



Spurs and Saddles: Two Spirits

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Chapter One

Hot and as thick as molasses, the air inside the Southern Star stagecoach was ripe with the body odor of its nine passengers. Toby Garrett, wedged hip to thigh on the rear bench seat between two other men, had tied his kerchief over his mouth to help filter out the worst of the stench and dust that blew into the coach through the small windows.

It helped, but barely.

Toby promised himself that he would do two things as soon as he arrived in San Francisco. The first was to treat himself to a hot bath and a fine, thick steak. The second would be to hightail it to the nearest telegraph office. He'd already composed the telegram to his boss in Kansas City in his head, right down to the part where he told the man in no uncertain terms that should Toby ever find it within himself to travel back to Missouri (a highly unlikely event considering that the only way Toby would submit to traveling cross-country by stagecoach again was if he were in a pine box) he would personally kick Millard Buford's ass six ways from Sunday.

"Garrett," Buford had said as he lit one of his expensive and ever-present cigars, "this is as fine an opportunity as any you're likely to see. Think of it, Toby! Stories have been circulating for years about men finding gold in every stream from San Francisco to Los Angeles. Why, tales have been told of men gutting fish and finding nuggets in their bellies! Now we hear tell that the mines have all gone dry, that there isn't an ounce of gold dust left in California. Yet they say the city of San Francisco has risen like a shining jewel on the edge of the sea. Our readers want to know what's going on west of the Rockies and you're going to find out, first-hand. All expenses paid," he'd said expansively, his jowls jiggling as he puffed out a cloud of thick cigar smoke.

It *was* an incredible opportunity, especially for a young reporter who'd only recently been hired and had barely worn down his first pencil writing anything for the paper yet. In retrospect, it was *too* generous an offer. Toby should have known better, but his ego had won out over his common sense. He'd jumped at the opportunity.

From the first bone-jarring jolt as the coach left the station in Kansas City to today, seventeen days out on the trail, the trip had been pure hell. The stagecoach line's primary purpose was to deliver the mail — paying passengers were just the frosting on the United States Postal Service's money-cake, and little thought went to their comfort.

Nine men, several of whom had questionable personal hygiene habits during the best of times, had been jammed into a roughly seven-foot square wooden box, sitting three abreast on as many bench seats. Two of the plain, unpadded seats faced forward and one backward, obligating the passengers on the second and third seats to sit facing one another with their knees dovetailed. Thick bags of mail had been wedged under everyone's feet, forcing the travelers to hold what baggage couldn't be strapped to the top of the coach on their laps.

Sleep was no more than a series of short, uncomfortable catnaps, taken while sitting upright. Every so often one or the other of the men Toby sat between would nod off, his head lolling against Toby's shoulder until he shrugged it off. It was bad enough that he had to endure the men's nostril-searing body odor — he'd be damned if he'd be made to suffer their bad breath and drool as well.

The roads — if they could even be called that — were chock full of holes and rocks and were often no more than a couple of wagon wheel furrows gouged into the rough prairie. Relay stations, where a fresh driver and “shotgun messenger” (a man whose duty was to protect the coach, its passengers, and first and foremost, the mail) would take the reins of the coach, were more often than not hastily erected, rickety huts that offered no amenities to the passengers.

They rode day and night, briefly pulling over to the side of the road three times a day for meals. Toby snorted to himself for referring, even in his own thoughts, to the slop dished out by the driver as a “meal.” That morning they’d been treated to weak tea, jerked beef and a few mealy crackers, for which they’d paid the princely sum of one dollar. Toby barely had time to see to his personal needs and choke down breakfast before the driver and his messenger, a pair of hardasses with sour tempers and flasks of rotgut secreted away in their coat pockets, had called “*all aboard.*” Scrambling into the coach, Toby had made it to his seat just as the driver cracked his whip over the mules’ backs and the stagecoach had begun to rumble forward. He had no doubt that if he had been a hair slower he’d have been left behind in the middle of nowhere.

Late morning brought with it a heat that sizzled the air. They had torn down the canvas from the small windows to let in whatever breeze could be had, regardless of the dust that blew in with it. In a very short time all of the passengers were covered head to toe with a coating of fine beige grime.

Toby’s kerchief soaked up the sweat that continually beaded up on his brow. His lightweight linen suit felt like a damp rag, clinging to his body. His feet baked in his shoes, perspiration soaking his socks. Staring out the window, he watched the sun climb ever higher into the sky, silently counting the hours until it would set once more and the fierce heat would subside. In the distance, billowing black thunderheads gathered on the horizon, wicked bolts of lightning flashing cloud to ground in crisp, bright white, vertical lines. He’d welcome a storm and the cooling rain and breezes it would bring, even if coach *did* leak like a sieve.

Bouncing, creaking and rattling, the driver raced the coach over rutted ground as fast as he could, whipping his team of slat-ribbed mules on. Toby could hear him bellowing at the beasts above the clatter of the stagecoach’s large wooden wheels and the pounding of hooves. Concerned about the approaching storm and eager to pass the reins to the next driver, the driver worried the team on, irrespective of the gullied and rocky terrain over which they raced.

Suddenly, one of the wheels hit a deep ditch, tipping the coach precariously to the left. Baggage flew across the interior as the passengers, nearly jostled out of their seats, lost their grip on their carpetbags and valises. A heartbeat later the world turned upside down and rolled crazily amid the shrieking of splintering wood and the screams of men and mules alike.

Toby woke with a headache that pounded so fiercely it made him feel sick to his stomach. Every muscle in his body ached mightily, every inch of skin felt as though it had been scraped raw. Lying facedown in the dirt, it took him several moments before he could sit up.

The Southern Star lay strewn around him at the base of a deep gully, fractured nearly beyond recognition. Sharp pieces of splintered wood stuck up like the skeletal remains of a huge beast amid battered valises and trunks. Mailbags had split open wide during the accident and hundreds of vellum envelopes had settled like large chunky snowflakes across the wreckage. The wind, nature's gravedigger, was already beginning to cover the rubble with dust and dirt.

Scattered about amid the debris of the stagecoach were the bodies of the eight men with whom Toby had been traveling. The driver and his messenger lay motionless several feet away. Three of the mules had perished, the last stood with its head hanging low, its sides heaving, still in its harness.

"Oh God, no," Toby murmured, his eyes flicking from one body to the next. He dragged himself to the closest man, feeling at his wrist for a pulse. There was none. "No!" he cried again, panic rising, squeezing his chest like a vise.

Rising to his feet, Toby scrambled from one man to the next, frantically checking for signs of life. It was no use. His traveling companions lay like broken dolls on the sunburned grass, their eyes cast with the bluish pall of death. The smell of blood and bowels hung heavily in the air, mixing with the stench released from broken cologne and whiskey bottles.

Standing in the middle of the debris, his arms hanging limply at his sides, Toby gazed blankly at the carnage around him. For a few moments his mind refused to accept the grim finality of his situation but when the dire truth finally hit him, he began to tremble. He had been cast alone somewhere in the middle of the vast, barren New Mexico Territory, without shelter, food, or water.

His own injuries, although miraculously minor, were aching and burning. A gash on his forehead throbbed and when he gingerly touched it, his fingers came away bloody. Toby was not a seasoned traveler, but even *he* knew the dangers he would face on his own. If the sun didn't bake him into a human tartlet and he didn't die from thirst or starvation, he might fall prey to any of a thousand other threats. The plains fairly teemed with rattlesnakes, scorpions, wolves, Indians, bandits, deep ravines, rushing rivers, any and all of which might prove deadly to a lone traveler with no means of protection and few survival skills.

Thick clouds darkened the sky; thunder boomed and lightning flashed as the storm neared, jarring Toby out of his shock. Hail began to fall, hard pellets of ice that stung Toby's bruised skin like needles. Nearby, the mule brayed, its large hooves clomping the ground nervously.

Without any firm plan in mind, feeling only a strong compulsion to get himself away from there, to put distance between himself and the dead, Toby unhitched the mule from its trappings with trembling fingers. He led the beast to a large rock that sat off to one side of the wreckage, climbed up on it and slid his leg over the mule's broad back. Leaning down, Toby wrapped his arms around the mule's neck, and held on as best he could.

The mule, already pushed to its limits by the wreck, bolted, trying to run away from the unfamiliar weight on its back and the smell of death that hung over the wreckage. Exhausted by both his injuries and his terror, Toby was barely able to keep his seat. He allowed the mule to

take him in whichever direction the beast took it into his long-eared head to go as the storm bore down on them.

Chapter Two

Storms, Buckshot Atkins thought as he rode hell-for-leather across the prairie, were Nature's way of reminding a man that She was in charge and that She could be a trail boss with a temper as ornery as a bear. When the wind howled across the prairie and the heavens turned a purplish black, all a man could do was pull up his kerchief, duck his head down and pray that he could find shelter before the skies opened up and the storm blew him and his horse into the next life.

Bending low over Bo, his dark brown stallion, Buckshot kept his face tucked down so that the brim of his hat would shield his eyes from the worst of the biting particles of dust carried by the wind. At his tail, a storm was brewing that was showing all the signs of growing into a whopper. Thunderheads as black as the devil's ass were swelling, split by jagged flashes of brilliant white. Thunder rumbled along the plains behind him, growing louder by the minute as the storm readied itself to break free.

It was the time of year for twisters, and the storm behind him looked sure to be holding a few in its bloated belly that it was eager to spit up. Buckshot spurred his horse on faster, his mount's legs a chestnut blur as horse and rider streaked across the open prairie in a desperate bid to outrun the storm.

Buckshot, finding himself with the sudden need for shelter, headed toward the mining town of Golden, an utterly deceptive name for the collection of ramshackle buildings that sat clustered together on the desolate prairie of the New Mexico Territory. It was a spit of a town populated by cowboys in between cattle drives and a few miners who stubbornly refused to abandon claims that had dried up years ago. It was also the closest thing to civilization in that godforsaken stretch of prairie.

Over the hard-packed earth they raced, dodging the sparse vegetation and cactus, splashing across shallow streams. The air had turned cooler and the wind began to whip hailstones against the back of Buckshot's shirt when he spotted an indistinct shape in the distance. As he neared it, Buckshot realized that the slowly moving figure was a rawboned mule with a rider crouched low on its back. He reached them just as the rider slipped off the mule's back and fell heavily to the ground.

Storm or no storm, Buckshot couldn't leave a man down. As dire as his own circumstances were looking and as much as he'd have like to have kept moving, the oath he'd taken as a Ranger and the star on his chest said otherwise. He reined Bo in, jumped off and hit the ground running before his horse had barely slowed to a stop. Kneeling beside the man who lay facedown in the dirt, Buckshot turned him over.

The man was young, perhaps no more than twenty, nearly a decade younger than Buckshot himself. He wasn't a cowboy. That much was clear to Buckshot in a single glance at the torn and muddied suit the man wore. His jaw was prickled with several weeks' worth of beard, and there was a fresh wound on his forehead. A shock of thick black hair fell to cover it as Buckshot roughly shook the young man's shoulders and he stirred, blinked wearily.

“Hey, fella, wake up! We got to get moving before this storm swallows us whole!” Buckshot shouted over the whistling wind. The man struggled to speak, but then his eyes rolled up white and his head fell back as he lost consciousness again.

Swearing profusely, Buckshot grabbed the man under his arms and dragged him toward Bo. The stranger was slender, which worked in Buckshot’s favor as he manhandled him up and laid him belly-first over the saddle. Mounting up behind him, Buckshot saw that the man’s mule had taken off, disappearing into the blowing dust. Unwilling to waste time going after the mule when his life and the life of the stranger were at risk from the furious storm that was exploding around them, Buckshot instead spurred his horse on in the direction of Golden.

By the time Buckshot reached the muck-filled dirt road that sliced through the center of Golden, he’d outrun the leading edge of the storm. Directing his horse to the blacksmith’s shop, which sat near one end of town and also served as a stable, Buckshot dismounted. He pounded on the barn door with a gloved fist until it creaked open and a bearded face, towering nearly a half-foot over Buckshot’s six-foot two-inch frame glowered down at him.

“Well?” Buckshot asked, grinning up at the giant of a man. “Are you gonna open up, or do I have to shoot your sorry hide first?”

“I’ll be dipped in pig shit, if it ain’t the Ranger! What are you doing in the Territory, Buckshot? Ain’t you supposed to be in Texas?” the giant laughed, swinging the barn door open with one brawny arm.

“I’m supposed to be a lot of things, Mathias. I’m *supposed* to be dry, my belly’s *supposed* to be full, and I’m *supposed* to be sleeping on a soft featherbed, but it doesn’t look like I’m doing any of those things,” Buckshot laughed, leading his horse into the stable. “I was just passing through on Ranger business when a storm blew up. It’s headed this way and it looks to be a whopper.”

The men grinned at one another. Mathias was Golden’s blacksmith and was by far the biggest man Buckshot had ever known. He was as burly as he was tall, a solid wall of muscle with a furry chest that was easily twice as broad as Buckshot’s own. He’d come to Golden only a year ago, and although he kept his past close to his vest, he good with his hammer and forge.

Mathias was *too* good in fact, Buckshot often thought, to squirrel himself away in a town like Golden without reason. Whatever secrets were buried in Mathias’ past, they were the kind that gave a man a reason to hide. Buckshot had met Mathias on his last trip through Golden, just after Mathias had arrived. They’d gotten along well, but Buckshot had not been able to get Mathias to confide in him. Then again, if a man is on the run he’s not likely to want to spill his guts to a Texas Ranger.

“Who’s this?” Mathias asked, eyeing the man who lay across Buckshot’s saddle.

“Don’t rightly know. Found him a ways back, riding a mule. He didn’t wake up long enough for me to ask him his name.”

Mathias frowned. “It’s dangerous to go trotting up to perfect strangers out on the prairie, Buckshot. You should have let him be.”

Buckshot raised an eyebrow. "I couldn't do that, Mathias. He was hurt. Besides, helping folks out is part of my job."

"I don't like the looks of him. Maybe you'd best leave him here. I can lock him up in the shed. Keep an eye on him for you."

Buckshot shook his head. "No, I'm responsible for him. Besides, he ain't done nothing to deserve getting locked up, Mathias. What's with you? Why does he rub you raw? He ain't said 'boo' to you, yet."

"Don't like his looks. Just don't trust him, is all," Mathias replied, shrugging. He changed the subject. "Where's his mule?"

"Took off and I didn't have time to go chasing after it."

Mathias frowned and picked the man up from the back of Buckshot's horse as if he weighed no more than a child. He shouldered the stranger then looked down at Buckshot. "One-Eye will take care of Bo for you, Buckshot. We'd best get you over to the Saddle Horn and settle you in. You're a sorry sight."

An old man with a grin full of pink gums and a deeply wrinkled face hobbled over and took Bo's reins from Buckshot. His one gray eye – which accounted for his name – fixed on Buckshot. "Welcome back, Ranger," he said. "Been a while, ain't it?"

Buckshot nodded, patting the old man on the shoulder. "It has at that, One-Eye. You take care of my boy for me, now," he said, removing his saddlebag from Bo's back and stroking the horse's neck fondly.

The old man nodded, leading Bo into the last stall, mumbling under his breath. Buckshot couldn't be sure if he was talking to himself or the horse. Knowing One-Eye, it was probably a little of both. The old man had lived and worked in Golden for far more years than Buckshot had been alive, and had a reputation for being an odd duck. No one knew his real name, and Buckshot was convinced that even One-Eye didn't remember it. He had more stories than any ten men put together, but the tale that intrigued everyone the most was the only story One-Eye could never be convinced to tell. Asking him how he came to lose his eye was a sure-fire way to clam the old man up tighter than a miser's wallet. Speculation ran the gamut from an Indian attack to a mining accident, although the favored theory was that he'd lost it in his youth to a jealous lover with a sharp temper and a sharper knife.

Outside, the storm swept over Golden, the wind howling and rattling the walls of the stable. With Mathias carrying Toby over his shoulder with as much ease as Buckshot carried his saddlebag, the two men stepped outside and into the fierce wind, battling it headfirst halfway down the street to the Saddle Horn Saloon.

The Saddle Horn was a two-story wooden building that housed a saloon on the first floor and a boarding house on the second. It had once been whitewashed but was now a weathered, dingy gray. The painted sign that bore its name had been rendered all but unreadable from its years of being blasted by the blowing dust of the prairie.

Buckshot and Mathias blew in through the front doors along with the wind from the storm and the dust from the street. Elbowing his way through the crowd at the bar, Buckshot slapped a shiny trio of silver dollars down in front of the bartender.

The jingle of the coins caught the barkeep's attention, but he frowned when he spotted Buckshot. "You ain't got a warrant for anybody do you, Buckshot? I need all the customers I can get these days," he growled, eyeing the silver greedily but making no move to take it. "Business ain't what it used to be. Can't afford for you to be carting none of them off."

"No, I doubt the man I'm after is in here, Hank. Just passing through, is all. I need a room," Buckshot replied, leaning one elbow on the bar. His eyes flicked over the rough-looking and suddenly quiet crowd in the saloon. He knew most of the men who were watching him curiously, but there were several unfamiliar faces that guiltily ducked aside when Buckshot's eyes fell on them. He made a mental note to ask a few questions about them later, although the man he was looking for was not among them.

"He a prisoner?" Hank asked, eyeing the man who Mathias had slung over his shoulder. The man was beginning to moan softly, and looked like he'd been beaten to hell and back.

"Nah. Don't know who he is yet. Picked him up near Needles Creek."

"Have you checked his pockets? If he ain't got money, he ain't getting a room, Buckshot. I'm not running a charity, here."

"Your heart's still as big as the whole outdoors, ain't it Hank?" Buckshot chuckled, shaking his head. "I guess it's best if he bunks in with me for the time being, then."

"Have it your way, Ranger," Hank nodded, scooping up the silver coins and pocketing them. He rummaged under the bar for a moment then slid a skeleton key over to Buckshot. "Take the second room on the left. One dollar a night, and meals ain't included. It's two bits for a bowl of whatever mess Pablo's done cooked up."

Buckshot grimaced as his stomach clenched with the memory of Pablo's culinary creations. The Mexican cook knew how to make two things: beans, and peppers that were hot enough to melt iron. Eating anything else that Pablo served up was taking a gamble with your innards that you were likely to lose. He nodded then palmed the key.

With Mathias and his murmuring cargo in tow, Buckshot climbed the stairs to the second floor and jiggled the key in the lock of the second room on the left. Opening the door, he ushered Mathias inside.

The small, sparsely furnished room boasted a single bed, covered by a thin and graying blanket. A rickety chair and a dressing table that held a chipped pitcher and basin, and an oil lamp that

was blackened from years of use stood near the only window in the room. Yellowed curtains, the lace of which had long ago begun to rot, hung limply at the shuttered windows. The fierce wind outside rattled the shutters, and a cool draft swept dust motes up from the floor, swirling them into the air.

Dropping his saddlebag on the floor next to the bed, Buckshot lit the lamp with a match, casting the room in a yellow glow. Tossing his hat onto the table, he motioned for Mathias to lay his burden down on the thin mattress. "Thanks for your help, Mathias. I'll be along tomorrow to settle up for Bo's keep."

"I know you're good for it, Buckshot. No rush," Mathias rumbled at Buckshot. "He don't look like a cowpuncher to me. Looks more like an undertaker in those duds he's wearing," he continued, gesturing toward Toby.

"Yeah, that he does. He didn't have a saddle, either. He was riding that dang mule bareback, if you can believe it. Could be he had a run-in with thieves," Buckshot said. "He sure got beat black and blue, and that would explain why he didn't have a horse or a saddle." Buckshot looked down at the young man, who was beginning to stir. "Looks like he's coming around. If he's up to it, I'll bring him by tomorrow, so you can see for yourself that he ain't nothing to worry over."

"He's lucky he's alive, if that's the case," Mathias said. He glanced over at the young man with a look that raised the hairs on the back of Buckshot's neck before he squeezed his bulk out through the narrow door of the room, and closed it behind him.

"Now what in tarnation got into his britches?" Buckshot muttered, shaking his head at the closed door. He hadn't missed the sneer in Mathias' voice, and didn't like the way Mathias had glared at his involuntary guest, but he was just too tired and hungry to ponder on it. He locked the door behind Mathias, then walked over to the dressing table.

Buckshot sighed and stripped out of his shirt, laying it on the chair. Bare-chested, he leaned over the basin and poured water from the pitcher over his head, rinsing the worst of the dust from his face and blonde hair. Using a scrap of scratchy, gray linen left near the basin for that purpose, he dried his face then combed his fingers through his wet hair.

"Where am I?"

Buckshot turned around. The stranger was leaning up on one elbow and feeling the bump on his forehead with his other hand.

"You're in the New Mexico Territory, in a town called Golden. The Saddle Horn Saloon, to be exact. I'm Buckshot Atkins and I'm a Texas Ranger. I found you along the trail and brought you here. Been wondering who you were and how it is you came to be riding a mule out in the middle of nowhere." He turned and rustled around in his saddlebag. Removing a canteen, he handed it to the man who uncorked it and drank greedily.

"Thank God. I thought I was a goner," he said in between gulps of water. "My name's Toby Garrett, from Kansas City. I was a passenger on the Southern Star stagecoach until it wrecked.

The mule and I were the only survivors.” His thirst finally sated, Toby handed the nearly empty canteen back to Buckshot.

“Your mule’s gone, I’m sorry to say. Didn’t have time to go after it, what with the storm getting ready to hit. Saving our hides was more important than saving his, I reckon,” Buckshot said. He held up his hand when Toby tried to stand up. “Whoa, there. I wouldn’t be getting up too fast, partner. You hurt anywhere else besides that bump on your noggin?”

Toby flexed his fingers and ran his hands over his ribs and legs. “No, I don’t think so. Just banged up and dented like an old tin can. Got a headache, but nothing serious. I don’t know how to thank you. You saved my life, Mr. Atkins.”

“All in a day’s work,” Buckshot shrugged. Picking up his saddlebag, he rummaged through it again. He pulled out a shirt that had been neatly rolled up and tossed it to Toby. “Here. It ain’t much, but it’s clean. Yours looks like you’ve been fighting on the losing side of a war. Get changed, and we’ll see about what we can find to eat. Can’t vouch for the food, though. A man’s more likely to find roasted iguana than chicken on his plate in this place.”

“Thank you,” Toby said, catching the shirt and shaking it open. He slipped off his filthy, torn jacket and shirt. His build was slender, but the muscles of his shoulders, arms and chest were firm. Dark hair was sprinkled between his cinnamon-colored nipples, trailing in a thin line down the middle of his flat stomach. His skin was splotched with a few shallow scrapes and bruises, but otherwise looked none the worse for the wear, despite the accident.

Buckshot watched Toby as he spent some time fishing in his jacket pockets, his face growing paler by the minute.

“What’s wrong?” Buckshot asked, seeing a worried look growing on Toby’s face.

“I can’t find my wallet! It had my credentials in it, not to mention my money!” He held up his jacket with his fingers sticking out of a large, jagged hole in the pocket. “I must have lost it either in the wreck or while I was riding the mule.” He threw his jacket down on the floor in disgust. “That’s just perfect, isn’t it? First I nearly get killed, and now I’m broke to boot.” Toby looked up at Buckshot. “I need to get to the local telegraph office. I can wire Mr. Buford at the Kansas City Post for money. He’s my boss. I’m a reporter with the paper,” Toby explained. “I need to tell him about the accident anyway.”

“Well son, I hate to be the one to break this to you but there’s no telegraph in Golden. Ain’t much of anything in Golden except for whiskey, dirt and a handful of men with more than a passing acquaintance with both. As I recall, the closest telegraph office is in Phoenix, about two or three days hard ride from here. There’s one in Dallas, too. But that’s just as far.”

“Goddamn it! What am I going to do?” Toby muttered, nervously running his fingers through his hair. He looked ready to panic, his eyes growing wider as if he’d just realized that he was stuck in the middle of the Wild West without a nickel to his name.

“Now don’t go getting yourself all worked up,” Buckshot admonished, removing his shirt from the chair and beating the worst of the dust from it with his fist. He slipped his arms into the

sleeves and buttoned it up. “I’m heading toward Phoenix anyway. You can ride along with me and we can square up once you wire your boss.”

