stop. His eyes widened as he watched the rattler slither away toward the open mesa. Grandpa Charlie slowly sat up and rifled through the pouch he wore at his waist.

Emerson rushed forward and knelt on the hard ground.

“*Shicheii*, did it bite you?”

Grandpa Charlie nodded and pulled a suction cup from his pouch. He pressed it to a red wound on his wrist and released the suction. “Our *dibe* made so much noise. I never heard the rattles till Old Jack bolted.” He grimaced at his grandson. “I fell on top of it. Lucky it struck my wrist, not my neck.”

Emerson stared while his grandfather suctioned blood and venom from the wound. He wrinkled his nose. *Okay, think! They mentioned this in first aid in Boy Scouts.*

Suction's not enough. “*Shicheii*, you’re supposed to see a doctor too. Otherwise, you might die.”

Grandpa Charlie grunted as he pushed himself to his feet with his good hand. The bitten one hung limply, the wound reddening. “The closest emergency center is Shiprock. Finish putting the *dibe* in the *bighans*, then feed the dogs, and bring my backpack. Be quick! I’ll wait in the truck.”

Emerson rushed the last of the sheep into the pen. Then he scooped food for the dogs and laid their bowls on the ground. He squatted beside them. “Red, Flint—I’m going with *Shicheii* to the emergency room. Lucky, you better come with me. I can’t protect you if I’m not here.”

The little dachshund gobbled her food while Emerson grabbed his grandfather’s backpack from the sleeping shelter. Then he hugged Red and Flint. “I don’t know when we’ll be back, but you know what to do. Stay and guard the *dibe*.”

Emerson and Lucky raced to the truck. He was surprised to see Grandpa Charlie sitting on the passenger side. His grandfather tilted his head toward the steering wheel. “You’ll have to drive.”

Stunned, Emerson opened the driver’s door and shoved Lucky onto the seat. “But *Shicheii*, you have to be fifteen to drive. I won’t even be twelve until November.” He climbed in and slammed the door shut.

Grandpa Charlie grunted. “See how my wrist is swollen? If I use this hand to drive, the venom will move quicker to my heart.” He looked over at Emerson with a tight smile. “You drive the truck on the mesa around sheep camp. The highway’s no different, only faster. Start the engine. We can’t waste any more time.”

Emerson yanked the bench seat forward so he could reach the gas pedal and brake. When he took hold of the steering wheel, its heat almost burned his hands. Gritting his teeth, he turned the ignition switch and shifted into drive. The truck jerked forward, and Grandpa Charlie braced himself with his good hand.

“I turn left when I get to the highway, right?” he asked his grandfather.

Grandpa Charlie nodded. “*Aoo, Shitsoi*. Follow the highway to Shiprock.” He cradled his wounded wrist. “Keep your eyes on the road, stay in your lane. Don’t speed. If someone ahead is driving too slow, just go around them. You know how. You’ve seen me many times.”

Emerson bounced the truck over the rutted paths until they reached the highway. He buckled his seat belt and glanced at his grandfather. “You too, *Shicheii*.”

Grandpa Charlie grunted and pulled the seatbelt over his lap and shoulder with his good hand. Emerson reached over and clicked it in place.

Emerson rolled down his window for fresh air and looked both ways. *Whew! No one coming.* He inched the truck out and angled into the right-hand lane, slowly picking up speed.

Emerson glanced at his grandfather. “*Shicheii?* You don’t look good. Isn’t there somewhere closer?”

Grandpa Charlie shook his head. “*Dooda.* Not after four o’clock. Newcomb has ambulance service to Shiprock, but you’d have to turn around and backtrack.” His grandfather leaned his head back on the seat. “It must have been a younger snake. They release all their venom when they strike. They don’t know any better.” He exhaled loudly and closed his eyes.

The speed limit sign ahead said 65. *I’ve never gone faster than fifteen around camp.*

Emerson pressed on the gas until he felt like he was flying. Air whipped through the window, cooling his face and neck. Suddenly, a jackrabbit sprinted across the highway. He pulled the wheel to the left and jammed the brake pedal. The truck swerved into the other lane.

Emerson gripped the steering wheel and edged the truck back into the right lane. His heart pounded and sweat trickled down his cheeks. Quickly, he wiped it away before grasping the wheel again with both hands. *That was close!*

He stretched to look out the rear-view mirror and was startled to see a car behind him. His arms tensed as he watched it close in on his rear bumper. Emerson grunted in relief when it pulled into the other lane and zoomed past them.

He shot a quick glance at his grandfather. Grandpa Charlie's head was drooping, his chin almost resting on his chest. *His breathing sounds awful, like something's sawing a log in his throat. He's getting worse. I have to go faster.* Emerson pressed the pedal until the speedometer read 65. *I can do this. I just have to stay calm.*

They zipped by the sign to Sanostee. In minutes, they passed the village of Little Water, and several billboards told them they were nearing Shiprock. Emerson started braking when they hit the city's outskirts. The truck lurched each time he hit the pedal, but he didn't want to be stopped for speeding.

Jeez—how awful that would be! I'm driving without a license, and the cops would probably give Shicheii a ticket for letting me do it. Maybe even put him in jail for—what do they call it? Child neglect? Emerson clenched his jaw. *Except I'm not a child, and this is an emergency.*

Up ahead he saw a blue sign with the letter H on it, and his face lit up. *I can just follow the H signs. But what if I have to turn? Crud! Then I'll have to change lanes.* Quickly, he looked left and right and gulped. *Cars everywhere!*

A movement in the side mirror caught his eye. He gasped. A tribal police SUV in the next lane stayed even with his bumper. *When did he show up?* The officer slowly accelerated, driving closer and closer to Emerson's window.