“That’s mighty kind of you, Mr. Atkins. I surely appreciate it,” Toby said, looking both relieved and embarrassed to have to rely on a stranger’s generosity. He chuckled a bit. “I already owe you my life. Guess I might as well owe you a few dollars as well.”

Buckshot smirked. “Just Buckshot will do. Hurry up and get dressed. Pablo never learned how to keep food hot, and there ain’t nothing worse than cold iguana,” he grinned.

Chapter Three

Sitting at a round, burned and battered wooden table at the rear of the saloon, Buckshot and Toby were served platters of beans, thickly sliced bread, and a healthy helping of a gray, lumpy, and totally unidentifiable gelatinous mass by Pablo.

“Good Lord, Pablo! What is this stuff?” Buckshot asked, poking the jellied mess with his fork.

“*Ostra de la pradera, señor,*” Pablo answered with a gap-toothed, dimpled smile, wiping his hands on a grease-splattered apron.

Buckshot frowned, lifting a forkful of the viscous jelly. “What in the blue hell did you do to them?”

“What is it?” Toby asked, sniffing at the gummy matter on his plate.

“According to Pablo, it’s *supposed* to be prairie oysters. Bull balls.” He was still poking at the mess on his plate and missed Toby blanching.

Pablo nodded, smiled again, and returned to the kitchen through a pair of nearby swinging doors, leaving Buckshot and Toby still staring at their plates.

“I’d stick to the beans if I were you. This mess don’t look like any calf fries I’ve ever eaten before,” Buckshot said, sliding the questionable mound over to one side of his dish with his fork.

Toby nodded and swallowed hard, unable to take his eyes from his plate.

“They’re usually right good, rolled in flour and fried up with some onions,” Buckshot said around a mouthful of beans. “But I ain’t never seen any cooked gooey and gray before. Maybe they ain’t bull balls. Might be from some other varmint. Coyote, maybe.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Could we perhaps talk about something other than cooking animals’ private parts?” Toby asked, making no attempt to taste either the oysters or the beans. “You said you were a Texas Ranger, didn’t you? What’s a Texas Ranger doing in the New Mexico Territory?” He gingerly picked up the slice of bread that lay on his plate, eyeing it carefully before taking a bite.

“Hunting.”

“You can’t hunt in Texas?”

“What I’m hunting ain’t *in* Texas. Not any more,” Buckshot’s blue eyes suddenly turned cold and hard. Looking at Toby, he considered how much he should tell him. Toby could be exactly who he said he was, or he might not. He didn’t have any identification to prove it. But for some reason, Buckshot trusted him. He leaned in over the table and lowered his voice. “My men and I were riding north of Dallas, on our way home from settling a range dispute. After a few weeks on the road a man gets a mite tired of jerky and black coffee, so we stopped at a little farm along the way. I thought we might be able to barter for a few eggs or a little sugar.

“We found ‘em in the house. The farmer, his wife, and their two girls. All dead. I’ll tell you something, Toby...in all my years as a Ranger I ain’t never seen anything like what had been done to them. It was like the Devil himself had let loose in that house. There was blood everywhere -- walls, floors, on the ceiling -- there wasn’t much left of any of them that hadn’t been hacked up. Worse yet, they looked...*gnawed* at.”

“Good God, Buckshot,” Toby whispered, placing his half-eaten bread down on his plate, his appetite gone. “What kind of animal did it? A wolf? A bear?”

“There ain’t no animal I know of could do so much damage to an entire family inside their own house, Toby. Animals don’t bust down doors or smash up furniture, neither. There weren’t any tracks or scat. Besides, an animal goes for the kill. It doesn’t torture its prey, and it sure as hell don’t write in its blood. But that’s what we found on the walls. Don’t know what language it was in, but it was writing just the same. It ain’t an animal that I’m looking for...it’s a man.” Buckshot shook his head, picking at his food with his fork.

“No sooner did we get back to Dallas after seeing those poor folk buried, that we started getting reports of other families killed just the same way. It was the same story every time. Every person in the house butchered up like a hog, strange markings on the walls. And in every case, a man who calls himself Reverend Malachai had been preaching hellfire and brimstone nearby a couple of days before. I spent the few months tracking him, but he disappeared.”

“So you think that a *preacher* did it? A man of God?” Toby asked incredulously. Regardless of Toby’s own situation, his reporter instinct was going haywire. If what Buckshot was telling him were true, then it would be a story worthy of the headlines.

“Ain’t no preacher. Ain’t no *man*, neither,” said a soft voice from behind Toby. Turning, Toby looked up to see a grizzled, one-eyed man standing quietly behind him. He couldn’t help shuddering at the puckered black hole that gaped where the man’s right eyeball should have been.

“What do you mean, One-Eye?” Buckshot asked, his brows knitting together. “Do you know the man I’m talking about?”

One-Eye raised an arthritic hand and briefly touched the dark, empty socket on his face. Without a word he turned and began shuffling away.

“Hold up there, One-Eye,” Buckshot called, jumping out of his seat and taking One-Eye’s elbow. “Come sit with us for a spell. Toby here is a stranger in these parts. He ain’t never heard none of your stories,” he continued, keeping his voice light and friendly. “Set yourself down and I’ll buy you a drink.”

One-Eye allowed Buckshot to lead him back to the table, and sat down in an empty chair next to Toby. He eyed the nearly full plates on the table with undisguised hunger.

Toby pushed the remains of his meal over with a smile. “Hungry, Mr. One-Eye? Help yourself. I couldn’t eat another bite,” he said. It wasn’t a lie, but it had nothing to do with the unappealing

fare he'd been served. After Buckshot's graphic description of the bodies he'd found, Toby doubted that he'd be able to eat for a week.

One-Eye chuckled quietly. "*Mister* One-Eye -- ain't that a hoot! Ain't nobody called me *mister* for a long time." He took a deep drink of the beer Buckshot had placed before him, then tackled Toby's plate of prairie oysters, gumming one forkful after another with gusto.

"If you don't mind me asking, Mr. One-Eye...how'd you lose your eye?" Toby asked after a few minutes, wishing he had his pad and pencil with him so that he could take notes.

Buckshot winced, which seemed like a strange reaction to the innocent question, but One-Eye answered.

"I don't never tell that story, son. But Buckshot," he said softly, turning his one, charcoal gray eye toward Buckshot, "you said a name that froze the marrow in my bones. I ain't heard that name in more than fifty years, and never wanted to hear it again. *Malachai*. It was Malachai that took my eye when I was a boy." One-Eye turned his head and spit on the floor, as if to rid his mouth of the foul taste of the name.

A tremor run across One-Eye's thin shoulders and Buckshot reached over, patting him gently on the arm. "If you don't want to talk about it, I understand. It can't be the same man anyway, One-Eye. The descriptions we got of him put him around my age at the oldest."

"It's him. I know it. I've had nightmares about that bastard for over fifty years," One-Eye insisted, shaking his head. He placed his fork down on the nearly empty plate, and took another long swallow of beer. Staring into the mug he held in his gnarled hands, he said, "I was sixteen or so when it happened. We'd been having a tough time of it back in Ohio and my pa had uprooted and moved us, kit and caboodle, clean down to Texas. He staked out a claim outside of Dallas. It wasn't more than a few acres, but it had some good grazing pasture on it. My brothers and me helped him build a cabin, and Pa bought a few head of cattle. It wasn't an easy life, but we were eating regular and had a roof over our heads. We was doing better than we had in Ohio, for sure.

"About a year after we settled in, a neighbor stopped by to tell us that a preacher named Malachai was going to hold services out by the Trinity River. Gonna bring the Spirit to the people, the neighbor told my pa."

"Did your family go to the service?" Toby asked when One-Eye fell silent, seemingly lost in his memories.

"Course we went. Wasn't often that we got to have a real church service. Didn't have no church built back then, no minister. Best we got was one that passed through ever so often, like this Malachai preacher. All the families round about went. Maybe twenty-five or thirty people all told."

"What happened? What did the preacher do?" Buckshot prompted One-Eye.

“Oh, that preacher was as slick as a lard-covered snake. He was the right prettiest man I ever laid eyes on, and that’s a fact. He was a big man, about thirty years old, I reckon. I remember his golden hair blowing in the breeze, and he had eyes that were as blue as the heavens. There was something wrong with his smile though. It was like a wolf’s smile. All teeth, and it didn’t reach up to his eyes. Nobody said nothing about it, though. We was too excited to have an honest-to-God preacher holding services. We was even gonna have a picnic afterwards. A potluck.

One-Eye paused and took another long swallow of beer. He wiped the back of his mouth with his sleeve, and looked pointedly at Buckshot’s plate. Smirking, Buckshot slid his plate over, watching One-Eye dive in with both hands and a fork.

“His voice was like an angel’s, as smooth as cream and twice as sweet; a voice that made a body want to stay put and listen, no matter what,” One-Eye continued in between bites. “But his words were all twisted up and wrong. He was preaching that God was hungry. That sacrifices had to be made to keep Him happy. That it had been too long since He’d tasted blood. I tell you, Buckshot, I ain’t never heard nothing like it before or since.”

One-Eye drained his glass and paused. “Buckshot, think maybe I could get something a bit stronger than this here beer?” he asked. “My throat is mighty parched from them oysters.”

Buckshot fetched a shot glass and a quarter-full bottle of whiskey from the bar. Setting them down in front of One-Eye, he poured a shot.

Downing the fiery liquor, One-Eye motioned for Buckshot to pour him another. He lifted the second shot to his mouth with a shaking hand and gulped it down, a drop of amber liquid dribbling from the corner of his mouth. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, he continued his story.

“I remember Malachai working himself up into a state, snarling and pacing back and forth in front of us like a mad dog. He said that God had told him that there were sinners among those in the crowd. Said the hand of God was fixing to rain down fire from the heavens if those sinners weren’t given up to Him. Got the people pretty riled up. Scared ‘em half to death is what he did, me and my family included. Pretty soon, folks were pointing at other folks, at their neighbors and friends, sometimes at their own family. They was accusing each other of god-awful things, murder and rape and the like. Things that wasn’t true in the least.”

He motioned for Buckshot to pour him another round, and tossed it back. Setting the shot glass on the table, One-Eye stared at it for a long while before speaking again.

“Pa and Ma took hold of us and ran when folks started throwing punches at each other. They threw us in the back of Pa’s wagon, and as we rode off we could hear the crowd screaming behind us and gunshots being fired. And above it all we could hear that goddamn preacher laughing.

“That night, after Pa had put out the lamp and everyone was in bed, the Devil came to call. I was sleeping in the loft with my brothers. There was a loud crash, and I remember looking down and seeing that the front door had been blown right off its hinges. Malachai was standing there in front of our hearth, but he sure looked different than he had in the field. He was wearing a cloak of stitched hides and I knew – just *knew* – that they were human skins he had on his back. His

eyes weren't blue anymore. They were as red as the fires of Hell, and his mouth was chock-full of long, sharp teeth. He had a huge flint knife in his hand, but it wasn't as if he needed one. His nails were as long as my finger and as sharp as a barber's straight razor.

"Malachai got my Pa and Ma first. Tore them apart with his bare hands and that flint knife before they could even get out of their bed. Then he come after my brothers and me. I tried to fight, jumped on his back, but he threw me off like I was no more than a pesky mosquito. He got Andy first -- he was the youngest of us three. Then Thomas. Tore my brother's head clean from his body. Then he turned on me.

"He took hold of my neck with one hand, and dug my eye out of my skull with one of his fingernails. I could hear him laughing, a sound that reminded me of somebody gargling a throat full of broken glass. I guess I blacked out then, 'cause I don't remember what happened after that."

One-Eye sagged down in his chair like a deflated balloon, looking years older than when he'd first sat down. Buckshot poured him another shot, but One-Eye didn't seem to have the strength left to lift the glass. He just stared at it, tears dripping down one side of his face. After a long while, he spoke again.

"When I came to, I was lying on a fur in an Indian camp. Zuni, they were. We couldn't speak each other's language so I never found out how they'd managed to save my life. Their shaman had bound up my eye with a mash of herbs and strips of rabbit skin, and I stayed with them until it had healed enough for me to travel.

"I couldn't bring myself to go back home again. I drifted west instead, into the New Mexico Territory and ended up here, in Golden. Been here ever since." He finally raised the glass and drained it. "'Course, it wasn't nearly any better here, what with the mine and all. It's cursed, is what I think. Sometimes at night you can smell the evil drifting out of it like oily smoke. It's enough to make a grown man shit his britches."

Buckshot and Toby stared slack-jawed at One-Eye, trying to absorb his incredible story. They exchanged a look over the table that told each other that they were of a like mind when it came to accepting what One-Eye had said.

One-Eye rose shakily to his feet, then jabbed a finger in Buckshot's direction. "I can see you don't believe me. That's fine...I probably wouldn't believe an old coot like me, neither. But think on it before you run off half-cocked after that bastard. Malachai ain't human, Buckshot. He's evil on two legs, and he'll rip you apart if you get too close," he said. Taking both the bottle of whiskey and the shot glass, One-Eye nodded at Buckshot and Toby before shuffling away.

Toby drained his beer, swiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "That was some story," he said, his eyes searching the bar for a glimpse of One-Eye, but the old man had disappeared into the crowd. "Think any of it is true?"

"Don't rightly know. I've been tracking this Malachai preacher for a long time now. Funny thing is, One-Eye's description of him is dead on with the eyewitness' accounts of the preacher -- tall, golden haired, handsome, with a voice like honey. But it can't be the same man. He'd have to be

practically ninety by now. I don't know what to make of it," Buckshot replied, sipping his beer thoughtfully. "'Course, that business about his eyes and teeth and all has to be the One-Eye's imagination. He always did tell a fine story."

Toby looked at Buckshot, studying him for a minute. "No matter who it is, he's one sick son of a bitch. Can I ask you a question? Why is it that a lone Texas Ranger is tracking this man? As dangerous as he sounds, I'd have thought that you'd have an entire posse out after him."

"Headquarters don't believe that it's the work of one man. The Colonel refused to believe that a preacher could've done such things. It was easier to blame it on Indian raids, I suppose, even though nothing was stolen from any of the farms. No cattle, no horses, no valuables. And the tribes near about have been peaceful of late. Still, it was his opinion that they done it, not the preacher."

"So you set off on your own?"

Buckshot nodded. "Took a leave of absence. It's the preacher, Toby. I'm willing to stake my life on it. Maybe he's got men working with him, maybe not. Don't see how he could do what he done without help. Then again, I don't understand why he would do it at all. But it's him that murdered those poor people, I just know it."

Buckshot rose and went to the bar, returning with another bottle of whiskey and two shot glasses. He poured them both a drink, and tossed his back. "I tracked him from Texas to here, and came across two more families slaughtered in just the same way as the ones back home. He's close by, Toby, and I aim to find him. I'm gonna see him swing for what he done."

Toby swallowed his shot, which burned a fiery trail down his throat to his belly, warming him from the inside out. Having eaten so little, his head began to buzz pleasantly. He studied Buckshot for a few minutes, watching him drink.

Buckshot was taller than Toby, broader through the shoulders and chest. His sandy hair curled and stuck out in all directions, the kind of hair that would stubbornly resist any effort to comb it back. Blue eyes the color of cornflowers were rimmed in red, telling Toby that Buckshot hadn't gotten much sleep lately. Buckshot's jaw was strong and scruffy, his cheekbones high and prominent. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed another shot of whiskey.

"How's that bump doing?" Buckshot asked, refilling both their glasses.

"Bump?"

"The one on your head."

"Oh, feeling better," Toby smiled. "Forgot all about it listening to One-Eye."

Buckshot nodded. "You'll have some time to rest up. We'll be staying here for a day or so. I want to ask a few questions around town, find out if anyone has seen this preacher, or heard of him."

They sat for a few minutes in silence, each one lost in his own thoughts. Toby drank another shot, and watched Buckshot refill his glass again. The horror of One-Eye's story hung between them like a thick cloud, stifling conversation, until they were distracted from it by the unexpected strains of music.

From somewhere in the crowded bar, a fiddle struck up *Turkey in the Straw*, and both men turned to look for the player. A thin, older man was standing on top of a table near the bar, his fiddle tucked under his bearded chin, his booted foot tapping along with the lively tune. Looking around, Toby noticed several men tying pieces of red cloth around their upper arms or across their foreheads.

"What's going on?" he asked Buckshot as the crowd began to clap in time to the music.

Buckshot shrugged. "Dancing. Men get tired of playing cards after a while."

"Who are they going to dance with? What are the red bandanas for?"

"Look around you, Toby. Do you see any women in here? A town like Golden ain't big enough to support a whorehouse and there ain't no God-fearing woman gonna set foot in a place like this," Buckshot answered. "It gets lonely here, the men get bored."

"I still don't understand."

Buckshot rolled his eyes and poured them both another shot. "The men take turns, Toby. The ones with the red bandanas are the womenfolk for tonight."

Toby's eyebrows shot up to his hairline. He watched as several men, mostly big, burly and bearded, paired off and began stomping and circling on the wooden plank floor in time to the music. The crowd hooted and hollered loud enough to wake snakes, as other men cut in on the pairs to take a turn dancing.

A cowboy, barrel-chested and sporting a black handlebar mustache that had been carefully curled at the ends, approached Toby waving a red bandana in his direction. "I needs me a partner," he rumbled, smiling a tobacco-stained grin at Toby.

Toby eyed the piece of ragged fabric as if it might jump free from the man's hand and bite him squarely on the nose. He heard Buckshot chuckling softly, and looked over. Buckshot's eyes were twinkling mischievously as he nonchalantly turned his head away, studying the crowd. Toby realized that Buckshot wouldn't be saving him this time around.

"Um, I don't know how to dance," Toby said, shaking his head. He was feeling the effects of the beer and whiskey, and the movement swayed him in his seat.

"Don't matter none. I'll learn you how right quick," the cowboy answered, frowning down at Toby. Evidently not pleased that Toby was being slow in accepting his invitation, he dangled the bandana impatiently in front of Toby's face again.

Considering how big the cowboy was and how hard his fists looked, Toby quickly threw back another shot and reluctantly took the bandana from the mustachioed man, tucking it in the breast pocket of his shirt like a handkerchief.

The man wrapped a meaty paw around Toby's wrist and yanked him out of his chair, dragging him onto the dance floor. Trying to remember how a woman danced, Toby tentatively placed his right hand on the man's shoulder, his other clenched tightly by his partner's. The man's other hand was on Toby's waist as he pointed his chin to the sky, stomped his boots and roughly spun Toby in a circle.

Barely missing a beat, the fiddler segued from *Turkey In the Straw* into *Red River Valley*, a much slower, poignant tune of lost love. Toby found his face smashed into the man's chest. His body odor was enough to make Toby's eyes water as the cowboy slowed their pace, rocking them back and forth and loudly singing the lyrics in a gravelly, off-key voice.

Buckshot must have decided that Toby had had enough punishment for one day, as he came over and tapped the cowboy on the shoulders. "The boy's had a tough day, Bill. Let him be now and find yourself another partner," he said.

"We ain't done yet," Bill growled, frowning at Buckshot.

"Yes, you are, Bill. Look at him. The boy can barely stand up," Buckshot insisted.

Truer words have never been spoken. Toby was swaying on his feet, although it was more likely from the whiskey and lack of food than from his ordeal. Toby felt like his eyes had the unfocused look of a man who'd fallen in a beer barrel and hadn't come up for air in a week.

"I like dancing," Toby muttered drunkenly, staggering around in an erratic circle. He slapped his knee, nearly falling over in the process.

Buckshot took hold of Toby's arm and kept him from falling down. "You city boys sure can't hold your liquor, can you?" he laughed. "I think it'd be for the best for you to get to bed, Toby."

"No, I wanna dance some more. Dance with me, Buckshot."

"I don't dance."

"It's easy! Watch!" Toby insisted, stomping his feet. He stamped one down hard on top of Buckshot's booted foot.

Buckshot swore a blue streak and grabbed his foot, doing a little jig of his own before taking hold of Toby's arm again. "Let's go before you step on somebody's foot that's liable to take it out on your hide, Toby," he said, firmly leading Toby out of the saloon and up the stairs to their room.

Buckshot sat Toby on the side of the bed, then turned and threw open the shutters of the window to let in the fresh air. The fierce storm had finally abated, and a cool night breeze swept in, ruffling the threadbare curtains.

“I think I’m drunk,” Toby snickered, swaying on the bed and looking up at him.

“I do believe you’re right.”

“I have to piss.”

“I practically had to carry you upstairs. I ain’t dragging your ass back down to the outhouse. Piss out the window. And try not to fall out while you do,” Buckshot muttered. He limped over and sat down on the chair, pulling off his boots and socks. Gingerly feeling his toes, he grumbled, “You damn near broke my foot down there, you drunken sumbitch.” He watched Toby stagger over to the window. Shaking his head, Buckshot stood up and started to undress.

Unpinning his star and stripping off his shirt, Buckshot draped it across the back of the chair, along with his gun belt and pair of revolvers, and placed his badge on the table. Looking toward the window, he saw that Toby had dropped his drawers and leaned out at a precarious angle between the open shutters as he peed.

Buckshot ran over and caught Toby around the shoulders just as he teetered forward, ready to fall. “Goddamn, boy! What did I just say?”

“You said to pee out of the window.”

“I *said* not to fall out!”

“I didn’t fall.”

Buckshot stared hard at Toby’s innocent expression, then laughed. “Get your ass in bed before I throw you out of the window myself,” he said, giving Toby a little push toward the bed.

Toby staggered across the room to the bed with his pants nearly down around his knees. He stood swaying in front of it for a minute before falling down face first, snoring.

Buckshot sighed and walked over, standing with his hands on his hips, looking down at Toby. “I do believe you’re going to be a handful, ain’t you?” he said. “Just what I need.” He shook his head then knelt down and tugged off Toby’s shoes. He pulled Toby’s pants off the rest of the way, noticing in passing that Toby had a nice ass. Rounded and dusted with dark hair, it reminded Buckshot that it had been a dog’s age since he’d last gotten himself laid, and his groin tingled pleasantly as he looked over Toby’s firm butt. Get that out of your head right now, Ranger, Buckshot thought to himself. You got bigger problems to worry about, and he likely wouldn’t understand even if he was awake.

Buckshot was a Texas Ranger, used to traveling in the company of other men, often spending weeks at a time in the middle of the desolate prairie or camped out on the side of some godforsaken mountain. He’d done his share of cattle drives as well, spending long lonely nights

on the trail with other cowboys. He was no stranger to the pleasures of another man's body, but he doubted that Toby, still wet behind the ears and from the city to boot, would have shared the same experiences.

Sighing again, he stretched Toby out on the bed, covering him with the thin blanket before stripping off his own pants. Buckshot crawled in next to him, and wrapped himself around Toby's slender body so that they would both fit under the single blanket. Closing his eyes, he willed his cock to behave itself and tried to go to sleep.

After a long while, he did.

Chapter Four

When Toby woke, it was still dark. Opening his eyes, he found himself looking at Buckshot's sleeping face, inches from his own. One of Buckshot's strong arms was thrown across his chest, and one of his legs covered both of Toby's, effectively pinning him to the bed. Buckshot's body was hot where it touched Toby's, his muscles firm even in sleep. Toby's eyes widened as he realized that not only did Buckshot have an erection, but also that it was trapped against Toby's thigh, burning his skin. Wiggling a bit, Toby tried to slip out from under Buckshot's embrace without waking him.

Cornflower blue eyes fluttered open, meeting Toby's own of hazel-green. Buckshot's full lips parted, his pink tongue sweeping across them. Toby thought for a moment that Buckshot was going to speak, but instead he leaned forward and pressed his petal soft lips against Toby's.

Shit! The man is kissing you! Jump out of bed! Push him away! Toby's mind screamed. But his body wouldn't listen. Mutinously, it ignored Toby's inner voice, melting into Buckshot's soft lips and warm flesh. Maybe it was the booze, or maybe the stress of the accident, or maybe just the fear he'd felt the day before, but his body seemed to have grown a mind of its own. Pressing closer to Buckshot, he rubbed his own burgeoning erection against Buckshot's leg. This is crazy, Toby thought, parting his lips for Buckshot's warm, wet tongue. This is another man! But oh God, he feels so good! He slid his hand over Buckshot's arms, then around his waist to his ass, tentatively exploring his hard, muscular body. It's got to be a dream. I'm dreaming. God, just don't let me wake up yet! he thought.

Buckshot deepened their kiss hungrily, giving Toby the sense that somewhere within him a dam that had been holding back a flood of lust had finally broken. Open-mouthed, Buckshot's tongue lashed Toby's furiously, sloppily, as his fingers slid across Toby's ass and in between his cheeks. Toby moaned, a sound that was both helpless and wanton, grinding his fully erect cock along the crease between Buckshot's groin and thigh. "Goddamn, that feels good, Buckshot," he managed to whisper as Buckshot's finger tickled at his asshole, rubbing it gently.

Pulling away from Toby's lips, Buckshot bent his head and suckled fiercely at the tender skin under his jaw, then lower still, lapping at his cinnamon-colored nipple until it peaked under Buckshot's tongue. "Now's the time to tell me to stop, Toby. Tell me now, 'cause I ain't gonna be able to stop later," he breathed.

In answer, Toby wrapped his fingers around Buckshot's thick cock, stroking it slowly. "Don't stop," he whispered. "Goddamn it Buckshot, this is my dream and I say don't stop."

Buckshot groaned, pushing Toby flat on the bed and straddling his hips. Toby looked up at him through half-lidded eyes, breathing hard. He felt his balls swelling, and his cock felt as unyielding as iron, fully erect and almost painful with need. Looking down between their flat bellies, Toby watched as Buckshot rubbed his erection along the length of Toby's own. Buckshot's foreskin felt like white-hot velvet, and he gasped when Buckshot took both of their cocks in his hand. Toby's hips rocked up into Buckshot's fist as he stroked them in tandem, his neck arching as a wave of pleasure flooded his groin.

“Like that do ya?” Buckshot whispered hoarsely. “I’ll show you something even better.” He let go and slid his body backwards, until his mouth hovered over Toby’s shaft. Flicking out his tongue, Buckshot lapped delicate circles around the head of Toby’s cock, then took it fully into his mouth, sucking hard.

Toby arched off the bed, both hands flying to either side of Buckshot’s head. “Oh my God, Buckshot! Yes!” he cried as his hips thrust up into Buckshot’s hot mouth. It was an unbelievable sensation, fueling a fire that ignited in Toby’s balls and threatened to consume his entire being. He felt the sweet pressure building, and knew that he wasn’t going to last much longer. “Stop, Buckshot. Stop or I’m going to explode.”

Buckshot pulled away for a moment, his lips curling into a smirk. Rising to his knees, his hand took over where his mouth had left off, fisting Toby’s cock. “That’d be the whole idea, Toby. Shoot it for me. Now, boy. Let ‘er rip.”

Toby obliged willingly. Crying out through gritted teeth, the tendons in his neck popping with the power of his orgasm, he came hard over Buckshot’s fist.

“Lordy! That was a gusher!” Buckshot said, scooting up over Toby’s chest. His hand was slick with Toby’s semen as he rubbed the head of his cock over Toby’s lips. “Open up for me, boy,” he ordered.

Again, Toby happily complied. His first taste of man filled his mouth as Buckshot slipped his cock past Toby’s lips. Pungent, musky, it was the taste of raw nature, pure and powerful. The head of Buckshot’s cock felt round and smooth under his tongue, as soft as lambskin but as hot as the desert sun. He suckled hard on it, trying to draw out more of the tantalizing drops of salty fluid that tempted his palate.

All too soon, Buckshot pulled out of Toby’s mouth, taking himself in hand and finishing himself off. Buckshot growled like a bear as he came, his stomach muscles rippling as he coaxed the last few drops out.

Toby grimaced, swiping at his face. “Goddamn it, Buckshot! You got me right in the eye.”

Buckshot laughed, lying down next to Toby on the narrow bed, his body still trembling with the intensity of his orgasm. “Sorry. I can shoot a worm out of an apple at fifty paces, but I got shit for aim when it comes to letting loose like that.”

“Well, I for one do *not* want to wake up, Buckshot. I’ve never dreamed of doing that with a man before. Dreamt a few times about kissing and touching, but not *that*.” Toby confessed, giggling. “Been with a woman, but it’s not the same, is it?”

“No, it ain’t. But Toby, this wasn’t a dream...”

Toby shook his head. “Of course it’s a dream, and it was the *best* goddamn one I’ve had so far on this entire sorry trip,” he grinned. His head was still buzzing quiet pleasantly as he rolled over and laid his head on Buckshot’s chest. He remained quiet for a moment then arched a brow as

something occurred to him. He looked up at Buckshot. "You said that the men in this town get bored and lonely. Is this what they do after they finish dancing?"

"Sometimes, I reckon. You gonna write *that* up in your newspaper?" Buckshot chuckled.

"I don't think the good people of Kansas City are ready for news like this, Buckshot," Toby laughed. "But maybe I can dream about that the next time. That would be good. Real good."

"You still think this is a dream?"

"Of course. Hey, why don't you go get us another bottle of that fine whiskey we had earlier?" Toby grinned. "Maybe some cigars, too, while you're at it, and a nice, thick steak. Rare."

Buckshot slapped Toby's belly playfully. "Boy, when you dream, you dream big, don't you? You're still drunk, Toby. Go back to sleep for a while."

He needn't have wasted his breath, because Toby was already snoring.

Buckshot sat up on the side of the bed, rubbing his face. "The sun's coming up. Let's go get us some chow and coffee. Maybe even a taste of the hair of the dog that bit us. I got a whopper of a headache. Then I need to ask a few questions around town. You're welcome to come along, if you want."

Toby nodded. His own head throbbed painfully, although he didn't say anything because he was afraid that Buckshot would tell him to stay behind. He might not be able to get to San Francisco as quickly as his boss would have liked, but a story about a Texas Ranger catching a murderer would be money in the bank for the newspaper. Folks ate stuff like that up.

He needed coffee in the worst way possible. His hangover was bad enough, but he'd had a doozy of a dream the night before, and he didn't know what to make of it. He'd dreamt that he and Buckshot had...well, that they'd done things men just didn't do together. What was most unsettling to Toby was that, not only had he liked it in his dream, just thinking about it now was giving him a hard-on. And that, he'd learned early on, could be dangerous to one's health.

Back home growing up, Toby's eye had always been drawn to the roughnecks and cowpunchers that worked his grandparents' farm. Hard-muscled, hard-drinking men, they were a tough breed, sun-browned and work-hardened. Toby loved watching them branding the calves, especially when it was as hot as Hades and they worked bare-chested. Muscles bulged beneath sweat-beaded skin as they tossed over a calf, holding it down while a hot iron burned his grandfather's mark onto its hide.

He'd been fourteen, all arms and legs and not much in between, when his hand had first strayed to his crotch while watching the cowboys work. Two years later he'd been caught peeking in the window of the bunkhouse by a cowpuncher. Toby had his fly open and his dick in hand, and it was patently obvious that he hadn't just needed to piss.

Dragged to his father by the ear, he'd been beaten to within an inch of his life, and branded a queer by the cowboys. He was avoided at all costs, not allowed on cattle drives or round-ups, living as a pariah in his own home. When he turned eighteen he'd left for Kansas City and a fresh start.

He'd never again allowed himself to think about men. Ever. His fantasies came out in his dreams from time to time, and he'd never failed to feel guilty about it when they did. After such a dream, he'd watch people's faces as he walked about the city, fearful that they knew.

But now he was afraid that he wouldn't be able to stop thinking about them, and about one man in particular. The dream had awoken feelings in Toby that he had thought he'd buried years ago.

Toby rose up, wrapping the grayed blanket around his waist to hide his erection. He pissed out of the window again and got dressed, keeping his back to Buckshot. There was no way he was going to let the rough and ready Texas Ranger see his arousal. He figured that Buckshot might be tempted to shoot it off.

Feeling better once he was dressed, he sat on the bed, watching Buckshot shave with cold water from the pitcher, scraping the blade of a razor-sharp Bowie knife carefully over his cheeks and throat. That Buckshot stood in only his denims didn't help Toby's erection in the slightest.

Buckshot's skin looked as smooth as silk, sun-kissed and pulled taut over rippling muscles developed by a hard life as a Ranger. He had a strong chest, and only the slightest dusting of light brown curls between his peach-colored nipples. Twin rows of muscles defined his stomach, leading the eye to the waistband of his pants and the bulge beneath his fly.

Toby could barely keep his eyes off of the man.

Finishing his shave, Buckshot offered his knife to Toby.

"No, thanks. I'm afraid I'd slice my throat open, Buckshot. You don't even have a mirror!" Toby said, shaking his head.

"You look like a shaggy goat, Toby. That beard must itch something fierce in this heat. Come here, I'll shave you," Buckshot offered. He rinsed off the razor and stood waiting.

A few minutes and a couple of nicks later, Toby was clean-shaven, if a bit bloody. Buckshot wiped off his Bowie and stuck it back in its sheath on his gun belt, and pulled on his shirt. Buckling his holster around his lean hips, plunking his hat on his head, and pinning his silver star to his chest, Buckshot led Toby out of the room and downstairs to the saloon in search of breakfast.

The Saddle Horn was practically deserted at that early hour. Buckshot and Toby took seats at a table near the bar, surreptitiously crossing their fingers that whatever Pablo served them would be edible this time around.

Luckily, he placed bowls of thick porridge, a plate of hot biscuits, and cups of strong, piping-hot coffee in front of them. Practically starving, they devoured their breakfast, stopping just short of licking the bowls clean.

“Where are we going first?” Toby asked, draining the last of his coffee.

“Figure I’d start at the mission. I want to ask the padre a few questions, if he’s sober,” Buckshot answered. He signaled Hank, who brought over a pair of shot glasses full of amber liquid. The smell of the liquor was nauseating, but Buckshot downed one anyway and waited for Toby to do the same.

“Ugh. I think I may be sick, Buckshot,” Toby groaned, a shudder running down his spine as his stomach rebelled against the strong taste of the whiskey.

“Yeah, but it’s the best medicine I know for what ails us,” Buckshot chuckled.

Standing and taking a last swig of coffee, Buckshot led Toby out of the saloon and into the street. The sun had just breached the horizon, and it was already hot outside. The day was going to be a scorcher. The sky stretched from one horizon to the other, a solid wall of azure blue without a single wisp of cloud to mar its expanse.

Toby’s first impression of Golden was that the town was less than inspiring. Faded, weather-worn wooden structures lined both sides of the street, but most them seemed deserted. At one time Golden looked to have been a thriving town, with a bank, a post office, a dry goods store, a land office, an ice house, several private homes, and of course, the saloon. But now all the buildings but the dry goods store, the private homes, and the Saddle Horn had been boarded over. Toby was willing to bet that the homes were now inhabited by squatters, most likely some of the cowboys and miners that had been kicking up their heels in the saloon the night before.

He followed Buckshot up the street, keeping an eye on where he planted his feet. There were no wooden walkways, and the dirt street was sprinkled with piles of horse droppings and muddy holes.

“What happened to this town, Buckshot? It looks as though it was doing well at one time,” Toby asked, carefully sidestepping a fresh-looking, steaming mound of manure.

Buckshot shrugged. “What happens to most mining towns, I reckon. Prospectors found a gold vein about a half-mile west of here. Word got out, and pretty soon people were coming in by the droves, hacking and picking at every rock, trying to strike it rich. The town sprung up around them. But the vein that the miners had found petered out soon enough, and no one ever found any others. Families packed up and left, and the town died. We still got a few hardheaded mules that keep at it, and new men come in from time to time, but they never find nothing more than fool’s gold. Most of the folk in this town are cowboys who need a place to live in between drives.”

They’d left the town limits and were hiking up a gently sloping, rocky hill toward a small, white adobe building that sat on its crest. A large, simple wooden cross had been hung over the door,

and a small brass bell hung crookedly in its rounded steeple. Sitting off to one side of the church was a cemetery, wooden grave markers leaning at precarious angles over weed-choked plots.

A short, heavy man dressed in the brown, coarse robes of a monk was on his knees, tending a tiny vegetable garden. His hair was balding at the crown, his shiny pate burned bright red from the sun. At Buckshot and Toby's approach, he turned, sitting up on his haunches.

"Who's there?" he called out, feeling for the walking stick that lay on the ground nearby. He used it to pull himself to his feet, leaning heavily on it.

"It's Buckshot, Padre. I need to ask you a few questions."

"Buckshot?" Padre answered, smiling. "Praise the Lord, I didn't know you were back!" He hobbled in the direction of Buckshot's voice, reaching out for him. "How are you, son? Still with the Rangers?" His fingers found Buckshot's face, gently sliding from his brow to his chin.

Buckshot took Padre's hand, placing it on his arm. "Yes sir, I am. I got a friend with me, Padre. His name's Toby Garrett, and he's a reporter with a newspaper in Kansas City."

Padre reached out a plump hand feeling for Toby, resting his fingers lightly on Toby's chest. "How do, Mr. Garrett. Any friend of Buckshot's is a friend of mine. My name is Father John Jessup, but most folk just call me '*Padre*.' Come, come...let's go inside. I could use some tea," he said, allowing Buckshot to escort him into the cool recesses of the church.

They walked through the church in between a row of rough-hewn wooden pews and through a door at the rear into Jessup's private living quarters. It was a single room, neat as a pin and sparsely furnished with a small, square table and a few three-legged stools, a fireplace, and a single cot wedged against one corner.

"Sit down, make yourselves at home," Jessup smiled as he bustled about setting a kettle of water over a small fire that burned in hearth. He set three mismatched, chipped china cups on the table along with a few bent and rusted spoons, then fetched a mason jar of dried leaves from a cabinet. Jessup moved with unerring precision around his home, never once stumbling or missing something that he reached for, never having to search for anything. He knew exactly where every item was, and moved as quickly and efficiently as any sighted person Toby had ever known.

"What brings a newspaperman all the way from Kansas City into the wilderness?" Jessup asked, sitting down at the table as he waited for the water in the kettle to boil. "I can't imagine what you'd find out here that would interest anyone in a big city. Folks here keep mainly to themselves."

"I was in a stagecoach accident, Padre. Buckshot found me and brought me here," Toby answered.

"Good Heavens! I hope you weren't injured, Mr. Garrett!" Padre gasped.

“Not much, just bounced around a bit. The other men I was traveling with weren’t so lucky. I was the only one who survived and I wouldn’t have for very long, if Buckshot hadn’t found me. He saved my life.” Toby noticed a slight blush sweep Buckshot’s cheeks.

“It wasn’t nothing. All I did was tote you here.”

“The Lord works in mysterious ways, Buckshot. Could be you and Mr. Garrett were meant to meet for a reason,” Jessup said, ladling a few healthy spoonfuls of tealeaves into the kettle. When the water in the black iron kettle boiled, he removed it from the hearth and placed it on the table. Buckshot did the honors, pouring the steaming, fragrant water into their cups.

“Toby will do nicely, Padre,” Toby said, sniffing the aroma of his tea and smiling.

“Toby it is, then. Buckshot, what brings you back to Golden?”

“I wish I could say it was just to visit, Padre, but I’d be lying. The reason I’m here ain’t a happy one. I’m investigating a string of murders that started back in Texas and led me here. Whole families were killed in cold blood,” Buckshot answered.

“Oh, good Lord. That’s horrible! May they rest in peace,” Jessup said, making the sign of the cross. “Indian attacks?” he asked. “I thought you had a peace treaty with the tribes in Texas, Buckshot.”

“I’m convinced that it wasn’t the work of no Indians, Padre. Have you ever heard of a preacher named Malachai?” Buckshot asked.

For the first time, Jessup’s hand trembled, rattling his cup against the wooden table. “Sweet Mother of Mercy! Where’d you hear that name, Buckshot?” he gasped. His face blanched a pasty white as he crossed himself again.

Buckshot exchanged a quick look with Toby. “He was seen preaching around each of the locations of the murders, Padre. And old One-Eye told us a whopper of a story about him last night. I take it you know him, then?”

“No, I don’t know him, thank God. I don’t know anyone besides One-Eye that’s met up with him and lived to tell the tale.”

“It can’t be the same man that attacked One-Eye, Padre. He’d be far too old to do what was done to the folks that were murdered,” Buckshot argued.

“There are things in this life that we can’t always explain, Buckshot. Things that our minds tell us are impossible, but our eyes insist are true. Malachai is one of them,” Jessup replied firmly, shaking his head.

“Who is he?” Toby asked, sipping at his tea. It tasted of clover and ginger root. “Why does he do what he does, and why hasn’t he ever been caught?”

“He can’t be caught, Mr. Garrett. The Indians call him Átahsaia, the cannibal demon. It’s my belief that he’s the Devil himself, and he does what he does because he *enjoys* it.”

“*The Devil?* Come on, Padre, be serious now. You expect me to believe that I’m trailing somebody with horns and a pitchfork?” Buckshot snorted in disbelief. “The Devil don’t butcher people up like cattle, and even if he did the footprints we found in their blood weren’t cloven.” He chuckled, until he saw the deathly serious expression on Padre’s face.

“Evil is evil, Buckshot, no matter what name you put to it. And Malachai is Evil itself. He’s every bit as real as you and me. I’ve been here a long time, Buckshot. I’ve heard stories. Stories that would curdle your blood,” Jessup replied.

“What do the Indians say about him, Padre?” Toby asked. No matter how farfetched Jessup’s theory seemed and even though it was as unbelievable as One-Eye’s tale had been, Toby was intrigued by the story. It would make an interesting sidebar to the story he planned on writing about the murders.

“They say that Átahsaia is a horrible demon, as ugly as sin, with great, bulging red eyes and long, jagged yellow teeth. His claws are as sharp as razors, and he eats the flesh of men.”

“Well, that settles it. All my witnesses have sworn that Malachai is a good-looking man,” Buckshot chuckled. “Even if it were possible, he couldn’t be this Átahsaia monster.”

“The Devil has power beyond our ken, Buckshot. Evil often wears a beautiful face, or else man wouldn’t be tempted by it. The Indians say Átahsaia can look like anyone. That’s how he gets close to his victims.”

“I’m sorry, Padre. I’m a Ranger. I believe in what I can see and touch. Whoever done these murders is a flesh and blood man, and I’m going to hang his sorry ass from the nearest tree when I find him,” Buckshot stated. He stood up, planting his hat firmly on his head. “We’d best go, Toby. I got to get on to the stable. I owe Mathias for Bo’s keep. Thank you kindly for the tea, Padre.” Buckshot said, walking over to the door and opening it.

“Pleasure to have met you, Padre,” Toby said, standing to follow Buckshot.

Jessup put a pudgy hand on Toby’s arm. “Don’t let him do anything foolish, Mr. Garrett. Don’t let his pride blind him. My eyes may be useless, but even *I* can see the Devil’s thumbprints in this.” To Buckshot he called, “Evil can’t be stopped with a bullet, Buckshot. You’re going to get yourself killed going after Malachai!”

Buckshot frowned then let himself out, followed closely by Toby. The two men walked back down the hill toward Golden, casting a backward glance now and then at the mission.

“Think there’s any truth to what the Padre was saying about Malachai?” Toby asked as they reached the town limits, heading toward the blacksmith shop.

“I think Padre’s been spending too much time weeding his garden. The sun’s done fried his brains,” Buckshot replied. “He’s a nice enough fella and he means well, but the fact that he drinks like a fish ain’t no secret.”

“That would explain it then. All that talk about Indian demons and the Devil *was* pretty crazy,” Toby said. “Got to admit that he gave me gooseflesh, though.” He shuddered and tossed a last look over his shoulder in the direction of the mission.

They’d just gotten abreast of the Saddle Horn when a piercing scream rent the silence of the early morning. Breaking into a run and drawing his revolvers at the same time, Buckshot saw Mathias backing into the street from his smithy shop at the far end of town, bellowing at the top of his lungs. Putting on a fresh burst of speed, Buckshot and Toby shot down the dirt street to where Mathias stood screaming. As they neared him, Toby felt a terrible feeling of foreboding wash over him.

Mathias’ hands were covered in blood.

Chapter Five

“Mathias!” Buckshot yelled, running at full-tilt and skidding to a stop in front of the blacksmith shop. “Mathias! What’s happened? Where are you hurt?” Jamming his revolvers into his holster, he grabbed Mathias’ arms, looking for an injury.

“It’s One-Eye! He’s dead!” Mathias cried, pulling away from Buckshot. He stumbled, falling down heavily to the ground. Wide-eyed, he stared over Buckshot’s shoulder toward the blacksmith shop and stable.

“Stay with him,” Buckshot ordered Toby. Spinning on his heel, he pulled out his revolvers, keeping both of them trained on the darkened interior of the shop as he slowly approached the doorway. Flattening himself against the jamb, he peered into the dim interior. Whatever had frightened a bear of a man like Mathias half out of his wits was something worthy of extreme caution on Buckshot’s part.

“One-Eye? You in there?” he called. He listened hard for an answer, but none came. Inching his way into the shop, he thought for a moment that Mathias had somehow spilled red paint all over everything – the floor, the stalls, his forge. But the thick coppery smell that hung heavy in the air told Buckshot a different story. It wasn’t paint. It was blood.

In their stalls near the rear of the shop, the horses snorted and pranced nervously, banging against the walls, obviously upset and pushed to their limits by the smell of blood. Buckshot called out quietly to Bo, hoping that the sound of his voice would calm his horse.

Making his way deeper into the shop, Buckshot kept his eyes peeled for any movement, and his ears open for the slightest sound. The fine hairs on his arms and the back of his neck stood up, fear prickling his skin. Other than the horses and the sound of his heart thumping in his chest, there was no sound at all.

Edging his way toward the far end of the shop, his eyes picked out the shape of a body crumpled up in a corner. As he got closer, he realized that it was One-Eye.

Or what was left of him.

One-Eye had been savagely attacked and gutted like a fish. Slick coils of his entrails lay stretched and spooled around his legs, glistening wetly in the dim light. Flies buzzed around his head and Buckshot watched as one lit, crawling over his face. Buckshot realized that One-Eye was now missing both of his eyes, as a fly disappeared into the ragged red hole on the left side of One-Eye’s face. The pool of blood in which the body lay had congealed, telling Buckshot that One-Eye had been murdered some time during the night.

Scrawled in dripping crimson across the wall above his body were the same markings that Buckshot had found at every other murder scene in which Malachai was a suspect. “Malachai,” Buckshot whispered, even as the ghost of Padre’s voice in his head insisted, “Átahsaia.”

Quickly turning away from his gruesome discovery, his stomach lurching, Buckshot’s gaze fell on Mathias’ anvil. As if recently vacated by its diner, a plate laden with gobbets of red, raw meat

sat on the flat top of the black iron fixture, a fork and napkin neatly set to the side. Floating in a glass of water set next to the plate was a single, charcoal-gray eye.

Bending over at the waist, Buckshot lost his breakfast on the gore-streaked floor.

“Tell me again, Mathias.”

“I done told you a hundred times already, Buckshot,” Mathias growled, glaring up at Buckshot. “Don’t make me say it no more.”

“Mathias, *you* found him. *You* were covered in his blood. There were no other witnesses, and I got a town full of men who are scared shitless. Murder and fear make rotten bedfellows. They do however, make excellent lynch mobs. Those men out there are getting ready to have themselves a hanging party, and they’re thinking that you’re gonna be the guest of honor. Now, one more time. Tell me how you found him,” Buckshot insisted.

Taken to Buckshot’s room at the Saddle Horn, Mathias had told his story. He sat on the narrow bed, its frame creaking under his weight. Lowering his hands to his lap, he flicked his bright blue eyes up at Buckshot. “He was my friend, Buckshot. Old One-Eye never hurt nobody. He come in, did his job. Never gave me no trouble. Why would I want to hurt him?”

“I ain’t saying that you did. But I want to hear how you found him one more time.”

Sighing, Mathias nodded slowly. “I come over to the shop to get an early start on the day. It was gonna be a hot one and I had three horses that needed to be shod, plus a couple of other odd jobs that needed doing. I could hear the horses making a racket inside, and I wondered what was going on. Thought maybe a coyote or a wolf was round about. When I opened the door, I smelled it right away. The blood. Then I saw One-Eye laying in the corner. He didn’t look right, didn’t look like he was just sleeping. I *couldn’t* believe that he was... I grabbed his shoulders and shook him, yelling at him to wake up. His insides just...fell out of him. They fell *out*, Buckshot!” He wiped a forearm across his sweaty forehead, then covered his face with his hands.

“Okay. I believe you. I know you’d never hurt One-Eye. Now, I want you to listen to me carefully, Mathias. You aren’t to leave this room, understand? I don’t want you setting one foot outside the door. As far as everyone in this town is concerned, you’re under arrest. You ain’t, not really, but it’s safer for them to think that you’re my prisoner,” Buckshot said, patting Mathias’ shoulder. “You stay up here. I’m gonna take Toby and go do some digging. We’ll sort this mess out and find who did it. Pablo will have a key to the door so he can bring you some dinner. Don’t open that door for anybody else. Okay?”

Mathias nodded, but didn’t meet Buckshot’s eyes.

“Just stay put, Mathias,” Buckshot ordered sternly. “Don’t make me cuff you to the bed.” He set his hat on his head, made sure that his star was visible on his shirt then led Toby out of the room, locking the door behind them.

“What do we do now?” Toby asked Buckshot, once the door was shut and they were out of earshot from Mathias.

“First thing we do is calm down that mob outside that’s screaming for Mathias’ neck in noose. There are a couple of men in town that I trust. Gonna deputize them, put one of them in charge of guarding Mathias while we’re gone,” Buckshot answered, walking toward the staircase. “Then I’m going to take the other and see if I can pick up a trail. If not, then we’re gonna ride to the next town, Cibola. See if they’ve had any trouble. I’ll probably need to send to Phoenix for a circuit judge to come and sort this mess out.”

They walked downstairs into the saloon. Buckshot went up to the bar, where Hank was stood wiping glasses with a dirty rag.

“Still got that shotgun back there, Hank?” Buckshot asked.

“Yup,” Hank answered, reaching under the bar and pulling it out, laying the long-barreled gun on the bar.

“Keep it loaded and handy. You got a revolver back there, too?”

“Yeah, I do. Why?”

“I need to borrow it. I only have my two, and Toby needs a gun,” Buckshot said.

“Toby needs a *what*?” Toby parroted, his head snapping to stare at Buckshot.

“Looks like he’s more likely to shoot off his own foot than anything he’s aiming at, Buckshot,” Hank chuckled, sliding the revolver across the bar toward Toby.

“Let me worry about him. You worry about keeping those front doors locked and those men out there away from Mathias. Anything happens to him, I’m holding you responsible, Hank,” Buckshot said. He picked up the revolver, checked the chamber, and handed it butt-first to Toby.

“Yeah, and I’ll add the cost of that gun to your bill, Buckshot,” Hank mumbled, earning himself a glare from Buckshot.

Toby took the gun as if it might explode in his hand. He’d shot a gun exactly five times in his life. All five had been at his grandfather’s farm when he’d been twelve. His father had let him shoot at tin cans that had been lined up on a fence. He’d missed all five times, and had clipped his Uncle Frank in the process. He’d never been allowed near a gun again, not even to hunt.

“Word is that Mathias done it, Buckshot. I can’t say that I believe it, but that’s what folks are saying out there,” Hank said, putting the shotgun back under the bar, but keeping it within easy reach.

“You know Mathias as well as I do, Hank. You know he ain’t capable of doing something like that. The man don’t have a mean bone in his body,” Buckshot answered, looking up toward the second floor.

“I know he don’t. That’s the only reason I’m letting you keep him here, no matter how much you’re paying for the room.”

“Raise your right hand, Hank. You too, Toby,” Buckshot ordered. “Repeat after me. I solemnly swear to bear true allegiance to the State of Texas, and to obey the orders of the Governor and my commanding officer according to the rules and regulations of the Texas Rangers.”

Toby was shocked. Buckshot had mentioned deputizing a couple of men, but he’d never thought that he’d be one of them.

Dutifully, he and Hank repeated Buckshot’s oath, stumbling a bit over the words. They got the gist of the oath though, becoming duly deputized as temporary Rangers.

“Hank, the only man I want within fifty feet of Mathias is Pablo, and that’s only when he’s bringing him dinner. Nobody else goes upstairs,” Buckshot said, checking his own weapons. He spun his pearl-handled revolvers around on his forefingers, pocketing them neatly in his holsters. His hand patted his Bowie knife as well, then he looked at Toby. “We’ll get you a holster at the blacksmith shop when we get the horses. It’s not going to be pretty outside, so let me do all the talking, okay? And whatever you do, don’t point that gun at anyone out there. You’ll get shot faster than you can blink.”

“Sure. Whatever you say, Buckshot,” Toby answered. Following Buckshot to the front door, he tried to spin his gun on his finger, and nearly dropped it, coming very close to making Hank’s prediction about shooting his foot off a reality. He settled for tucking it into the back of the waistband of his pants and hoping fervently that he didn’t shoot himself in the ass.

Buckshot paused, taking a deep breath before he opened the door and stepped outside. Immediately, a chorus of deep, angry voices rose up, slamming him with a barrage of questions, demands, and accusations.

“Where’s Mathias, Buckshot?”

“He’s a cold-blooded murderer! Bring him out, Buckshot!”

“We know how to deal with men like him, Ranger!”

“Ain’t no *Texan* gonna tell us how to deal justice in the New Mexico Territory!”

“Why are you protecting him, Buckshot? Send him out!”

Buckshot raised his hands up. “Quiet down and listen up! Mathias is in my custody. That means that nobody — and I do mean *nobody* — goes inside the Saddle Horn. If you try to get to Mathias, you’ll be shot. Got that?” He looked over the grim faces of the men in the crowd, murmuring to Toby that it was the few men whom he didn’t know that were causing the biggest ruckus. “Listen to me. You all know Mathias. He’s worked in this town for a year and never got into so much as a bar fight. I don’t think he’s responsible for killing One-Eye. I think the man

who did is the same man I've been tracking from Texas. The man I'm after killed a bunch of folk the same way as One-Eye, including a passel of children."

"Nobody knows where Mathias comes from, Buckshot. Nobody knows where he goes when he disappears, neither," called out a man whose name Toby thought was Frank.

"Where do you go when you leave town for a while, Frank? Leaving don't make him guilty. He always comes back, don't he?"

"Who is this man you're hunting, Buckshot?" Bill called out, stepping forward out of the crowd. His fingers worried at one of the curling ends of his handlebar mustache. "Where is he?"

"His name is Malachai. I don't know where he is, Bill. If I did I'd have him in custody or in the ground by now. But I trailed him here clean from Texas. I knew he was close, I just didn't know *how* close. He's my age, tall, with long blonde hair and blue eyes."

"And if we see him?" Bill asked.

"Hightail it in the opposite direction. This man is plum crazy. Not just talking-to-yourself, seeing-angels crazy, neither. He's loco and more dangerous than a rattlesnake with fangs at both ends." Buckshot looked into the crowd, meeting as many eyes as he could. "I'm going to take a look see at Mathias' shop again, then I'm gonna see One-Eye buried right and proper. After that I'm gonna ride out to Cibola. Most likely, I'll be back in a day or so and God help you all if I come back and find one hair out of place on Mathias' head."

"Are we gonna sit here and let this Texan tell us what to do?"

Frank yelled. "Last time I checked, this ain't Texas. He ain't got no authority here."

"Shut up, Frank," Bill shot back. "We all know Buckshot here. He never steered us wrong before. Keep your yap shut and your eyes peeled."

"Bill, you wanna give me and Toby a hand with One-Eye?" Buckshot asked. At Bill's nod, he said, "Fetch a couple of linens from Hank. We'll need to wrap him up." Buckshot looked over the crowd and picked two more men. "You two head up to the mission. Tell Padre what happened, and dig a grave."

Bill headed into the Saddle Horn, while the other two men walked off toward the mission. With one last stern look at the remaining men, Buckshot turned away. Toby was pretty sure that Buckshot'd done as much as he could to keep Mathias safe, at least for a while.

When he and Buckshot reached the blacksmith shop, Buckshot made a careful examination of the ground outside, walking all the way around the building. The area was clean, with absolutely no evidence left behind by One-Eye's murderer aside from a couple of bloody footprints. Human footprints.

"Stay here, Toby. I need to take a look around inside again, and trust me — you don't want to be in there. Wait here for Bill, okay?"

Toby wasn't eager to enter the building anyway. He had no desire to see for himself what was left of One-Eye. Buckshot's descriptions had been graphic enough to suit him. "Sure thing, Buckshot. Be right here, waiting for you."

Buckshot nodded and turned toward the door.

Buckshot shuddered when he entered the shop. The smell of blood was still thick in the air, although that could have been Buckshot's imagination working overtime. Regardless, he couldn't look toward the corner where One-Eye still lay, or at the anvil that held the grisly feast without feeling a cold shiver tickle at his spine.

He took a closer look at the writing on the wall above One-Eye's body. Large, dripping letters had been printed in a childish scrawl in One-Eye's blood. Buckshot had no idea of what language it was in, but the word was identical to the others he'd seen.

A sound at the door drew his attention. Turning, he saw Bill poke his head in the door and turn pasty white when he spotted all the blood. "Um, Buckshot? Got those linens for you."

Buckshot took the sheets from Bill, turning down his offer to help wrap One-Eye's body. The last thing Buckshot needed was for someone else to upchuck over the evidence.

He lay the sheets down, then took a deep breath. As quickly as possible, he rolled One-Eye's body onto the sheets, making certain that everything that had once been a part of One-Eye went with him. Placing the dinner plate on One-Eye's stomach along with the water glass that held the eyeball, Buckshot felt the bile rise in his throat again. He waited until his stomach settled before finishing the grisly task. Tying the linens securely around the body with a piece of rope, he watched the sheets soak up red. Only then did he call to Bill and Toby.

"I can use a hand carrying him outside," he said. "You two take One-Eye while I get Bo."

Toby turned a sickly green and Bill swallowed hard, but both men nodded. Standing on either end of One-Eye's corpse, they looked down queasily at the red-splotched linens. Finally they nodded toward one another. Each picked up an end and carried One-Eye outside into the bright sunshine.

Before going to get Bo, Buckshot appropriated a gun belt and holster for Toby.

Bo lifted his head and snorted as Buckshot opened his stall door and stepped inside. "Been a rough night, hasn't it boy?" Buckshot said, stroking Bo's velvet nose. "Sure wish you could talk. You'd have a mouthful to tell me, and that's a fact."

Saddling Bo up, Buckshot led him outside. Between the three men, they hoisted One-Eye's body up and over Bo's saddle, then marched silently alongside the horse and his macabre rider, a grim parade that ended at the freshly dug grave near the mission.

One-Eye's funeral was brief. Padre said a few words and Buckshot read a passage from his battered, old black Bible.

One of the cowboys had quickly whittled a marker for his grave. It read, "*One-Eye, Murdered July 3, 1867. Rest in Piece.*"

Considering the manner of his demise, Buckshot thought the marker most appropriate.

Buckshot had wanted to leave as soon as One-Eye was decently in the ground.

He'd appropriated a horse that belonged to Hank and was named "Thunder." A dark gray gelding, he would be Toby's mount for their trip to Cibola.

They'd ridden for the last couple of hours mostly in silence. What little conversation they had had centered on the murder, and Buckshot was tired of thinking about One-Eye, Mathias, and Malachai, tired talking about nothing but death. He wanted to have a conversation about something else for a while, something that would take his mind off of his troubles.

"You ride pretty good for a city boy," Buckshot said, looking over at Toby, who sat well on his huge, gray horse.

"I haven't always lived in the city. I was raised outside the limits and spent nearly all my time on my grandfather's farm," Toby replied, sounding a bit miffed that Buckshot had seen fit to comment on his horsemanship. "I've been riding for as long as I've been walking."

"Don't get your britches in a knot. I just didn't think a reporter from Kansas City would be such a fine rider, is all."

"It was insulting."

"I'm sorry. Sheesh, you've got your feathers ruffled now. Settle down. I didn't mean to insult you."

Toby sighed. "It's not your fault. I've been defending myself since I left Kansas City. The drivers of the stagecoach were two tough men with half a brain and two teeth between them. They used to refer to me as the '*prissy city boy*.'" Toby's cheeks went red as he said it, and Buckshot wondered if he was worried that Buckshot might just agree with them.

"Yeah? Well, seems to me that the prissy city boy survived a stagecoach wreck, while the two tough cowboys are deader than doornails," Buckshot said, smiling.

"That was luck."

"Not all of it. You had the courage to leave the wreck and go looking for help, riding that mule. Not to mention riding him bareback and hanging on even though you were hurt! Now that's tough, son."

“That wasn’t courage *or* being tough. That was fear, pure and simple. I wasn’t looking for help. I was running from trouble,” Toby admitted, blushing. “I was a coward. I was afraid to wait for help to come to me.”

“Knowing when to run isn’t being a coward, Toby. It’s being smart,” Buckshot said quietly. “Chances are if you’d stayed, you’d still be waiting...or you’d be dead.”

Toby gave Buckshot a small nod, but held his tongue, not meeting Buckshot’s eyes.

Buckshot knew what Toby was thinking by the look on his face. He was feeling like a coward, the guilt clearly showing in his hound dog expression. No doubt that the memory of the accident was still wreaking havoc within him – Buckshot had had similar experiences and knew how easy it was to succumb to guilt when you survived while others died, how tempting it was to blame yourself. Still, there weren’t any words of wisdom he could offer, other than those he already had. There were some things a man had to learn on his own.

Plodding along, their horses’ hooves striking the earth with dull *thuds*, the silence that hung between them grew uncomfortable.

“How’d you come to be a reporter?” Buckshot asked after a few minutes, anxious to fill the empty air between them.

Toby shrugged. “I always liked to write. In case you haven’t noticed, aside from riding I never really got the hang of being a cowboy. Couldn’t shoot worth a damn, couldn’t rope anything that wouldn’t hold still for me. But what I *could* do was write. Someday I’d like to write a book, but for now I settled on working for the paper.”

“I read a book last year.”

“*Really?*”

“You don’t have to make it sound like I said I walked on water,” Buckshot laughed. “I *can* read, you know. The one I read just last year was about a whale and this old fool named Ahab.”

“You read *Moby Dick*?”

“I thought the title sounded dirty. I was wrong.”

Toby laughed until tears rolled down his cheeks. “Well, now that makes perfect sense.”

Buckshot chuckled along with Toby. “It was interesting enough, though. Made me wonder what the ocean looks like. Never saw it myself. I seen the Gulf of Mexico, though. Figure it must be pretty much the same thing. You know...wet.”

“Yeah, I suppose it would be at that. Never saw the ocean either. Never left Kansas City until I boarded that stagecoach and ended up here,” Toby said. “How’d you become a Ranger?”

“Took the oath, same as you.”

“Funny.”

“My Pa was a Ranger. Got himself killed in the line of duty when I was a kid. Figured if it was good enough for him, it was good enough for me. Plus, I kind of liked the notion that I’d be keeping the peace. Too many good folks can’t defend themselves, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. It’s kind of the same thing with reporting. You tell the story so people can learn from it, maybe not make the same mistake as somebody else.”

Buckshot nodded. “Time to rest the horses for a spell. That looks like a good spot right there,” Buckshot said, pointing to a shady overhang on the bank of a sparkling stream. They headed over, and turned the horses loose to drink and graze, settling themselves in the small space under the overhang.

Lying in the cool shade of the overhang, Buckshot let his mind wander to things other than the gruesome murders and the preacher he hunted.

Watching a pair of meadowlarks swoop and spiral into the air over the stream as their melodious song briefly filled the air, Buckshot leaned up on his elbows, and crossed his legs at the ankles.

“Sure is pretty out here. Reminds me a lot of back home. I could never understand why people would want to live in cities, all penned up like chickens in a coop, bumping in to each just trying to walk down the street. Why is that, Toby?” he asked, taking off his hat and fanning his face with it.

“Kansas City isn’t exactly a chicken coop, Buckshot. It’s a pretty amazing place. There’s the theater, and the opera, and you can buy just about anything from vegetables to fine silks at the Market. There are barbershops and haberdasheries, mills, icehouses, saloons by the handful, brothels, you name it. Can’t get any of that on the prairie, Buckshot.”

“No, I don’t suppose you can. Been to Kansas City once and I’ve been to Dallas more often than I’d like. They’re both mighty grand, but they still can’t hold a candle to the wide open spaces as far as I’m concerned. Ain’t nothing like sleeping out under the stars.”

“You mean with the cactus, the scorpions, and the rattlesnakes?” Toby grinned.

Buckshot snorted. “I *mean* under so many stars that a man can’t count ‘em all. I *mean* under a sky so wide that a man can see from one end of the earth to the other. I *mean* in a meadow that’s choked up with wildflowers. I *mean*- ”

“I get it, I get it!” Toby laughed. “I do believe you’re a poet at heart, Ranger.” He lay back, folding his arms under his head. After a short while, he said, “I’ll tell you something true, Buckshot. I think I agree with you. Since I left on this trip I didn’t do anything but think about getting from Kansas City to San Francisco. I never realized that there was so much beauty in between them. Never really thought about it.”

“Know what I’m thinking about right now?” Buckshot asked, turning up on his side and facing Toby.

“What?”

“This,” he answered, leaning over and brushing his lips across Toby’s.

Toby bolted up and pulled away as if Buckshot had the plague, narrowly missing banging his head on the low overhang. “What the hell are you doing, Buckshot?”

Buckshot sat up, his eyes wide with surprise. “I *was* kissing you. Is that a problem?”

“Hell yes, that’s a problem!” Toby yelled, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

“It *is*? Well, now you could’ve fooled me, especially after what we done last night.”

Toby pointed a trembling finger at Buckshot. “*That* was a dream.”

“No, it wasn’t. If it was a dream, then how’d I know about it? Want me to tell you what we done in detail?” Buckshot smirked. He sat up, folding his arms across his chest.

Toby paled, and swallowed hard, shaking his head. “It was a dream,” he insisted.

“No, it wasn’t. First,” Buckshot said, holding up one finger, “I kissed you some.” He held up a second finger. “Then I took hold of your co- ”

“Oh, God. It wasn’t a dream! You and me...we...”

“Oh yeah, we did.”

“And...you didn’t shoot me yet?”

Buckshot blinked. “Well...not with my gun, if that’s what you mean.”

“But...but you’re a Ranger!”

“And you’re a newspaper reporter. Whew, sure am glad we got that straightened out. Hate to think that I was messin’ around with a banker.”

“This isn’t funny.”

“I think it is. You’re looking at me like I’m going to put a bullet between your eyes, Toby.”

“You’re not?”

“What in the blue hell makes you think that?” Buckshot asked. “If I remember correctly it was me who kissed you and started the whole thing, not the other way around.”

Toby eyed Buckshot warily, giving him a small nod. "Yeah, you did at that. I just...well, my Pa always told me that..."

"That what?"

"That men like you shot men like me."

"Ah..." Buckshot sighed, finally understanding. "So, you like men better than women, huh? Just never admitted it to no one before now, did you? Maybe not even to yourself?" He nodded, a soft smile creasing his cheeks. "It's okay, Toby. I do, too. But what did your Pa mean by '*men like*' me?"

"Cowboys. Tough men. My Pa always used to tell me that I'd better *tough-up* or somebody like you would string me up, or worse. It's why I left home and went to Kansas City -- where nobody knew how I was."

"I ain't never, in my entire life, lifted a finger against someone just because of how they acted or how they looked, Toby. It's my job to *protect* people, remember?"

"I know. It's just that you...took me by surprise, Buckshot. I really thought I just dreamt it. I've had dreams like that before," he whispered, his cheeks heating.

"Yeah, I suppose you would. Me, too, from time to time, come to think of it," Buckshot admitted. He looked down, chewing on his lower lip for a moment, then raised his eyes to meet Toby's. "Thing is, I really liked kissing you, Toby. A lot. And I can't seem to stop thinking about kissing you again."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. So...can I?"

"What?"

"Kiss you," Buckshot whispered. Cupping Toby's cheek with his hand, he leaned in again and brushed his lips against Toby's.

Feather-soft and barely there, it nonetheless sent a shiver down Toby's spine.

Buckshot leaned his forehead against Toby's, his hand still gently stroking Toby's cheek. "Can I touch you? I won't if you don't want me to, Toby."

"I...I want you to, Buckshot. I'm just a little nervous."

"Don't be. Ain't gonna do nothing you don't want me to do. I promise," Buckshot whispered. He lowered his mouth to Toby's and kissed him again, light and sweet. Then he kissed him again, firmer. And again, firmer still.

Toby lay there, letting Buckshot kiss him, aching to kiss him back, to touch him, but unable to move. He was torn between wanting Buckshot to touch him, and fearing his desire.

Buckshot's fingers found Toby's groin, fondling his cock through his linen suit pants. The warmth of his hand over Toby's crotch was enough to sweep any lingering doubt from Toby's mind. Unable to resist any longer, Toby arched his hips up into Buckshot's hand, feeling himself hardening from their kisses and Buckshot's light touch. He opened his mouth, inviting Buckshot's tongue in, meeting it with his own. Amazed at his temerity, Toby nearly smiled as he reached over to see if Buckshot's reaction was the same as his own.

He found that it was.

That was all it took. If Toby had thought that it had been a dam that had burst within Buckshot the night before, then it was a sexual tidal wave of epic proportions that swept through his own body now.

His fingers fumbled at the fly of Buckshot's denim, trying to free his burgeoning erection. Toby wanted to taste him again, wanted to slide his tongue over the hot, velvet steel of Buckshot's cock, and *know* that it wasn't a dream. More, he wanted Buckshot's mouth on *him*. Just the thought of plunging his cock between Buckshot's lips had him grunting and fairly ripping at Buckshot's crotch in desperation.

Buckshot was no more in control than Toby. He was under enormous pressure from the killings and was eager for the temporary relief that would come with his orgasm. But more than that, he'd spoken the truth to Toby. He did want to touch Toby; wanted Toby to touch *him*. Before Toby, his encounters with men had been quick, slam-bam-thank-you-sirs, with no strings and no regrets. Toby was different, more exciting than any man Buckshot had ever touched before. His fingers flew to his fly, smacking Toby's fumbling hand away, unbuckling his holster and unbuttoning his denim, even as Toby did the same with his linen trousers.

Just as Buckshot had reached inside of his pants, pulling his cock free of the denim, a shadow fell across the two of them. Backlit by the sunlight, two tall figures stood silently looking down at them.

Chapter Six

Buckshot reached for his holster, but the sharp, flint-tipped arrows that were pointed in his direction stayed his hand.

The figures backed away, motioning with their bows for Buckshot and Toby to stand and come out from under the overhang.

“Buckshot?” Toby asked in a hoarse whisper, and Buckshot could near hear Toby’s heart begin to pound as he covered his groin with both hands.

“Just do what they tell us, Toby,” Buckshot answered, rising to his feet. He made no effort to pick up his holster when it dropped free of his hips, or to button up his fly. Stepping out from under the overhang, he stared stoically at the two warriors who’d found them, keeping his hands raised palms out, showing that he had no weapons.

The two braves were dressed in soft buckskin shirts and trousers, decorated with stone beads, brightly dyed porcupine quills, and painted markings. Their knee-high leather boots were also beaded, and trimmed with fur at the knee. Long black hair, twisted into a single, thick braid, was knotted with feathers and beads. The sides of their heads had been close-shaved, while the hair at the top had been cut short, sticking straight up from their skulls like a turkey’s tail. Solemn and impassive, their faces were sun-bronzed and noble. Both had eyes as dark as pitch, hawkish noses and high, prominent cheekbones. Blackened tattoos marked their cheeks in an intricate pattern of dots and lines. They held large wooden bows, the catgut stretched taut and a pair of flint-tipped arrows notched and ready to fly.

He immediately noticed that their visitors weren’t alone. Two other braves on horseback had already taken the bridles of Buckshot and Toby’s mounts and were leading them away.

The two who had their arrows trained on Buckshot and Toby eyed Buckshot’s cock. He felt it soften under the gaze of their dark eyes, hanging limply over the open fly of his pants. His cheeks grew hot under the warriors’ scrutiny, but he still made no move to cover himself, although through the corner of his eye he could see Toby frantically tucking himself back into his pants.

One brave turned to the other, pointing at Buckshot’s groin and smiling. He said something in a language that Buckshot didn’t begin to comprehend. The brave next pointed to Toby and the other warrior grinned and said something in return. Then he motioned for both men to move out.

Herded along in front of the two braves with the tips of their arrows at their backs, Buckshot quickly shoved his penis back inside of his denim, buttoning his fly as they walked. The other two Indians were already far ahead of them, with Bo and Thunder tethered to their own ponies, trailing behind them.

They walked for hours, marched over the prairie as the sun relentlessly beat down on their heads, sweat beading and dripping down their backs. The tips of the warrior’s arrows nudged them along, and a few sharp words from their captors discouraged any attempt at whispered conversation between them.

Eventually they came to a village nestled along the broad banks of a river that Buckshot suspected was the Rio Grande. A cluster of rounded thatched huts, their walls fashioned from stretched and painted hides, sat in a semi-circle around a central fire pit. Women in beaded buckskins, a few with babies at their breasts, sat around the pit, peeling vegetables and tending a haunch of venison that had been spitted over the fire. Braves stood in small groups, talking animatedly among themselves. Children raced in between the huts, laughing and dodging the legs of the adults. At the far end of the village was a rough corral of brush and tree limbs that held a small herd of paint ponies. It was there that Bo and Thunder were being led.

As Buckshot and Toby were led to the edge of the village, all activity stopped and every eye, except for the very youngest, turned toward them. Stopping at the center of the settlement near the fire, the aroma of roasting venison wafted over them, making their stomachs rumble despite their circumstances.

A heavy skin that covered the entrance to one of the huts was pushed aside and a man stepped out, ducking his head under the low opening. His creased, sun-leathered face was solemn as he approached Buckshot and Toby. Worn loose, his long hair was thickly streaked with silver, his head sporting an impressive headdress of eagle feathers and a pair of six-pronged deer antlers. His tunic and leggings were so heavily covered with beads and quills that they jangled softly with his movements. Slowly walking over, his age apparent in his step, he came to a stop in front of Buckshot and Toby, staring silently at them.

A flick of his wrist brought a young brave to his side. Near Toby's age, the warrior inclined his head to the old man, then faced Buckshot and Toby, standing tall and proud.

"I am Gray Wolf. My people are Ashiwi. Your people call us Zuni. This is White Deer, our Chief," he said in halting, heavily accented English.

"I'm Buckshot, and this here is Toby. We're just passing through your territory on our way to Cibola," Buckshot said. "You speak our language real good, Gray Wolf."

"I learned from a white priest when I was a boy."

"Why did your warriors bring us here? We mean no harm to you or your people."

"Grandfather has dreamed of you. We have been looking for you for many days. Come, we will sit and talk," Gray Wolf said, motioning for Buckshot and Toby to follow White Deer and himself into one of the huts.

"Buckshot, what is this?" Toby asked in a low voice.

"Don't rightly know. Guess we're gonna find out though. Just do what they say, Toby, and we'll be all right. If they wanted to kill us, we'd be dead already," Buckshot whispered.

Ducking past the skin windbreak, they entered the small dwelling and were directed to sit down, facing White Deer and Gray Wolf. A woman came in, placing a bowl of berries and a water skin at White Deer's side, leaving as silently as she'd entered.

White Deer dark eyes looked hard at both Buckshot and Toby in turn, until the two men squirmed uncomfortably under his intense gaze. Turning, he spoke to Gray Wolf.

“Grandfather says that the one you seek is not in the village the white men call Cibola,” Gray Wolf said.

Buckshot’s spine stiffened. “What do you know of Malachai?” he asked, at the same time Toby asked, “How did he know we were going to Cibola?”

“The Spirits told Grandfather in his dream. The one you seek is called Átahsaia.”

“Where can I find him?”

Gray Wolf translated for the aged warrior, and White Deer chuckled, speaking another string of unintelligible words to Gray Wolf.

“He says that you should not worry. Átahsaia will find *you*.”

With short, curt movements of his hands, White Deer began to speak in a voice brittle with age, Gray Wolf translating for him.

“All of life is a Great Circle. What has come before will come again. Everything is connected. Long ago, when the world was covered with mist, a demon hatched from the bowels of the earth. His name was Átahsaia, and he hungered for the flesh of The People.

“He was cunning, and wore a kindly skin so that he might trap The People. But his beauty was only a cloak to hide his sharp teeth and claws. One day, the Sun looked down and saw the suffering of his Children. He mated with the Great Waters and She gave birth to two brothers, Áhaiyúta and Mátsailéma. Beautiful boys, they were strong and brave. The Father-Sun gave them weapons, a net of rainbows and an arrow carved from turquoise.

“Áhaiyúta and Mátsailéma came upon the demon Átahsaia near his nest in the earth. At first, they argued over which would be the better way to hunt the beast. They separated, and each tried to kill him alone. Each one failed. It was only together, as One, that they defeated him. They tracked Átahsaia deep into his burrow. Mátsailéma cast the rainbow net over him, and Áhaiyúta plunged the turquoise arrow into his black heart. He disappeared back into the belly of the earth, and troubled The People no more.”

“That’s a nice story, Gray Wolf, but what’s it got to do with the man I’m trailing?” Buckshot asked. “He’s done killed a lot of people, and now he’s killed an old man who was a friend of mine. I aim to find him before he murders anyone else.”

“Grandfather says that he remembers your friend. It was long ago when our healer tended his wounds. He was strong, and survived losing his eye. Grandfather dreamed of his death.”

“Buckshot, this is getting very spooky. They knew One-Eye? These are the same Indians that saved him when he was a boy?” Toby gasped. “How did they know he was dead?”

Buckshot shrugged in reply, as mystified as Toby.

“It was Grandfather’s Grandfather who dreamed of your friend years ago. Our warriors traveled far to the East so that they might save his life. It took very powerful magic, and we lost many warriors to Átahsaia’s teeth that night, but the boy’s life was spared. Grandfather says that The People were led to the Boy-With-One-Eye to save him so that he, in turn, would bring you to us. So that you might kill Átahsaia again, Áhaiyúta and Mátsailéma,” Gray Wolf said, inclining his head toward Toby and Buckshot.

“I’m sorry, Gray Wolf, but we aren’t these two warriors that you’re talking about. We’re white men. I’m a Texas Ranger, and he’s a reporter from Kansas City. I do aim to find Malachai and bring him back to Dallas, alive if I can and dead if necessary,” Buckshot said, shaking his head. “But I don’t believe in demons.”

Gray Wolf translated and White Deer laughed, reaching over to pat Buckshot on the knee with a gnarled hand.

“Grandfather says you do not need to believe in Átahsaia, because Átahsaia believes in *you*,” Gray Wolf said, his eyes twinkling with humor. “He says that your skin is just a covering, and that we are all The People underneath. You are Áhaiyúta and Mátsailéma, reborn. He knows this because he has dreamed of you. It is how we knew where to find you. You hunt Átahsaia as they did, and you are both Two-Spirits, as were they.”

“Two-Spirits?” Toby asked.

“You find pleasure in each other’s bodies. Two-Spirits are great shaman, who speak with our ancestors and are granted their wisdom. Two-Spirits are two halves of the same whole. This is powerful medicine. Among The People they are honored. One gives his life essence to the other and it is returned in kind. It is never lost, but continues to be passed back and forth in an unbroken circle, forever growing stronger. From this bond you will draw power, enough to send Átahsaia back into the earth. But remember, unity is your greatest weakness, as well as your greatest strength.”

It was dim inside the dwelling, for which Buckshot was intensely grateful as he felt his cheeks burn fiercely. He didn’t know what to say. Since the Zuni had literally caught them with their pants down, he and Toby couldn’t very well deny it.

White Deer reached behind him. Turning back, he laid a large net fashioned from brightly colored twine at Toby’s feet, and an arrow that had been tipped with a gleaming blue-green arrowhead before Buckshot.

“We return your weapons to you. We have kept them safe since last you walked this earth. Stay among us tonight. There will be feasting and dancing in your honor. Tomorrow, you will return to the white man’s village and face Átahsaia,” Gray Wolf said. He rose to his feet, and gave his hand to White Deer, helping him up from the ground. “Rest now. There are berries and water here. We will eat when Father-Sun sinks into his bed.”

Eyeing the arrow shaft that had been placed at his feet, Buckshot's eyes fell on a familiar pattern of marks that had been burned into the shaft. He picked it up, his eyes growing wide.

"Gray Wolf! What are these markings?" he asked, in a tightly controlled voice. A muscle in his cheek twitched, giving away his rising tension.

"It is the name of your enemy. Carving the name of your enemy on the arrow will assure that it finds its mark in his hide. Your arrow is marked with Átahsaia's name."

"These marks mean 'Átahsaia?' You're sure of that?"

"Yes."

Buckshot dropped the arrow on the ground, staring at it as though it might start hissing and wiggling at his feet.

The two warriors slipped out of the hut, leaving Buckshot and Toby staring at one another in disbelief.

"Do they really think that we're these two Indian fellas? Aha-something and Matsa-whatever?" Toby asked, fingering the twine net that lay at his feet. Twisted lengths of thin hemp rope had been dyed bright colors, strung with beads of turquoise and dried corn kernels, and knotted into an open-weave net.

"Looks that way," Buckshot answered, lifting the arrow again. He held it up, inspecting it. The shaft was strong, flexing only slightly when he exerted pressure on it. He touched the point of the turquoise arrowhead with his finger, finding that it was wickedly sharp. It pierced his skin easily, drawing a bead of blood up on the pad of his index finger. Swearing softly under his breath, Buckshot stuck his finger in his mouth. "Sure is odd, ain't it? That these markings mean 'Átahsaia,' I mean. That's the same name Padre mentioned was the name of that Indian cannibal demon. You saw the writing on the walls in Mathias' shop, Toby. It's the same as I've seen at all the murders. I'm wondering if maybe the Colonel wasn't right after all. Maybe it *is* the work of an Indian."

"All I know is that it's scaring the shit out of me, Buckshot. I can't even *think* about what it means. In any case, what do we do now? We need to get to Cibola, don't we?" Toby asked, looking at Buckshot. "If we stay here we'll never make it there and back to Golden by tomorrow night."

"I don't see where we've got much of a choice. There's two of us and about fifty of them, and I done left my dang revolvers back at that overhang," Buckshot said. "Seems like we're gonna be their overnight guests, like it or not."

"What about Mathias?"

"We'll hightail it back to Golden first thing in the morning. Make sure those hotheads outside the saloon didn't do anything stupid. Then I think the best thing to do would be to take Mathias into Texas. He'll be safe enough there. I don't understand what this writing business means, or how

Malachai is involved with the Indians, but when I tell my colonel about the newest attacks he'll send a battalion out here with me to find whoever is responsible," Buckshot said, thinking out loud. He looked into Toby's eyes and smiled. "There's a telegraph in Dallas. You can wire home."

Toby stiffened his back and averted his eyes. "I suppose I could at that. Be one less thing for you to worry about at any rate."

"I didn't mean it like that, Toby," Buckshot said softly, reaching up and placing his hand on Toby's scruffy cheek, forcing him to turn back. He rubbed his thumb lightly over Toby's lips, then leaned in and kissed him.

One kiss. That's all it seemed to take for Buckshot to light a fire in Toby's groin and make him forget everything else. Knowing that he wasn't dreaming, and that Buckshot wanted him as much as he wanted Buckshot was a potent aphrodisiac. Toby threaded his fingers through Buckshot's hair and rose to his knees, forcing Buckshot up onto his own. Buckshot's hands on the sides of Toby's face were work-hardened and rough, but his tongue was warm and soft when it met Toby's own.

To Toby, Buckshot tasted sweeter than any fancy pastry he'd ever eaten in any fine restaurant back in Kansas City. He sucked hungrily on Buckshot's lower lip, as his hands fell from Buckshot's head to his ass. He palmed the firm, denim-encased flesh, squeezing Buckshot's cheeks until Buckshot groaned and ground his hardening erection against Toby's thigh.

A scratching sound at the leather windbreak broke them apart faster than lightning, and they sat back on their rear ends, breathing heavily. Gray Wolf's head poked inside, a broad smile on his face as if he knew what they'd been doing. He tossed a pair of fringed, buckskin breechclouts into the hut. "Grandfather says that since you do not feel as though you are one with The People, we must adopt you into our clan. We will hold the ceremony tonight before we feast." He grinned again and left, letting the leather flap fall closed once more.

Toby let his breath out in a puff that blew tendrils of his hair from his forehead. He leaned over and picked up one of the breechclouts. "What are we supposed to do with these napkins?" he asked Buckshot.

Buckshot snorted derisively. "They're not napkins. They're warrior breechcloths. Indians wear them in battle because they don't restrict movement."

"Fine. Then what are we supposed to do with these *breechcloths*?"

"We're supposed to wear 'em."

"Wear them *how*?" Toby asked, looking at the two small flaps of buckskin that were joined by a leather thong. He placed it on his head, peeking out at Buckshot from behind one of the leather squares in confusion. "Doesn't seem too practical for a hat."

Buckshot snorted and snatched the leather loincloth from Toby's head. "That's because you don't wear it on your head. You wear it *here*," he said, laughing and slapping it over Toby's crotch.

"We wear them over our pants?"

"No, we wear them *instead* of our pants."

"You're pulling my leg, Buckshot! That's...that's...indecent!" Toby sputtered, ripping the squares of leather away from his groin.

"*You* wanna tell them that? You remember *them*, right? The fifty or so Indians with the bows and arrows outside there?" Buckshot chuckled. "If *you* want to insult our hosts, then be my guest. *I'll* be wearing the breechcloth."

Toby paled a bit, staring at the windbreak. "No, I guess not," he murmured. He watched Buckshot stand up and begin unbuttoning his shirt, then reluctantly followed suit.

In a few moments, the two men stood facing one another dressed in nothing but two small flaps of buckskin, one fore and one aft. The skins barely covered their essentials, and Toby kept one hand in front and the other behind, trying to hold the breechcloth decently in place.

Toby had to admit that Buckshot looked good nearly naked. His body was firm, his skin pulled taut over his strong muscles. Toby's eyes kept wandering to the small square of leather that covered Buckshot's genitals, aching to explore what lay under it -- preferably with his tongue.

To his dismay, he found that a breechcloth did absolutely nothing to hide an erection. Looking down at himself, Toby saw that the front of his own was rising noticeably as his cock straightened and lengthened, fueled by his decadent thoughts.

"Now, Toby...you're gonna have to stop thinking whatever it is you're thinking about, or else I'm gonna be pitching a tent same as yours," Buckshot chuckled. He reached over and pulled aside Toby's breechclout, revealing his hardening cock. "Sure is a pretty sight to see, though."

Toby smacked Buckshot's hand away and turned around, trying to think of something else, something innocent. Unfortunately, Buckshot seemed to find his back as interesting as his front, and had just as easy access to it. He felt a cool draft and then Buckshot's fingers trailing along the crack of his butt.

"Will you stop that?" Toby hissed, spinning around and slapping at Buckshot's hand again. "It's bad enough that I have to prance around in front of tribe of Indians in nothing but a leather diaper, but I'll be damned if I'm going to do it with a hard-on!"

"You ain't got nothing to be ashamed of, Toby. It's not like they don't know what we're hiding under here."

Toby smirked. “Well that’s good to know, especially since I won’t be the only one showing off what I’ve got.” He looked pointedly at Buckshot’s groin, where his breechclout had lifted to a nearly horizontal position.

“Goddamn, look what you done to me!” Buckshot grinned, lifting the leather flap and exposing himself to Toby. “Think maybe you can do something about this pickle I’ve got myself into?”

“Your *pickle* will just have to wait until we’re alone. We’ve already been interrupted twice, Buckshot,” Toby replied huffily, although his mouth was drooling at the sight of Buckshot’s thick erection. He turned away again, this time with his hand firmly holding down the back of his loincloth.

Another scratching sound silenced them and they turned to look at the windbreak. A warrior, one of the two who had been their escorts to the village, poked his head into the dwelling. He entered, smiling, carrying two small bowls in his hands.

Kneeling, the warrior set the two bowls on the ground in front of Buckshot. His smile tilted into a smirk as his eyes came level with Buckshot’s deflating erection, and they flicked up, looking at both Buckshot and Toby in amusement. They both flushed scarlet, but neither one spoke. He wouldn’t have understood them anyway.

Dipping a finger into one of the bowls, the warrior began to draw black markings on Buckshot’s skin. He added red from the other bowl to the slashes and circles of black, then duplicated the same markings on Toby’s body.

Gray Wolf entered the hut, wearing a long tunic and leggings. His face had been marked with red paint that marred and blurred the black tattoos on his cheek and neck. Looking over the warrior’s handiwork, he grunted his approval, and the warrior silently picked up his bowls and left.

“Come,” he said to Buckshot and Toby, leading them out of the dwelling.

The sun had set, and a great bonfire had been kindled in the fire pit, its flames leaping and crackling in the darkness. To one side of the camp, sitting far enough away from the fire pit as to seem spectators rather than participants, were the women and children. Wrapped in blankets against the chill of the night, they smiled and nodded, making trilling sounds with their tongues when Buckshot and Toby stepped out of the hut.

A drum boomed, and they fell silent. The deep rumble of the drum resonated in Toby’s bones, echoing in his chest. At first the tempo was fast, then it slowed, only to pick up again after a few beats. A high, windy reed added a haunting melody to the drum’s pounding.

White Deer appeared nearby, walking to stand next to Toby, Buckshot, and Gray Wolf, holding a tall, wooden pole in his hand. The length of the pole was marred with slashes carved along its length, and at its top was a knot of eagle feathers and a furry wolf’s tail.

Another warrior, naked except for a breechcloth and a headdress of hawk feathers and antelope horns, his body marked with the same red and black paint patterns as Buckshot’s and Toby’s, trotted to one side of the fire. He began to swing a long, thin rope through the air. Attached to the

end of the rope was a flat, oval piece of wood. The drums and reed fell silent as the man began to whirl the rope above his head in a circle, like a lasso. As he spun it faster, the wind caught the oval piece of wood, creating a haunting sound.

The night was filled with the eerie hum of the bullroarer, a whispering groan that stirred even Toby with its power. After a few moments, the shaman's strong, deep voice added words to the poignant, otherworldly music the bullroarer made.

In a quiet, respectful voice, Gray Wolf translated for them.

"The shaman calls the spirits to attend, Sun-Father, Mother-Waters, Spirits of Bear and Fox, of Wolf and Antelope. He calls our forefathers to come, to stand with us again. He tells the spirits that here stand two who have not been counted among The People. Two men who are brave, who are worthy. He asks their blessings for you, their acceptance."

The bullroarer stopped and the shaman melted back into the shadows. The drums and reed began to play again as warriors, dressed in buckskin breeches, their chests and faces painted, ran into the clearing. In a circle they danced, stomping their feet and spinning around the fire to the beat of the drum. Their chants waxed and waned with the drum's tempo, until the shaman once again approached the fire. Toby saw the man's hand flick out toward the bonfire and the flames leaped upwards in an explosion of brilliant red sparks.

White Deer called out loudly, banging his staff against the ground. He walked to the fire with great dignity, turning to solemnly look at Buckskin and Toby. When he spoke, it was with an authority that belied his great age.

"The Spirits have given their blessing. We accept you into our family, warriors of The People. In your hands we place our trust, in your arms we shall find protection, and in turn you shall ever find the same in ours. We are Family. We are The People. We are One," Gray Wolf translated, softly.

With a sharp knife, White Deer carved two more lines into his ceremonial staff, then held it high above his head. The camp cheered, and White Deer shook his staff, dancing around in a small, stiff circle.

"What do we do now?" Toby asked out of the corner of his mouth.

"We celebrate!" Gray Wolf answered, a broad smile creasing his face. He clapped Toby and Buckshot on the shoulders. "You are now my brothers!"

Suddenly, the mood of the camp changed from one of solemnity to one of jubilant celebration. The women scurried about, passing around platters of venison and quail, fish, berries, and corn. Cups of strong-smelling corn-beer were passed hand-to-hand as the Zuni settled themselves down, clustering around the bonfire.

Gray Wolf led Buckshot and Toby (who still insisted on trying to hold down the front and back ends of his breechcloth) to White Wolf, seating them next to the Chief. Lighting a long, slender, white bone pipe of fragrant herbs, White Deer inhaled deeply before passing it to Buckshot.

Buckshot puffed on the pipe then passed it to Toby, who choked on the pungent smoke. He gratefully accepted a wooden cup, raising it to his lips and drinking deeply, only to have his coughing fit renewed and doubled as the grain alcohol burned his throat. Buckshot laughed, patting him on the back and relieving him of the cup.

Draining it, Buckshot set the cup on the ground at his feet, where it was immediately refilled by one of the attentive women. "Better eat something, Toby," Buckshot warned, as Toby started to sway slightly. "You got drunk enough on plain old whiskey last night. I can't imagine what this stuff is going to do to you. And that pipe wasn't full of plain ol' tobacco, neither." When Toby opened his mouth to protest, Buckshot shoved a piece of meat, taken from a nearby platter, into it.

"Who are you?" Toby asked, his mouth full of venison, "My mother?"

"Just chew it before you choke on it," Buckshot warned. He accepted another cup full of strong spirits, tossing nearly the entire thing down in one long swallow.

The pipe made its way back to Toby and he drew the smoke deeply into his lungs, managing not to choke on it. His head was spinning pleasantly when the drums began to boom again, and he was handed another cup. Drinking it, he smiled, watching as several warriors jumped up and began an impromptu dance near the fire.

Rising to his feet, a bit unsteadily, he pulled Buckshot up by the hand. "Dance with me, Buckshot. You wouldn't last night, but you've got no excuse tonight!" he laughed, pulling Buckshot into the circle of dancing warriors.

Trying to follow the warrior's intricate steps, the two men bounced and stomped their way around the circle, bending and jumping, and miraculously managing not to step on anyone or fall flat on their faces. After a while Buckshot and Toby joined hands and looked into one another's eyes, their feet never slowing, moving almost as one in a dance to which only they knew the steps.

Time passed, and they sat somewhat apart from the Zuni, leaning against one another, drinking corn-beer, staring up at the stars. Eventually they were coerced into dancing again by Gray Wolf. Caught up in each other and their own internal rhythms, Toby and Buckshot danced until the moon shone high above them. The fire had burned down to embers by the time they realized that they were alone in the clearing.

"Shit! Where'd everybody go?" Toby asked, slowing to a stop and looking around the deserted camp, panting for breath.

"Must've all gone to bed. C'mon," Buckshot said, grabbing Toby's hand and stumbling toward the hut they'd first been shown to by Gray Wolf. They ducked under the windbreak, finding the dwelling thankfully empty.

Falling to the ground on the blankets that had been spread out for them to sleep on, Buckshot leaned back on his elbows and looked up at Toby, who stood rocking on his feet by the entrance. His eyes alighted on Toby's breechcloth, and he burst into laughter.

"What's so funny?" Toby asked, staring down at Buckshot. It was odd, but there seemed to be two of Buckshot sitting on the ground looking up at him. He blinked, trying to clear his vision.

"I was just thinking... You were so all-fire concerned with keeping those leather flaps down when we first went to the ceremony. But after a few puffs on that pipe and a few swallows of that liquor, you was leaping and prancing around without a care in the world. You showed your privates to the whole damn camp!" Buckshot laughed.

Toby grimaced and blushed, but said, "Well, so did you!"

"Yeah, I suppose I gave them a good look-see too, didn't I?" Buckshot chuckled. His smile grew warm and his eyes sparkled as he looked at Toby. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to give me a private show, now would you? Everybody's gone to bed -- not much chance of any interruptions..."

"There isn't any music."

Buckshot grinned, slapping the palms of his hands on his thighs, imitating the beat of the drums. He whistled, trying to mimic the melody of the reeds. He didn't even come close, but Toby didn't care.

Toby began to dance, swaying back and forth on his bare feet. Tentatively, self-consciously, he lifted one leg and then another. But the lust that glowed in Buckshot's eyes encouraged him and, thanks to the effects of the liquor and the herbal pipe, he soon lost his inhibitions. Stamping and twirling around, he grinned and lifted his breechcloth, flashing Buckshot, until he finally lost his balance and fell to the ground, laughing.

Buckshot was on him in an instant. Smashing his mouth to Toby's, his tongue slipped past Toby's willing lips. His hand slid to a nipple, rolling the hardening bud between his fingers until Toby began to writhe beneath him. Toby's cock stiffened, his breechcloth pushed aside, and it rubbed against Buckshot's inner thigh like a firebrand.

"Want you," Buckshot whispered, pushing his own leather flap aside and grinding his cock against Toby's pubic hair. Buckshot buried his face in the crook of Toby's neck, his lips pulling at the tender flesh. "Want to be inside you."

"In....side?" Toby breathed as his hand slid between their bodies and his fingers curled around Buckshot's thick length. Buckshot's hot mouth against his throat was making him crazy with need. "Like last night? In my mouth?"

"No," Buckshot groaned, rocking his hips into Toby's hand. "Inside your body. I want your ass, Toby. I want to fuck you."

Toby stiffened as Buckshot's words penetrated his drug-and-alcohol induced euphoria. "I...I don't know, Buckshot. That's...different than what we did before."

"I know it. It's even better. You'll see. Let me, Toby," Buckshot whispered, sliding his hand under the back flap of Toby's breechcloth, squeezing his cheeks. "Let me show you. Oh God, I want you so bad," he moaned.

Buckshot pushed himself down the length of Toby's body, pulling his own erection free from Toby's hand. Wetting his lips, he took the head of Toby's cock into his mouth, sucking hard. He swirled his tongue over the tiny slit, tasting the salty fluid that gathered there then drew the full length of it into his throat. His squeezed Toby's iron hard shaft as he released it, and he dropped lower and drew Toby's furry balls into his mouth. Rolling them from side to side over his tongue, Toby's cry of pleasure was like a lightning bolt to Buckshot's groin, sending his need soaring. His mouth left Toby's sac and drifted lower still as Buckshot's hands spread Toby's thighs apart.

Buckshot's fingers slid beneath Toby's ass, cupping his cheeks, then slipped under Toby's thighs. Pushing his knees to his chest, Buckshot exposed Toby's brown, puckered asshole to the air. Curling his tongue, he flicked around its ridges, savoring Toby's musky scent and flavor. In long, languid licks, his tongue laid a wet trail from Toby's asshole up over his scrotum to the very tip of his cock and back again, until Toby's hands planted themselves on Buckshot's head, pushing down as he begged for more. Returning his attention to Toby's ass, Buckshot's tongue tickled at the delicate skin around his hole, before delving in.

"Good God, Buckshot!" Toby gasped, fisting his hands in Buckshot's hair. He began to move against Buckshot's tongue, moaning with each wet thrust. "More, Buckshot...more!"

"Let me," Buckshot pleaded, lifting his head from between Toby's legs, one hand stroking Toby's cock. His own cock felt ready to burst, and his need burned in his eyes. "Let me fuck you. Please, Toby..."

"Yes, yes...anything!" Toby groaned as his body undulated. Buckshot bit his lip at Toby's wanton rebellion against the sudden absence of Buckshot's hot tongue. The word Buckshot had used was crass and vulgar, gutter language, but somehow at this moment it was sensual, and the only one Buckshot could think of that adequately conveyed fiery need that was coursing through him like a bolt of lightning.

Buckshot reared between Toby's legs, pushing them further apart. Spitting into his hand, he slicked his cock with his saliva and aligned himself with Toby's clenching asshole. Slowly, with infinite patience, he began to push himself inside Toby's body.

"Oh, God, Toby...so tight...so hot," Buckshot groaned as his cock breached the ring of muscle and slid into the silky channel of Toby's ass. "It feels so good, Toby. *You* feel so good!" His hand found Toby's cock again, stroking it from root to tip. "Made for me. You fit me like a glove. Feel me? I'm inside you, Toby."

Toby gasped, his eyes screwing shut and his fists clenching tightly as Buckshot pushed into his virginal asshole. Buckshot put his hand on Toby's cock to distract him from the discomfort in his ass. Soon Toby's body adjusted to the intrusion, and as Buckshot began to move inside of him, slowly and carefully, he could see a new, incredible sensation take hold of Toby. He could see it in the way Toby's head twisted from side to side, his bottom lip caught between his teeth, and heard in the soft mewling sounds he made. Buckshot groaned, feeling connected, completed in a way he'd never known before. It was almost as if Toby's heart and his own were beating in tandem, their bodies melded into one entity. Buckshot shifted, and knew immediately that he'd hit that deeply buried sweet spot within Toby that would set fireworks off behind a man's eyelids from Toby's wide-eyed gasp.

Buckshot leaned down as Toby lifted his head up, and they kissed with a passion that drew a groan from Toby's throat. Connected in two places, their bodies moved as one, each acutely attuned to the other.

It was almost too much. Electrical jolts of pleasure ricocheted through Buckshot, and Toby cried out, pushing himself up to meet Buckshot's cock in time with his thrusts. As Buckshot began to move faster, pumping harder, their bodies colliding with loud, sharp *slaps*, Toby's balls swelled against his thighs.

Buckshot was lost in a nova of light, its intensity drawing his body up tighter than a drum, every muscle drawing rigid and tight. He came hard, filling Toby's ass with a gust of liquid heat.

Toby's hand joined Buckshot's, the two of them working Toby's cock until Toby began to shudder, his orgasm rising up, his body convulsing in great, shuddering waves as he cried out. Buckshot pulled away reluctantly, laying himself on top of Toby's semen-slicked body, breathing hard. He kissed Toby affectionately, feeling a sense of separation he'd never felt before with anyone. He missed the unbelievable connection he'd had with Toby when their bodies had been joined. For a few moments they had been *One*, just as White Deer had said.

Buckshot, his heart pounding from his orgasm and exertions, kissed Toby as tenderly as he could. "Thank you," he whispered, and meant it. Moving over, he used an edge of the blanket to clean Toby's stomach of the evidence of his orgasm. Lying his arm across Toby's chest, he spooned his body as closely as he could to Toby's and closed his eyes, sated, satisfied, and happier than he could remember being in a long, long time.

"Buckshot?" Toby whispered

"Mmm?"

"Tell me this wasn't a dream. Tell me that when I wake up in the morning you'll still be here, and still want me."

"It wasn't a dream, Toby. And I'll be right here when you wake up. Promise," Buckshot mumbled, already half asleep.

Smiling, Toby snuggled back into Buckshot's embrace. Within moments, they were both snoring.

Chapter Seven

Sunlight burned against Buckshot's closed eyelids. He sat up, immediately feeling the effects of the beer and herbal smoke he'd inhaled the night before. He put a palm to his forehead, and shook Toby awake with the other.

"Argh! My head feels like it's going to bust wide open," Toby groaned, sitting up next to Buckshot. He immediately lay back down, throwing an arm over his eyes.

"Don't I know it. Mine feels the same. Still, we got to get going, Toby. Got to get back to Golden, make sure that Mathias is all right. Hank ain't gonna be able to hold those men off forever."

"I know, I know," Toby sighed. "I'm gonna jump in the river before we head back. I need a bath in the worst way, and maybe I can wash this headache out at the same time."

Buckshot nodded. The two men ducked out of the hut, realizing too late that they still wore only the breechcloths from the night before. Several women, kneeling nearby grinding corn, giggled as the two men dashed through the camp toward the river, holding the flaps of their leather loincloths firmly in place.

The water was cold, but refreshing and revitalizing. Using fistfuls of leaves plucked from nearby bushes, they scrubbed the smudged black and red markings from their bodies.

Watching Toby wash, Buckshot's hand slowed its own ministrations. He felt as if he could watch Toby all day and never tire of the sight of him. Lean, there didn't seem to be an ounce of flesh on Toby's body that wasn't absolutely necessary. He had told Buckshot that he considered himself soft, but Buckshot thought he was just the opposite. Every inch of him was hard; planes and angles that Buckshot wanted to map out with his hands and lips. He would have ripped the leaves out of Toby's hands and had at him right there on the riverbank, headaches or no, if it hadn't been for the possibility that they'd be seen by someone from the camp.

Sure enough, Gray Wolf appeared as they bathed, wishing them a good morning from the bank of the river. He waded into the shallows, handing Buckshot a small bowl of sweet-smelling liquid to wash with, and leaving two piles of neatly folded leather on the bank for them, before leaving them to their privacy once more.

The liquid smelled flowery, and left their hair and skin squeaking. Dripping, they left the water, shivering on the bank as they examined the clothing left for them by Gray Wolf. Each of them had been given a long beaded shirt and leggings of velvety soft, white buckskin.

Toby pulled his leggings on, tying them closed at the waist by the drawstring. His hair was wet, his shoulders beaded with water. Buckshot couldn't stop himself from running a finger through the water droplets that covered Toby's chest, or from threading his fingers in Toby's black hair and capturing his lips in a fierce, possessive kiss.

Breaking away, he stared into Toby's wide eyes, breathing hard. He was surprised himself at the strength of the emotions that were flooding him. He had entered Toby's body the night before,

but at the same time Toby had somehow breached *him*, invaded *him*, carved out a place for himself in Buckshot's soul. He'd never met a man before who excited him so much, made him feel so protective. The very thought of anyone else touching Toby made Buckshot seethe with jealousy.

"Wow," Toby whispered, left a bit breathless after the kiss.

"Mine."

"What?"

"*Mine*. You made me promise you last night that I would be here this morning still wanting you. I do. Now, tell me that *you* want *me*," Buckshot breathed, his voice tight with desire. "Tell me that you're mine, Toby."

Toby blinked and dropped his eyes, his face flushing. For one terrible moment, Buckshot feared that the answer was going to be "no," and he wasn't at all sure how he would handle Toby's rejection.

"Yes, I'm yours, Buckshot. I mean, I'd like to be, if you still want me," Toby answered softly, staring down at his bare feet.

Buckshot's face split into a wide grin. He grabbed Toby's face between his hands and kissed him soundly again. "Hell yes, I still want you. Want you right now on this riverbank, as a matter of fact."

Toby grinned, and Buckshot settled for a tight hug and another deep kiss before they finished dressing.

Feeling much better after their bath, they walked back into the camp, stopping at the teepee for their boots and shoes. Called to the fire by Gray Wolf and White Deer, they were served a corn mush and wooden cups of hot tea.

"Grandfather says it is good that you celebrated your return to us with your bodies last night," Gray Wolf said, lifting a brow as both Buckshot and Toby choked and sputtered on their tea. "Your life essence grows stronger each time you share it."

"What?" Buckshot asked, feeling his face burn. He cast a quick look at Toby, whose face had flushed nearly purple. "How the hell did he know-"

"Grandfather is very wise and knows many things," Gray Wolf said. His smile tilted into a smirk. "But he did not need the help of the Spirits to know this. Your cries woke the camp."

Buckshot and Toby stared into their cups of tea, wishing that the ground would open up and swallow them whole.

Clearing his throat and still staring at the dregs of his tea that sloshed in his cup, Buckshot said, "We need to leave, Gray Wolf. We have to get back to Golden."

“Yes. Grandfather says to be wary,” Gray Wolf said, his expression sobering. “He has foreseen thunderclouds gathering in the sky, a storm of evil readying to lash the land. He says to remember the bond that you share. Remember that you are One.”

“Please thank him and your people for the food and the new duds,” Buckshot said, rising to his feet. Toby rose to stand beside him. “We’re grateful.”

“No thanks are necessary. The People care for our own,” Gray Wolf smiled. His expression turned somber, and he put a hand on Toby and Buckshot’s shoulders. “Kill him, Áhaiyúta and Mátsailéma. Send Átahsaia back into the bowels of the earth that spat him up.”

“We will. We’ll find Malachai and make sure he swings, Gray Wolf,” Buckshot answered. “I give you my word on that.” He and Gray Wolf clasped forearms in a warrior’s traditional farewell.

“Do not underestimate his strength. He is as old as the rock, as ancient as the waters. Use caution, my brothers, and return to us in victory.”

Stopping at the overhang where the Zuni had first found them, Buckshot retrieved his gun belt. He’d felt more naked without it than he would have without his pants, and sighed with relief when it was once again buckled around his lean hips.

“Someday I’d like to learn how to shoot, Buckshot,” Toby said, as Buckshot mounted up again.

“You don’t need to be a sure-shot to get the job done,” Buckshot said. “Don’t need to plant one between somebody’s eyes, neat as a pin, Toby. All you need to do is hit ‘em *someplace*. And for that, all you need to do is point the business end in their direction and pull the trigger.”

“What if I miss?”

“You won’t.”

“What if I do?” Toby insisted, looking over at Buckshot.

“Then I’ll be there right behind you, and I *never* miss,” Buckshot said with a smile. “I won’t let anybody hurt you, Toby. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried about getting hurt, Buckshot,” Toby growled, his pride obviously wounded. “I just wanted to know what to do if I missed the first shot. You think that I’m useless, too, don’t you? Like the stagecoach drivers did? Like my Pa did? Well, I’m not. I’m not made of glass. I’m not going to shatter just because somebody takes a swing at me.” He tapped his heels to Thunder’s flanks, and charged ahead.

“I didn’t say that,” Buckshot said, when Bo caught up and drew abreast of Thunder. “I know that you’re not useless. I never once said that you were. I wouldn’t have deputized you if I thought you couldn’t handle it, Toby.”

“Why did you deputize me?” he asked, his eyes darkening with doubt. Buckshot could see the mistrust dancing in their dark depths. “You knew I couldn’t shoot worth a damn. Yet you gave me a gun and made me take the oath.”

Buckshot was silent for a few minutes, chewing the inside of his cheek. “My gut.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I said, I felt it in my gut. Felt that it was right, that I wanted you at my back, Toby. Out of all the men in town, you’re the one I trusted. Trusted you from the minute I picked you up and tossed you over Bo’s back. Crazy, ain’t it?”

Now it was Toby’s turn to ride in silence for a short while. “No,” he finally said, “it’s not crazy, Buckshot. I trusted you, too. Why? I have no idea. I mean, we didn’t know each other. Never met before.”

“Maybe not, but...you felt it too, didn’t you, Toby? That maybe we *did* meet before? Like we’ve seen each other before but can’t place where?”

Toby nodded. “Exactly. From the minute I woke up I thought you looked familiar somehow. And I trusted you because of it. Maybe the Zuni are right. Maybe we knew each other in another lifetime.”

“Maybe. But I’m happy just knowing you in this one.”

The sun crested and began its descent before they spotted the town of Golden shimmering in the distance like a watery ghost. They’d ridden hard since leaving the Zuni. Buckshot was anxious to get back, worried that Mathias might have been dealt a hand of frontier justice in his absence.

Reaching the town limits near Mathias’ blacksmith shop, the eerie silence that greeted them set off warning bells for Buckshot. Something was wrong. There wasn’t a soul in sight. Not a single man walked the street, not a single voice could be heard. No horses drank at the trough, or were tethered to the wooden rails in front of the dry goods store or saloon. All that could be heard was the creak of the chains that held the Saddle Horn’s sign as it swung in the hot breeze.

“Buckshot?” Toby whispered, pulling Thunder up to a walk beside Bo, “There’s something wrong, isn’t there? I can feel it. Where is everybody?”

“Shh,” Buckshot said, holding up his hand. His eyes scanned the street, looking for any sign of life as his hand reached for one of his revolvers.

Continuing slowly up the street, Buckshot's keen eyes picked up signs that something violent had taken place in their absence. The plate glass window in the front of the dry goods store had been shattered, shards of glass glittering in the sunlight like diamonds in the dirt. Hitching rails had been split in two like kindling. A wagon sat askew on its rear axle, two of its wheels torn off and splintered. On its bed, sacks of flour had slid off and burst open, spilling white powder on the ground that blew like fine snow in the breeze. Worse yet were the reddish-brown puddles and streaks that seemed to be splattered everywhere. Buckshot didn't need to examine them to know what they were.

Drawing abreast of the Saddle Horn, Buckshot dismounted and looked up at Toby. "Stay here. I'm going inside," he whispered.

"I'm going with you," Toby said. He moved his leg, ready to slide off his horse.

"No. I need you to stay here, Toby. Keep a lookout. If you see anything move, anything at all, you yell. Okay?" Buckshot ordered, putting his hand on Toby's hip, pushing him back up into the saddle.

The truth was that he didn't want an inexperienced man trailing him into what might be a dangerous situation, but he didn't want to tell Toby that. He'd only argue, and Buckshot didn't have time for arguments. He had the spine-chilling feeling that everyone in town was dead.

Toby nodded reluctantly, then settled himself down on Thunder's back again, drawing his gun from his holster. Buckshot hoped he wouldn't have to shoot anyone and that if he did, he'd remember which end of the gun was the business end.

Pulling out his other revolver, Buckshot trained both barrels on the front door of the saloon as he crept silently up to it. It was ajar, and he peered through the opening into the dim interior. Nothing moved inside, no sounds reached his ears as he edged through the door into the building.

It looked as if a twister had spun its way through the saloon. Tables and chairs had been upended and smashed to pieces. Every bottle and glass behind the bar had been shattered. The smell of liquor was strong from the spilled whiskey and beer that pooled on the bar and plank floor. Buckshot's feet crunched over broken glass as he made his way toward a figure that was sprawled atop the long, oak bar.

Hank's body, clawed open from stem to stern, lay on its back across the bar. Hank had died with an expression of horror frozen on his face and his shotgun clenched in his hand. Thick black blood congealed beneath his body, his clothing soaked through with it. His body was cool to touch -- he'd been dead for quite a while.

Turning, Buckshot took the stairs two at a time. Reaching the landing, he saw that the door to his room had been blown off its hinges, lying on the hallway floor, split into two jagged pieces.

Flattening himself to the wall, Buckshot inched toward the open doorway. Cocking the hammers of both of his weapons, he burst into the room barrels first.

At first he thought the room was as empty as the rest of the town seemed to be. Then he spotted a figure sitting on the floor, huddled in a corner of the room. A balding head bent low, the man's

knees were drawn up to his chest, his lips moving silently as his trembling fingers moved over a string of black rosary beads.

“Padre?” Buckshot said, shoving his guns back into his holster as he quickly walked over and hunkered down next to the quaking man. “What happened here? Where’s Mathias? Padre?” He touched Padre’s shoulder gently, but the priest screamed and turned away, smashing his body into the wall.

“Padre, it’s me, Buckshot,” he said, laying his hand on Padre’s arm. “It’s all right, Padre. Come on, you know me. You know my voice.”

“Buckshot?” Padre whimpered, although he stiffened at Buckshot’s touch. “Is it really you?”

“Yes, it’s me. What happened here, Padre?”

Padre choked on a sob, pressing his face into the wall. “He came. He was here all along...” his voice trailed off as his inner eye saw something Buckshot couldn’t see.

“Who came, Padre?” Buckshot demanded, placing his hands on Padre’s shoulders and forcing him to turn around. “Where *is* everybody?”

“Átahsaia,” Padre moaned, his fingers gripping his rosary so tightly that the string snapped, sending small black beads skittering across the floor. Blubbing, he threw himself into Buckshot’s arms, his fingers clenching at his buckskin shirt.

“It’s all right now, Padre. He’s gone, and no one’s gonna hurt you now,” Buckshot said, keeping his voice soft and assuring. “Tell me what happened, Padre.”

“I was downstairs when I heard him,” Padre rambled, sobbing against Buckshot’s chest. “I’d just gotten here. I think he killed everybody, Buckshot! They’re all dead, I just know it.”

“Mathias, too? How, Padre?” Buckshot asked angrily, losing his patience. “Mathias is as big as a mountain. He could’ve fought off ten men with breaking a sweat. And everyone else in town was armed to the teeth!”

Hank’s was the only body he’d seen thus far, but Buckshot’s gut clenched with fear. He had the sinking feeling that Padre was right, and that if Buckshot looked inside the buildings in Golden he’d find other bodies -- lots of them, including Mathias.

Padre groaned. “No one knew, Buckshot. No one could see him the way he really looks. But I heard him, Buckshot, his true voice. He sounded like the devil himself.” Padre dissolved into tears once more, trembling violently in Buckshot’s arms.

Buckshot held himself in check, forcing himself to remain calm. He stroked Padre’s back until the priest’s tremors slowed. “Do you know happened to Mathias, Padre?” he asked again.

“I came because I thought I could give Mathias some comfort in his hour of need. I’d no sooner walked into the saloon when all hell broke loose,” Padre moaned.

“What then? You have to tell me what happened, Padre!” Buckshot ordered him, shaking Padre’s shoulders. As badly as he felt for the terrified priest, Padre was taking too long in tell Buckshot what he needed to know.

“He killed Hank. I heard him, Buckshot...I heard him ripping Hank apart!” Padre cried, burying his face in his hands.

“If what you’re telling me is true, then why didn’t he kill you, too?” Buckshot asked.

“God forgive me, but I’m a coward. I didn’t even *try* to help poor Hank. I found the stairs and crawled up as fast as I could go. I hid in here, but Átahsaia found me anyway. I thought he was going to kill me, and all I could do was pray to God that he would make it quick, not like Hank.” Padre took a long, shuddering breath. “But he didn’t touch me. He spoke to me, instead. His voice burned like a red hot poker in my ears, and his breath reeked like a slaughterhouse.” Trembling violently again, Padre collapsed limply against Buckshot.

“What did he say?” Buckshot asked, holding Padre by the shoulders and shaking him again. “What?”

“He said that if I wanted to live then I needed to do as he told me,” Padre wailed, his wide eyes staring into space over Buckshot’s shoulder. “He said I was to tell you something. Made me repeat it back to him, so that I got it right.”

“What was it?”

“Leave this place, Áhaiyúta. Do not seek me out again. This land is mine, and so is your brother,” Padre whispered, his body shaking uncontrollably. “What does that mean, Buckshot? Who is Áhaiyúta?”

Buckshot gasped, his blood freezing in his veins. Toby! He’d left him outside, all alone. “He’s me, I reckon. Stay here, Padre. Hide. If I don’t come back by morning, you get yourself out of this town. Find your way to the stable and saddle up a horse as best you can. Give him his head and let him decide the direction. Horses are smart, Padre, smarter than people sometimes. He’ll smell Malachai and run the other way. Ride as far and as fast as you can and don’t look back.”

“Don’t leave me alone here, Buckshot! Please!” Padre begged, his blind eyes wide. His hands reached for Buckshot, fingers closing around the soft buckskin shirt he wore so tightly that his knuckles whitened.

Prying his shirt out of Padre’s fingers, Buckshot said, “I need to go, Padre. You’ll be alright. I got to get Toby!” Jumping to his feet, he fled the room, leaving Padre shaking and huddled against the wall.

Guns drawn, Buckshot flew down the stairs two at a time to the first floor of the Saddle Horn. The front doors remained opened, just as he’d left them when he’d come in. Bursting through the doorway, he skidded to a stop, frantically eyeing the street.

It was empty.

Nothing moved but the dust that swirled on the breeze. The sign for the Saddle Horn banged noisily above him, the only sound he could hear besides the frantic beating of his own heart. The horses were gone, and so was Toby.

“No,” Buckshot groaned, looking first in one direction, then the other. His fingers tightened on the triggers of his guns, although there was nothing for him to shoot at. He staggered a few steps into the street, his hands falling to his sides, his weapons useless. Staring up at the sky, he howled, his scream thick with frustration and guilt. He’d failed Toby. He’d left him outside alone after he’d sworn to protect him, and now Malachai had him. He might be dead already.

Shaking his head fiercely, Buckshot refused to entertain that last thought a second time. He pushed it firmly away and reined in his emotions, taking long deep breaths to calm himself. He reminded himself that he was a Ranger, and tried to think like one.

“Where?” he asked himself. “That goddamn bastard has Toby, but where would he take him? If he killed him, he’d have left his body here for me to see, to break me. I know it. So then, where would he have taken him?”

Buckshot stepped further into the street, his eyes scanning the ground. A glint of metal caught his eye. He bent down and picked up Toby’s gun, his fingers tightening around the cold metal as a new fear gripped him. Wherever Toby was, he was unarmed.

The dirt was riddled with hoof prints, but his sharp eyes spotted a footprint among them. Bending down, he examined it. It was half again as large as Buckshot’s own footprint. Buckshot would have thought it made by a bear, grizzly by the size of it, but the shape was wrong. The big toe would be on the outside of the print, not the inside if it was a bear track. It was closer to a human footprint in shape, except for the claw marks in front of each toe. A couple of feet away was another, identical print. It was deeper, as if whatever had made it was carrying something heavy. Then still another, heading out of town in the direction of the mission.

That’s where Buckshot would start then. At the mission. Gritting his teeth, he set off in that direction at brisk pace. Nothing was going to stop him from getting to Toby. Nothing. He’d shoot his way through a dozen demonic preachers if he had to, a hundred of them. A thousand. An army of them. And when he ran out of bullets, he’d use his fists. Hell, he’d use his *teeth* if he had to, but he was *going* to get Toby back.

Halfway down the street, a soft snorting sound reached his ears and he froze. Swinging his guns toward the origin of the sound, the alley between the dry goods store and the abandoned land office. A large shadow loomed in the alleyway, but a soft nicker kept his fingers from pulling the triggers.

The shadow solidified into a large chestnut stallion as Bo trotted out from between the two buildings. Buckshot had never been happier to see his horse than he was at that moment. Despite the gravity of his situation, he smiled. “Bo! Its about time you showed up, you sorry bag of glue scraps,” he grinned, running to meet Bo halfway. He gave him a fond pat on the neck then jumped up into the saddle. “Let’s go, son. Malachai’s got Toby and I aim to get him back.” A

quick tap of Buckshot's boot heels spurred Bo into a gallop, hooves thundering dully against the ground as they raced down the street toward the mission.

Once past Golden's town limits, Buckshot reined Bo in. As Bo slowed to a stop, Buckshot sat tall in the saddle, staring up the gentle rise at the white adobe building, alert for any sound or movement anywhere near the mission. It was as quiet as death. Nothing stirred, not even the breeze. Clucking his tongue softly, they began to move slowly up the rock-strewn dirt path, until they drew abreast of the small cemetery. There Buckshot dismounted, approaching the mission on foot.

The front door to the small church was open, and the rectangle of darkness it revealed reminded Buckshot eerily of a gaping giant's maw set in a leering white face, waiting to devour him. He shook off the gooseflesh that raised the hair on his arms as he stepped over the threshold, concentrating on listening for movement within the dark confines of the mission.

Buckshot paused just inside the doorway, pressing his back up against the wall, giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the gloom inside the mission.

The rough-hewn pews of the mission had been overturned and tossed about the church, splintered into so much kindling. The small stone altar had been cracked in half, as if split by a petulant child's fist. A snowfall of shredded paper covered the two halves of the altar, and Buckshot knew without needing to examine them that the tiny pieces were the tattered remains of Padre's bible.

Nothing moved within the church. No breeze stirred the paper ruins of the bible, and no sound reached his ears. Buckshot nevertheless cautiously made his way up the aisle through the mess, guns drawn. His eyes searched the wreck of the mission, looking for some clue. He didn't doubt for a moment that Malachai had been the one responsible for the destruction, but whether he'd done it before or after he'd taken Toby was the question.

Near the front of the mission, close to the doorway that led to Padre's living quarters, Buckshot's eyes spotted a piece of brown leather lying under a jumble of wood. He knelt down and pulled it free, his breath catching in his throat. It was Toby's saddlebag.

Closing his eyes, Buckshot ran his hand over the soft, scarred leather. He pictured Toby riding alongside him when they'd left Golden the day before; remembered laughing with him, remembered kissing him under the overhang near the river. In a rush of emotion, he remembered making love with him, and the way Toby's body had fit so perfectly with his own. His hands squeezed the leather bag between them as Buckshot fought to keep control over the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. He needed a clear head now, needed to be focused. No matter how his heart was aching, he needed to concentrate and not allow it to rule his head or else he'd stand no chance of rescuing Toby.

The saddlebag proved one thing to Buckshot. Toby had been inside the mission. While Buckshot had been trying to get information out of Padre at the Saddle Horn, Malachai had taken Toby here and had desecrated the church. Buckshot hadn't missed them by much.

Turning on his heel, he raced out of the mission toward Bo. Tying Toby's saddlebag down next his own, Buckshot mounted up. Stretching out before him, the land rolled in sheet of uninterrupted dun flatness, offering no shelter, no place to hide. He realized that there was only one place where Malachai could have hidden away with Toby, and once the thought occurred to him Buckshot knew without a doubt that that was exactly where he'd find them.

The mine.

Chapter Eight

Toby was trapped.

Once, when he'd been ten or so, he'd gone swimming in a pond that lay on his grandparent's farm. The pond, no more than a mud hole during the dry season, was shallow and silt-bottomed. Having filled with muddied water during the recent rains, the pond bottom had soaked up the water like a sponge, turning it into a quagmire. But the water that floated on top of the mud was cool, and Toby had been hot. He'd stripped off his clothes at the bank then climbed a tree that overhung the pond. Shimming out onto a branch, he'd jumped off feet first into the shallow water.

And had sunk knee-deep in the thick, gooey mud on the bottom.

His legs had sunk up past the shins in muck as thick as peanut butter at the bottom of the pond, the surface of the water only a foot or so above his head. Toby remembered looking up and seeing the sunlight reflecting on the water, sparkling like diamonds, just out of his reach. He struggled as hard as he could trying to free himself, but that only served to sink him deeper into the slime that sucked at his legs.

While his had lungs burned fiercely for air, he'd felt himself growing lightheaded and pinpoint stars had danced before his eyes. The watery world in which he'd been trapped had begun to fade into darkness, and he would have drowned had it not been for a hand plunging into the water, fisting itself in his hair and dragging him up to the surface. A ranch hand had seen him dive into the pond and not come back up, and had saved Toby's life.

Toby felt that same way now, his lungs aching for air, his heart pounding in his chest, stuck helpless in a cold blackness while dimming sunlight glimmered just beyond his fingertips. Except this time, he doubted that he'd be saved.

He'd been so angry when Buckshot had ordered him to stay behind at the Saddle Horn. Toby had obeyed, but not without muttering angrily to himself the whole time. "I'm not a child. I may not be a crack shot or an expert tracker, or a goddamn great and mighty Texas Ranger," he told himself, "but I'm not a soggy-bottomed infant, either. I can take care of myself." He looked down at the gun in his hand. "I can," he murmured again, as if saying it twice would make it true. "I should be inside with Buckshot right now, helping him, watching his back."

What he didn't admit, even to himself, was that if he were *inside* the Saddle Horn with Buckshot, he wouldn't have to be *outside* alone in a town chock-full of nobody. His anger thinly disguised the fear that had been rippling down his spine since they'd first entered town; it gave him something else to concentrate on other than the terror that threatened to overwhelm him. It didn't take a reporter's instincts to know that something dreadful had happened to the men of Golden. Something horrible. Something bloody. And it didn't take a genius to know that whatever that dreadful, horrible, bloody thing was, it was still out there. Still watching.

Still hungry.

To distract himself, he reached behind his saddle and removed his saddlebag. He knew that Buckshot had put a handful of bullets in it, and wanted to take them out where he could get to them if he needed them. Opening it, his fingers fell on the net the Indians had given him. Moving it aside, he felt around the bottom of the bag for the loose bullets.

Toby was so engrossed in digging through the saddlebag that he didn't hear the low growls coming from nearby.

The horses were not so distracted. Screaming their fear, Bo and Thunder both reared up, pawing the air with their hooves, kicking the hitching rail to pieces. Unable to keep his seat on the frightened horse, Toby was thrown from the saddle and landed hard on his back in the middle of the dirt street, the wind knocked out of him.

A shadow loomed over him, blocking out the sun. Cold radiated from figure that stood over him, a dead cold that seeped into Toby's bones and turned his bowels to ice. Blinking, he'd peered up into the face of evil itself.

Yellowed eyes wild with rage and madness glared down at him, their pupils as red as the fires of Hell. What might have passed for laughter bubbled past its blackened, tuberous lips, and it grinned a mouthful of long, sharp teeth at him. It leaned down, exhaling in Toby's face, its breath a hot wind that stank of rot. Toby remembered opening his mouth to scream as a clawed hand reached for him, but blackness took him before he could utter a sound.

He'd awoken for a few moments inside the mission. The creature that had taken him had exploded into a rampage, snapping the heavy wooden pews like matchsticks, tossing them about the mission like twigs. Toby could feel hate roll off the creature in great, pulsing waves, a maelstrom of malevolence let loose within the walls of the small mission. Átahsaia or Malachai - whatever name he answered to -- was pure evil unleashed, maliciousness incarnate.

The holy place seemed to incite Átahsaia to greater and greater heights of fury, as if the building were his enemy and he sought to rip it apart to its foundation, leaving nothing but dust behind. He fed on his own rage, growing more incensed, more violent with each pew splintered, each small statue smashed.

Toby tried to back away, inching toward the front door, but Átahsaia spotted him before he'd gone very far. Strong, sharp-nailed fingers closed around his throat, lifting him off his feet. His airway was closed off, tendons straining to the breaking point as Átahsaia's hand squeezed his windpipe, and Toby gratefully allowed the darkness to take him again.

Now he awoke again, cold, frightened nearly out of his mind, and surprised to find himself still alive. It was dark and damp, the air stale, the panic squeezing Toby's chest making it difficult to breathe. Around him sheer walls of dirt rose up, studded with a few roots and rocks. Fifteen feet above his head he could see an irregular circle of light.

He was at the bottom of a hole, looking up.

Forcing himself to take long, deep breaths, the reporter in Toby took over, allowing him to calm down and think rationally as questions raced through his mind.

Why on earth had Átahsaia dumped him down here? For what purpose? Why hadn't he killed Toby immediately, there on the street in front of the Saddle Horn? He could have -- easily. Toby had been a sitting duck, lying on his back in the dirt after being thrown from his horse. He hadn't even been armed, having lost his gun on the way down. One swipe of those dagger-like claws and it would have been over.

Was Átahsaia playing with him? No, Toby conceded. This was no game, not to Átahsaia. Too much blood had been spilled, too much effort expended. He was keeping Toby alive for a reason, but Toby had no idea what that reason might be. It might not even be a reason that a sane mind might understand.

Toby looked around, but it was too dark to see much but shadows. The light didn't reach to the bottom of the pit where he lay. The hole he had been tossed in was roughly circular with steep dirt walls supported by strategically placed timber. It didn't look as though he'd be able to climb out, not without rope and help from someone on the ground above. With a sinking feeling of despair, he pulled his knees up to his chest, circling them with his arms. Darkness would fall swiftly, the light from the hole above his head already beginning to redden with the sunset. That Átahsaia would be back for him was not the question. The question was *when* he'd back.

He wondered if Buckshot were still alive, and the thought that he might not have survived constricted Toby's chest with sorrow. Closing his eyes, Toby thought about the connection he'd felt with Buckshot the night before when they'd made love. The closeness, the feeling of being *One*. Toby could hear his own heart beating in his ears, his blood *whooshing* in a steady, strong rhythm. Then, in a whisper almost too soft to be recognized as sound, he heard the echo of another heart beating in time with his own.

In the darkness at the bottom of the pit, Toby smiled. He felt such a wave of relief wash over him, that it nearly took his breath away. He was convinced beyond any doubt that Buckshot was alive. Átahsaia hadn't killed him. Not yet. Even though they weren't together the knowledge that they were both still alive comforted him. He wondered if all lovers had that connection, or if it were unique to Buckshot and himself. Maybe what the Zuni had claimed was true after all -- that he and Buckshot had lived before, loved before, been *One* before. That thought comforted him as well.

Suddenly, Toby started. With a gasp he realized he'd just answered one of his own questions, the most important one. He *knew* why Átahsaia was keeping him alive.

He was bait.

White Deer and Gray Wolf had told them that Áhaiyúta and Mátsailéma had needed to draw on one another's strengths to defeat Átahsaia. They'd needed to be *One*. Toby could hear Gray Wolf's voice clearly in his head. "*Unity is your greatest weakness, as well as your greatest strength.*" Toby suddenly understood why Átahsaia hadn't killed him. It worked both ways. They needed to be *One* to kill Átahsaia, and Átahsaia needed them to be *One* to kill *them*.

Toby prayed with all his heart that Buckshot was riding fast and furious in the opposite direction, although knowing Buckshot, it was unlikely. Toby didn't want him anywhere near Átahsaia,

because if they were together then Átahsaia had a chance to end their existence once and for all. Not just in this life, but possibly in any other life that might follow.

A cascade of dirt and pebbles fell over the side of the opening above Toby's head, called his attention back to the small oval of sky. A shadowed face peeked over the edge, followed by a familiar voice calling down to him.

"Toby?" Buckshot called down to him. "Is that you? Are you all right?"

"No, Buckshot! Get out of here! It's a trap!" Toby screamed. He was struggling to his feet when he felt something grab at the back of his buckskin shirt and pull hard. Toby heard the buckskin rip, and felt the painful sting of something sharp grazing the flesh of his back. Suddenly, he was flying backward through an opening at the bottom of the hole that he hadn't known was there, dragged by the back of his shirt over the rocky dirt into utter darkness.

Chapter Nine

“Toby! Toby!” Buckshot called down, his fingernails digging into the soft earth as he leaned precariously over the opening of the mineshaft.

One moment Toby had been there, looking up at him and yelling something about a trap, and the next he’d been gone. Buckshot could still hear him screaming although his voice was fading away, moving faster than seemed humanly possible deep into the belly of the mine.

The belly of the beast, Buckshot thought, rolling over onto his back, breathing heavily. *No time to think on it. Move, Ranger*, he told himself. Heaving himself to his feet he raced back to Bo. His horse was sidestepping, his eyes rolling white, unsettled by the stench of evil that permeated the area. Buckshot couldn’t blame him -- he felt the same way himself. The shorthairs were bristling on his arms and the back of his neck, but all he had time to spare Bo was a quick pat and a murmured word of reassurance.

Untying the two saddlebags from behind Bo’s saddle, Buckshot first dug out a length of rope from his own, then secured the two of them to his gun belt by their drawstrings. Tying one end of the rope to the pommel of Bo’s saddle, he threw the other end into the mineshaft. He checked his revolvers, tossed his hat down on the ground, and picked up the rope. With his only thought being that he had to get to Toby, he dropped feet first over the edge of the pit.

The sun was lowering in the sky by the time Buckshot reached the gloomy bottom of the hole. He paused, feeling more than seeing what was around him. A cold draft blew against the skin of his cheek, and he could barely pick out a darker shadow against the walls of the shaft. Fishing in his saddlebag, he came up with a small lantern and a pack of matches.

The soft yellow glow of the lantern illuminated an opening in the earthen wall, a rough six-foot by six-foot square cut into the dirt and shored up with timber. Holding the lantern high with one hand, his revolver in the other, he ducked his head under the old, rotting wood that framed the opening, and set off through the mines’ entrance.

Blackness, thick and suffocating, wrapped around Buckshot like a heavy blanket, kept at bay only by the weak light of his lantern. The air in the tunnel was close, thin, and his lamp’s flame flickered feebly in the oxygen-poor darkness. At first he walked bent at the waist under the low ceiling of the tunnel, but it gradually rose higher the deeper he went until he could walk upright without hitting his head.

In the hard-packed earth floor were two thin, shallow furrows that led into the blackness. Toby’s heel prints, carved into the dirt as Átahsaia had dragged him away. Buckshot held his light a bit higher and followed the tracks.

The walls of the tunnel were wide enough for his shoulders to pass through without scraping the sides, but only by a narrow margin. The tunnel had been excavated by hand and had been dug only wide enough to suit the miners’ purposes.

With shovels and pickaxes they'd dug their way deeper underground, human moles that feared neither the darkness nor being trapped beneath the ground. Their only care was for the shining silver that ran in narrow veins through the earth.

Old One-Eye had been full of tales about the miners who'd dug out the shaft, Buckshot remembered, and most of them had been grim. Not much good had come out of the mine, if he recollected One-Eye's stories correctly. A few of the first men to quarry the area had struck silver, but the vein had quickly petered out. And yet men were drawn to the mine for years afterwards, digging ever deeper into the belly of the earth, hoping against hope to find more. The only thing they had ever found in twisting, unstable shafts that they hollowed out of the ground was death.

Cave-ins took most of the miners. A sudden, imperceptible shift in the earth around them, or a poorly struck pickaxe was all it took to bury men alive under a ton of rock and dirt, or to seal them in an airless tunnel. Explosions killed some. A pocket of invisible, odorless gas, ignited by a carelessly lit match burst into a mushrooming ball of flame that incinerated everything and everyone in its path. Falls and drownings took their share. Boarded-over vertical shafts gave way under foot, plunging men to their deaths. Underground streams broke through the earth walls, flooding the tunnels and sweeping the men away. The few who survived would flee, bleeding and scarred from the gaping wound in the earth, men like One-Eye who were forever haunted by what they'd seen and experienced in the depths of the mine.

But, as sure as bulls have balls, One-Eye had said, more would come to take their place, descending into the pit, picking up where the ones before them had left off. Digging and dying, the lesson never learned until it was too late for most of them.

Most folk said it was the call of silver that kept bringing them there, but now Buckshot wasn't so sure. One-Eye had been convinced that it was something else, something far more insidious than the siren call of riches that lured men into the mine. He'd claimed that the pit had been there *before* the miners came, carved out of the earth by ancient hands long before any settler had ever stepped foot in the New World. It was while exploring the pit that the first miners had discovered the silver vein, and each wave of men after them had only deepened the mine.

One-Eye had called it cursed.

Buckshot was quickly coming to agree with One-Eye's point of view. There were just too many coincidences, too many thick threads that bound them all together — Buckshot, Toby, One-Eye, the Zuni, Malachai — to be mere chance.

He pushed the thoughts out of his mind, concentrating instead on his step. Maybe someday when he was old and grizzled and sitting with Toby in a pair of rocking chairs he could sort it out. Not now. Right now all Buckshot needed to do was find Toby. Find him, and get him the hell out of there.

Fifty feet down, seventy-five, a hundred feet down. The air grew thick with a stench of decay, a rotting ripeness that grew fouler with each step he took. The further Buckshot walked, picking his way over small rockslides and around debris left behind by the miners, the heavier the stench grew, making it difficult to breathe. The trail he'd been following all but disappeared, making

tracking Átahsaia and Toby much more difficult, especially in the dim light of his lantern. Still, Buckshot doggedly persisted.

Slowing his progress were the myriad of smaller tunnels that branched off from the main one. The mine was a honeycomb of passageways, most dead-ending at a wall of rock and dirt, some leading into small chambers. A few were nearly as wide and tall as the main tunnel, others barely big enough for him to crawl through. Several times Buckshot lost the trail and ended up veering into one of these offshoots. Each time he'd had to backtrack to the main one, losing precious time.

His lantern's light was growing weaker by the minute, the flame flickering and struggling to stay lit in air that was swiftly becoming nearly too foul to breathe. Buckshot was starting to feel lightheaded, woozy. He shook it off and pushed on, gritting his teeth with determination.

Buckshot nearly fell onto his face when his toe hit a piece of wooden planking. A vertical shaft, boarded over long ago, the wood damp and rotting, sat between him and the trail he was following. Edging his way slowly forward, his eyes strained to see into the darkness beyond the weak glow of his lantern. Below his feet the wooden planks creaked in protest as he walked. Placing one foot carefully in front of the other, he cautiously tried to test each step for his weight.

He'd nearly made it across when a scream, shrill and terrified, pierced the tomblike silence of the tunnel. Buckshot couldn't tell if the scream came from in front of him or behind him, or from how far away, but he knew instinctively that it belonged to Toby. Caution fled as he quickened his step, his heart hammering.

A loud cracking sound filled his ears and ground fell away, as the moldy, worm-riddled boards gave way under his feet. Twisting as he dropped down through the air, Buckshot landed hard on his left arm. White-hot pain lanced through his wrist, rocketing up his arm into his shoulder. Rolling onto his back, dazed, he fought to contain the pain and get his bearings.

The lantern shattered where it fell, the flame having winked out, but Buckshot realized that he could see fairly well without it. Grunting as he sat up, cradling his left arm with his right, he found himself in a huge cavern. Stalactites dripped in long stone needles from the cave ceiling, ending only an inch or two away from kissing their stalagmite cousins on the floor. The sheer rock walls glowed eerily in soft greens and blues, casting enough light for Buckshot to see.

Miners had not carved this space out. It was too immense. He was in natural cavern. At its highest point, the ceiling rose nearly fifty feet above Buckshot's head. He'd been lucky that he'd fallen into the shallowest end of the cavern, dropping down a mere fifteen feet or so to the rocky floor. Taking stock of his surroundings, his keen eyes spotted a small hole in the rock ceiling. It might be a way out, he thought, but it was unreachable. Nearly fifty feet of air separated him from it, and there seemed no negotiable way to climb the sheer rock walls to get to it.

The stench was even thicker down in the cave than it had been in the tunnel. Buckshot had once, while on a scouting mission for the Rangers, come across the base of a cliff where the carcasses of an entire herd of buffalo lay in a heap. Stampeded by wasteful settlers who selected only the best cuts and hides from the herd, the rest had been left to rot in the sun. The smell in the cavern rivaled that reek.

His eyes searched the cave, watchful for movement. There was no sign of Átahsaia. No bear-like creatures with dripping fangs or insane preachers with glowing red eyes. He seemed to be alone. Heaving himself to his feet, he turned around in a full circle. Having dropped his guns when he'd plummeted down through the vertical shaft, he searched the ground for them. He found one and holstered it, but as he was looking for its mate, Buckshot thought he saw something move in a small alcove near the rear of the cavern.

He watched the spot intently for a couple of minutes and was rewarded by seeing it again. Still cradling his injured arm, he began to pick his way across the cavern floor toward the alcove.

As he neared the alcove, Buckshot saw a figure lying on its stomach. Several times the man tried to rise, only to slump back into the dirt. Although Buckshot could only see the curve of the man's jaw and the back of his head, he'd recognize Toby anywhere. Excitement hurried his step, and he dropped to his knees next to Toby.

"Toby?" Buckshot called softly, gently shaking Toby's shoulder. "Toby, it's me. It's Buckshot. Wake up, Toby!"

"Buckshot?" Toby groaned, pushing himself up onto one side. He squinted, blinking as he tried to clear his vision. "Is it really you?"

Buckshot swallowed hard and forced himself to smile, touching Toby's face lightly. Toby looked as though he'd been on the losing end of a bare-knuckle prizefight. His face was bloodied and bruised, his left eye swollen nearly shut and his upper lip puffed up to nearly twice its normal size. "Yeah, it's me. Had to come down here to haul your sorry ass back up," he smiled.

"No! No, you have to get out now, Buckshot! I figured it out. I know why Átahsaia hasn't killed me yet. He could be back any minute — you have to get out!" Toby cried, his swollen lips cracking and bleeding with the effort. "He needs us both together in order to kill us for good, Buckshot. Or else we'll just keep getting reborn and coming after him!"

"You must have hit your head pretty damn hard, Toby," Buckshot said, frowning. His fingers danced lightly over Toby's skull, searching for lumps. "Nobody's gonna kill us. Come on now. Can you stand up?"

"You're hurt!" Toby exclaimed, seeing the way Buckshot cradled his left arm against his chest.

"It's nothing. You're hurt worse than me. Come on, get up. Lean on me and we'll find a way to get the hell out of here," Buckshot said, standing and reaching down with his good hand to help Toby up.

A snarl echoed through the cavern, a wet, vicious sound that startled both Toby and Buckshot into immobility. Looming impossibly large on the opposite wall, a shadow danced across the rock walls.

“Get down! It’s him!” Toby hissed. He reached up and grabbed hold of Buckshot’s gun belt, pulling hard. Neither noticed that he had wrenched the saddlebags loose. They fell unheeded to the ground.

Buckshot sunk to his knees next to Toby and raised his revolver, sighting carefully, waiting for the first sign, the first hair on Átahsaia’s head to appear, anything solid that would give him something to shoot at. His blood pounded in his ears and his nerves stretched taut as he prayed that his hand would remain steady enough to hit what he shot at.

When it came, it was so fast that Buckshot’s eyes could barely stay focused on it. A great shaggy shape flew with inhuman speed across the cavern floor on all fours. Buckshot fired off two shots, but the creature never even slowed. It reached the alcove in a couple of heartbeats and a clawed hand grabbed hold of Buckshot’s shirt before he could move. With no more effort than a child might throw a rag doll, Átahsaia tossed Buckshot through the air.

The shots echoed in the cavern, loud, sharp reports that bounced off the rock walls. A rain of dirt and small pebbles began as the unstable ceiling of the cavern, thinned and weakened from the extensive excavation of the tunnels above it, began to crack.

Landing hard on his back, his injured arm screaming in agony, Buckshot lay stunned for a moment. He took a deep, shuddering breath, gritting his teeth against the pain and forced himself to sit up. Across the way Átahsaia had risen onto his hind legs, and Buckshot got his first good look at the monster he’d chased all the way from Texas.

Nearly seven feet tall, Átahsaia looked like a man, yet not. While his jaw couldn’t properly be called a muzzle it wasn’t human either, but a bizarre combination of both. Muzzle or mouth, his black lips were peeled back to reveal a jaw full of sharp, yellow teeth. Beady, feral eyes reflected red in the dim light; wide nostrils flared on a blunt, broad nose, scenting the air.

Hair covered most of his body in a thickly matted pelt, shaggy and reeking of decay. Solid, powerful muscles moved fluidly beneath his mangy hide as he took a step in Buckshot’s direction.

He was the most god-awful, misbegotten thing Buckshot had ever laid eyes on. Raising his revolver again, he sighted carefully as his finger squeezed the trigger. Another loud, sharp crack sounded as he fired a bullet into Átahsaia’s hide.

Átahsaia didn’t flinch. He looked down at his chest with an expression that seemed almost amused, or as close to amusement as his malformed face could come. He touched the blood that flowed from his wounds then, looking at Buckshot, licked his finger clean. His jaw stretched in a bestial grin and, with a laugh that chilled Buckshot’s marrow, changed.

Átahsaia’s features melted and ran together in a swiftly swirling vortex of flesh and hair, his body thinning, his skin smoothing. In the flash of an eye, the preacher Malachai stood in his place.

“Ranger!” Malachai shouted, his deep voice echoing in the cavern as he pointed a long, slender finger at Buckshot. His fingernail was half again as long as his finger, blackened and curved like

a bear claw. “I will have my sacrifices! I’m hungry, Ranger. I fed in Texas, and now I feed here. You will not stop me!”

Again Átahsaia’s body shifted, muscles and bone collapsing and rebuilding themselves in an instant into another incarnation.

“What’s wrong, Buckshot?” Mathias asked, wiping a thick string of yellowish drool from his mouth with the back of his hand. He smiled with teeth too long and too sharp. “Aren’t you glad to see me?” He took another step in Buckshot’s direction, then another.

“No!” Buckshot groaned, his eyes wide with disbelief. He shook his head slowly, refusing to accept what his eyes were seeing. “Not you, Mathias! It was you all the time? You killed One-Eye and Hank? I fucking protected you!” A rage unlike any Buckshot had ever felt before suffused him, propelling him to his feet. A scream ripped from his throat, full of hate and betrayal as he fired his revolver again.

Átahsaia-Mathias’ left eye exploded into a spray of red, but even as the bullet entered his skull he changed again, back into his true form. He threw his shaggy head back and roared with pain.

The rain of dirt and rocks around them grew thicker, stones and small chunks of granite bouncing as they hit the ground, and an eerie, groaning sound filling the cavern.

“Who are you? *What* are you?” Buckshot yelled. His thumb continued to cock the hammer of his gun, his finger pulling the trigger, even though the chamber was empty. “I’m not going to let you kill anyone else, Átahsaia!”

“Who are you to oppose me? I have grown stronger, wiser with time. You and your brother have not. You are insignificant! You are nothing but dust; clay that moves and speaks. You are brittle, fragile. But I am not. I am a god!” Átahsaia thundered, advancing on Buckshot. “You will not defeat me again, Áhaiyúta! I have learned how to be stealthy; the wolf now moves freely among the sheep. The People no longer believe — they have forgotten how to be wary. My time has come, and yours and your brother’s are at an end!” Átahsaia roared, his jaw dislocating like a snake’s, his maw stretching impossibly wide as he took another step toward Buckshot.

“Toby! Run!” Buckshot screamed as Átahsaia loomed over him.

Toby reached out when Átahsaia grabbed Buckshot but he was a heartbeat too late and his hand closed on empty air. He felt his heart seize in his chest when Buckshot landed hard and lay still, certain that he was dead. Buckshot’s movement filled Toby with both relief and dread. He was relieved that Buckshot lived and yet terrified for him at the same time, and powerless to help him.

He was as shocked as Buckshot when Átahsaia changed his shape, first into the preacher and then into Mathias. How many other manifestations did this creature have? With a power like that he could move among his prey unfettered, undetected until it was too late. Toby had a sudden vision of Kansas City awash in the blood of its people, and of Átahsaia howling with

pleasure as he disemboweled the city. And after Kansas City was no more than a bleeding wound in the prairie, Átahsaia would move on to another city. Dallas. Phoenix. San Francisco. New York. He had to be stopped. Somehow, they couldn't allow Átahsaia to win.

Another sharp report rang out, calling Toby's attention back to Átahsaia and Buckshot. Buckshot had fired again, emptying his gun. He was out of ammunition, and they were both out of time.

He watched Buckshot inch his way backward, trying to put some distance between himself and Átahsaia, while around them the shower of debris grew thicker. A large chunk of stone crashed perilously close to Toby's head with a dull thud. He reached for it, picking it up with both hands and stood up. It was a poor weapon, but better than an empty fist.

Ignoring Buckshot's order to run, Toby raised the jagged stone above his head with both hands and ran toward Átahsaia. Unmindful of the danger and his injuries, his only thought was to keep Átahsaia from reaching Buckshot.

When Átahsaia turned towards him, snarling, Toby brought the rock down with all of his strength, praying that he could buy Buckshot enough time to get away.

"Buckshot!" Toby screamed, "Run!"

Buckshot watched in horror as Toby launched himself at Átahsaia, a large, broken piece of granite in his hands. He was certain that Toby was going to get himself killed and that he was going to have to watch him die.

Toby skidded to a stop, bringing the rock down on Átahsaia's head with a loud *crack*. Átahsaia fell to his knees, holding his head as rivulets of blood soaked his matted hair. Toby's rock had cracked his skull open like a walnut, stunning Átahsaia. As Buckshot watched slack-jawed, Toby picked up the same jagged piece of stone and, baring his teeth and screaming, slammed it down onto Átahsaia's skull a second time. A spray of crimson-showered Toby's face as his rock cracked a new fault in Átahsaia's skull.

Átahsaia's features transformed with lightning speed, innumerable faces melting one into another in dizzying succession. Indian, white man, black man, wolf, bear, and some that Buckshot didn't recognize -- insectile creatures with multiple eyes and dripping fangs -- flowed across Átahsaia's skull in a blur. Blood continued to gush from the wound on his head, muddying the dirt floor of the cavern into a reddish-black muck around his feet.

Buckshot stood up and ran to Toby, throwing his arms around his back and crushing him to his chest, despite of the blood that covered him.

"Buckshot! The saddlebags!" Toby yelled, turning toward the alcove. "The net and the arrow!"

A quick glance at Átahsaia convinced Buckshot's feet to move, and he scrambled to retrieve the saddlebags from the alcove. Átahsaia was struggling to rise, and it was clear that he would soon

succeed. Buckshot realized that he and Toby would never be able to escape the cave while Átahsaia still breathed. He was too strong; he seemed nearly invincible.

In the few moments it took Buckshot to cross the cavern floor, pick up the saddlebags and return, Átahsaia had fought his way to his knees. His face seemed molten, liquefied features flowing and ebbing across his skull, each one more alien and horrifying than the last.

Fumbling with the drawstrings of one of the saddlebags, Buckshot finally succeeded in ripping it open. He removed the net, tossing it to Toby. He dug into the other saddlebag until his fingers closed around the arrow shaft.

Movement caught Buckshot's eye and he looked up in time to see Toby fling the net over Átahsaia's head.

A roar of pain and fury echoed in the cavern as the net settled over Átahsaia's skull. The beaded and knotted twine seemed to sizzle where it made contact with Átahsaia's matted, bloody fur, the stench of burning hair filling the air.

Without pause, without thinking, Buckshot pulled the arrow from the saddlebag and charged Átahsaia. Unaware of the primal scream that tore from his throat, Buckshot plunged the arrow deeply into Átahsaia's chest. Sprayed with black blood, Buckshot scrambled backwards to Toby's side.

"Is it over?" Toby asked, looking at Átahsaia, who had fallen backward and lay still on the ground, blood from the horrible wounds on his head seeping into the dirt even as the gore from the arrow wound spread across his chest.

"It will be soon enough. You done saved my life, Toby. Not bad for a prissy city boy," Buckshot said, pulling him into his arms. Toby was safe. That was all that mattered to Buckshot at the moment.

Toby shook his head, clutching at Buckshot as if afraid he'd disappear if he let go. "I want to get out of here, Buckshot. Can we leave now?"

Buckshot nodded, then reluctantly let go of Toby, turning back to Átahsaia. He and Toby needed to witness Átahsaia's final breath before they could leave. He had to make certain that the creature was dead, or he'd never be able to sleep. He'd be forever looking over his shoulder, watching people's faces, worrying that one of them might be Átahsaia.

Átahsaia struggled to rise, but slumped down into the dirt, his sides heaving as he labored to breathe. Blood bubbled from his lips, his breath whistling in his chest. His face had stopped its frenzy of transformations, the final one being a terrifying mix of several different creatures. Too many eyes, mouths, and noses jutted from a doughy, fleshy face that was turned up toward the ceiling of the cavern. His breath grew shallow, his chest barely rising and falling.

Buckshot felt a tremor under his feet and looked at the ground, then back at Toby. Toby's eyes widened, and Buckshot turned back to Átahsaia's body, following Toby's line of sight.

The earth around Átahsaia's body was shifting, falling in on itself. His body began to sink as the hole deepened, dirt pouring into the hole with him.

The tremors grew stronger, small rocks raining down from the ceiling as large cracks spider-webbed from the hole and spread across the floor and up the walls. Soon the entire cavern was shaking, chunks of stone falling all around them as Buckshot and Toby fought to keep their footing.

"We have to get out of here!" Buckshot cried over the loud rumbling of the earth. Frantically he looked around the cavern, desperate to find a way out. It was then that he noticed with relief that a previous rockslide had left a steep but negotiable way up to the hole he had spotted when he'd first fallen into the cavern. "Come on! This way!"

With Toby close behind him, Buckshot reached the foot of precipitous jumble of rock and began to climb. It was slow progress. His left arm was nearly useless from the fall into the cavern, and the ground was shaking so violently that it was difficult to keep his balance. More than once it was Toby's strong hand grabbing the back of his shirt that kept Buckshot from tumbling backward.

Slowly Buckshot and Toby picked their way up over the rockslide, the scree slipping and sliding beneath their feet, under a shower of dirt and pebbles that coated their hair and clothes a monotone dun. They reached the top just as a large section of the ceiling gave way. A thunderous crash deafened them as tons of rock and dirt broke free, pouring into the cavern, collapsing most of the shafts above it. Choking on the thick cloud of dust that mushroomed up and filled the cavern, they crawled up over the edge just as the ground began to give way, the beginnings of a tremendous sinkhole.

Scrambling to their feet, Toby and Buckshot ran hard, keeping just inches in front of the crumbling edge of the expanding fissure. It nipped at their heels until finally, just as they both reached their limits and began to slow, it stopped.

Buckshot bent at the waist, gasping for air. Behind them, not a hundred yards away, an enormous crater lay over the area that had once been the mine. He looked over at Toby, who had sat down, trying to catch his breath.

"You okay?" Buckshot asked, setting himself down next to Toby.

"Yeah, I'm just peachy. How about you?" Toby smirked, gingerly touching a scrape on his forehead. "How's your arm? Is it broken?"

"Nah, I don't think so. Just banged up, is all," Buckshot answered, smiling. "Lost my goddamn hat, though. I left it over there before I came in after you," he said pointing toward the crater. His face blanched as he remembered what else he'd left at the edge of the pit before he'd jumped in. Sticking two fingers into his mouth, he whistled long and shrilly.

It was a few heartbreaking moments before he heard an answering neigh and Bo trotted toward them from out of the darkness. Buckshot breathed a deep sigh of relief, and leaned his head on Toby's shoulder. "Thought I lost him for a minute," he smiled.

Toby looked out over the sinkhole, a black stain on the earth, barely visible in the dark. "Is it really over, Buckshot? Is Átahsaia dead?"

"Must be," Buckshot answered. "He sure looked dead when the ground started to cave in. And nobody could survive being buried under all that," he added, lifting his chin toward the crater. "It's over."

"So...what now?" Toby asked softly.

"Now? Now we go back to Golden, find Padre. We should stop at the Zuni village and tell Gray Wolf and White Deer what happened. Then we need to go back to Dallas so I can report in, and you can wire your boss back in Kansas City."

Toby nodded. "And then?"

Buckshot looked over at Toby. His face was averted, looking down and to the side as if he were afraid to meet Buckshot's eyes. "And then...well, I've heard tell that San Francisco is growing into a mighty fine city. Got me a friend there. He's a reporter from a paper in Kansas City. Can't shoot worth a damn, but he's a good kisser, and he gives one helluva blow- "

Toby snorted, shoving Buckshot with his shoulder. Unfortunately, the arm he banged against was Buckshot's sore one.

"Ow! You don't need to beat on me," Buckshot yelped, cupping his injured arm with his good one.

"Oh God, I'm sorry, Buckshot!" Toby cried, turning towards him. His apology was stifled on his lips by Buckshot's mouth meeting his in a hard kiss. A large hand cupped his cheeks, a calloused thumb rubbing gently over his cheekbone. Toby melted into Buckshot's kiss, parting his lips in an open invitation to Buckshot's tongue.

Eventually, a long velvet nose insinuated itself between them, blowing warm air through its nostrils, impatiently nudging one and then the other.

"Your horse has the worst timing," Toby laughed, as Bo gave Buckshot an exceptionally hard push. "I agree with him though. Let's get out of here, Buckshot."

"We need to go back to Golden and see to Padre. It ain't gonna be pretty, Toby. We'll need to bury the dead, and I have no idea how many bodies we're going to find. But after it's all done, I swear to you that we're going to find us someplace nice and private, *without* Indians, horses, or anything else that might interrupt us and I'm going to finish what I just started," Buckshot promised, softly kissing Toby again. "I need you sore bad, Toby."

Toby just smiled, laying his head on Buckshot's shoulder for a moment. "I'm going to hold you to that Ranger, and the sooner, the better."

Epilogue

“I’m still waiting on an answer, Toby,” Buckshot whispered before taking Toby’s earlobe between his teeth. Nipping lightly at it, he ran his tongue over the sensitive ridges until Toby moaned. Laying a trail of wet kisses along the side of Toby’s throat, Buckshot paused over the tender skin at the juncture of his neck and shoulder, sucking hard. The shudder that ran across Toby’s skin sent a jolt directly to Buckshot’s groin, but he steeled himself against it. He loved getting Toby hot and bothered and he never failed to get himself worked up into a state by doing so, but this time Buckshot had an ulterior motive in mind and needed to keep his wits about him.

The weather was still pleasant but Buckshot knew that it was already too late in the season to travel east over the mountains safely. If they didn’t leave soon they wouldn’t even be able to make it up to the foothills before the heavy snows came. They’d have to wait until spring to leave, and the last thing Buckshot wanted was to spend an entire winter in the crowded city of San Francisco. He’d only come west to please Toby; to allow him the opportunity to write his report for the Kansas City newspaper for which he worked. It was important to Toby to finish the job he’d set out from Kansas City to do, and Buckshot could certainly understand that. But now it was time to go.

Unfortunately, every time Buckshot brought the subject up the discussion would end in a draw.

“Come on, Buckshot,” Toby would hedge, “haven’t you had enough of rough living for a while? Everything you could ever want is right here at your fingertips. What’s waiting for you back in Texas besides cow pies and cactus?”

“Open spaces. A man can stretch out there, Toby. I can’t take a deep breath here without getting jostled by somebody. Can’t take a shit without some fool squatting next to me.” Buckshot would argue.

Then Toby would proceed to list every amenity available in San Francisco, and Buckshot would counter each and every one. Stalemate.

Buckshot admitted that he’d enjoyed himself in the beginning. Exploring San Francisco with Toby had been different than Buckshot’s trips to Dallas and Kansas City, where his philosophy had been *go in, do what was necessary and get the hell back out*. In Toby’s company, the fledgling city had seemed almost enchanting to Buckshot, from the mysteries of Chinatown to the hustle and bustle of Market Street. Toby had been so excited that it had been impossible for Buckshot not to catch the same fever as they’d taken in the sights.

A favorite memory of Buckshot’s took place shortly after they’d arrived in California, before they’d reached San Francisco. On a warm, cloudless day, he and Toby stood on a white sand beach as the blue waters of the Pacific washed over their bare feet. The ocean was everything Buckshot thought it would be — huge, impressive, powerful, and most definitely *wet*. The crashing waves made for beautiful background music when Buckshot spread a blanket over the sand and made love with Toby in the bright sunshine.

At this particular moment, however, the ocean was the furthest thing from Buckshot’s mind. Toby hadn’t yet given him an answer and Buckshot was beginning to dismay that he would ever

get one. Since he had absolutely no intention of leaving without Toby in tow, he'd decided that circumstances warranted a bit of underhandedness.

Thinking that perhaps he might get Toby to agree while in the heat of passion, he'd refused to let Toby out of bed that morning. Now Buckshot was taking full advantage, although holding himself in check was taking every bit of Buckshot's considerable self-control.

Buckshot knew it was low and scheming and definitely not Texas Ranger behavior, but he was desperate.

"Tell me you're going to come with me, Toby," Buckshot breathed, sliding his hand over Toby's lean stomach to his rapidly rising erection. Wrapping his fingers around his solid length, Buckshot smiled against Toby's throat at his hissed oath.

"Buckshot, this is dirty pool," Toby moaned, lifting his hips into Buckshot's touch. "Rangers are supposed to fight fair."

"Yeah? Well, *this* Ranger's out of patience waiting on you to make a decision. All bet's are off, Toby," Buckshot chuckled. "I'm going to use every trick I can think of to get you to say that you'll come with me, short of tying your ass to Bo's saddle."

"Thank God for small favors."

"Don't thank Him yet. I'm saving hogtying you as a last resort," Buckshot grinned. He kissed his way down to Toby's nipple, laving his tongue over the hard peak. His hand stroked Toby's cock slowly, his thumb sliding over the head and tickling at the tiny slit until Toby's breath came faster and he began to wriggle. "Say 'yes' Toby."

"Oh, God..."

"That don't sound like 'yes' to me," Buckshot said, his lips burning a path across Toby's skin until they reached Toby's flat, muscular belly.

"Buckshot..."

"That don't sound like 'yes' neither."

Toby groaned, his hips bucking up into Buckshot's hand. When Buckshot's breath ghosted over his cock, his entire body trembled. "*Please*, Buckshot..."

"I believe the word I'm looking for is 'yes' Toby," Buckshot whispered, flicking his tongue out across the smooth head of Toby's cock.

"Yes! Yes, goddamn it!" Toby cried. His cry caught in his throat as Buckshot swallowed his erection whole from the tip to the root.

Buckshot would have grinned had his mouth not been full. Sometimes it served a Ranger to behave a bit like an outlaw, he thought as he concentrated on giving Toby his just reward.

He'd been able to keep himself in check only by a supreme effort of will, and hearing the word he'd longed for Toby to say destroyed that tenuous grip. Growling, he devoured Toby's cock, taking him in deep and sucking hard, refusing to stop until Toby cried out and twisted his fingers tightly in Buckshot's hair.

Toby's taste on his tongue pushed Buckshot over the edge. Nearly snarling with need, he flipped Toby over onto his stomach, spat in his hand and slicked his own turgid cock. Prying Toby's firm ass cheeks apart with his fingers, he pushed himself into the tight warmth of Toby's body.

No matter how many times he made love with Toby, feeling the silken walls of Toby's ass clench around his cock ignited a passion in Buckshot that he couldn't contain. He rode Toby hard, his pelvis slapping noisily against Toby's rear end. Grunting and gripping Toby's hips, Buckshot slammed into him until the fire that was smoldering in his belly and his balls engulfed him, and he filled Toby to overflowing.

Collapsing next to him, Buckshot pulled Toby into his arms, tucking Toby close to his side. "I know I didn't play fair, Toby, but I need to go back and I wasn't leaving you behind."

Toby smiled softly, leaning up for a kiss before settling down with his head in the crook of Buckshot's shoulder. "I know. I wasn't about to let you leave without me. I just need to finish my story for the paper first, Buckshot."

"All right, Toby. But we have to leave right after you're done, before it gets too late in the season."

Falling asleep, Buckshot slept until well past noon. He awoke to Toby's noisily sucking lips wrapped around his cock. Sighing, Buckshot lay back as Toby extracted his revenge.

It was the sweetest payback Buckshot could ever remember getting.

"I know what I said, Buckshot," Toby grumbled, pushing peas around on his plate with his fork. "But it's already early October. Isn't it too late to travel?"

"It wouldn't have been too late if we'd left when I wanted to," Buckshot grouched. "We'd never make it over the mountains, but we can still make it to the foothills. I know of a cabin on this side of the Rockies that we can use. Belonged to a pair of outlaws on the run from Texas, but we tracked them there and took them in a while back."

"You expect us to spend all winter holed up in a cabin?" Toby asked incredulously. "Have you lost your mind, Buckshot? Why can't we stay here until spring? San Francisco's not that bad. At least we won't starve here."

"We won't starve there, neither. I'll make sure we have plenty of supplies laid by. Just think about it, Toby -- a bearskin rug, a nice cozy fire, and you and me, snowbound with nobody else for miles around..."

Toby couldn't help smiling or the faint blush that colored his cheeks. "Bearskin rug, huh? And what do you plan on doing on that rug?"

"I can think of a couple of dozen things right off the top of my head. And they all start with me getting you naked."

Toby laughed. "All right, you convinced me, Buckshot. I'll have my last story written and ready to be sent to the Pony Express office in Sacramento. We can leave right after that, if you want."

"I want," Buckshot smiled. "I also want you to finish your dang dinner so we can go back upstairs to our room. Thinking about you on that bearskin rug done gave me a tent in my britches."

Toby grinned then attacked his dinner, every bit as anxious to get back to their room as Buckshot.

When they'd reached San Francisco, Toby had kept the promise he'd made to himself. He'd treated Buckshot and himself to a bath (he'd never realized how enjoyable a bath could be, nor that two full grown men could find a way to fit into a small wooden tub at the same time), and a fine steak dinner. Afterward, he'd had gone directly to the telegraph office. But instead of wiring his boss, Mr. Buford, and quitting, Toby had thanked him.

Because regardless of the hardships and horror that Toby had endured since boarding the ill-fated Southern Star stagecoach, Toby had found something far more important than any story about gold mines could ever be.

Smiling again at Buckshot over a forkful of peas, Toby saw the love shining in Buckshot's eyes and knew that he'd follow Buckshot anywhere.

Even, God help him, if he needed to travel by stagecoach to get there.

The End