

red cloud wolves, 1

Silver
Dreams



Kate Steele

Changeling Press

Red Cloud Wolves 1: Silver Dreams

Kate Steele

All rights reserved.
Copyright ©2007 Kate Steele

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

ISBN: 978-1-59596-518-9
Formats Available:
HTML, Adobe PDF,
MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader

Publisher:
Changeling Press LLC
PO Box 1046
Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046
www.ChangelingPress.com

Editor: Connie Alberts
Cover Artist: Bryan Keller

This e-book file contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language which some may find offensive and which is not appropriate for a young audience. Changeling Press E-Books are for sale to adults, only, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

Red Cloud Wolves 1: Silver Dreams

Kate Steele

He was a professional gunman, not a murderer. Falsely accused of a crime he didn't commit, Landon Jeffers is on the run from a posse determined to see him dance at the end of a noose. Passing through a desolate stretch of Arizona desert on a route he's sure will throw them off his trail, he makes a discovery that will change his life forever. Silver.

Never one to throw away an opportunity to line his pockets, Lan decides to settle in and dig his way to a fortune. But what are the brilliant glowing orange stones he also unearths? What is this strange fascination he feels for them? More importantly, why have his dreams of silver riches morphed into images of moonlit nights, howling wolves and an Indian brave whose piercing black eyes turn to reddish-orange fire?

Acknowledgements:

I've taken a few historical liberties. I'd like to offer my apologies in advance for adding to the reputation of Calico, California by giving her a crooked and vindictive lawman in the form of Marshal Coburn. I've also blurred the arrangement of certain parts of the topography of La Paz County, Arizona which is the home of the Red Cloud Mine, the finest producer of those beautiful red-orange crystals called Wulfenite. Also my apologies to anyone who might take exception to the vague references to Marshal Wyatt Earp. Obviously Marshal Earp and Landon Jeffers have never met.

Just a side note: If you happen to come across the spell that allows wulfenite crystals to transform a human into a werewolf, contact me at katesteele27@yahoo.com. We definitely need to talk.

Prologue

Calico brought to mind images of bright colors and patterns. Landon Jeffers wiped the sweat from his brow and looked down at the town from his vantage point on the crest of a hill. Calico, California was not bright and colorful. It was a collection of browns, tans, grays and shades of white that took the form of houses and businesses surrounded by a ring of rough, rocky hills, mountains and uninviting, desert terrain. It was a mining town and it looked the part.

Still, taking a second look at the surrounding hills and mountains, there was a certain amount of color to be found in this place. Distant greens, shades of blue, gray, cream and tan spread across the landscape like a crazy quilt. It was pretty in its own way especially when seen under the light of the setting sun. If anyone cared to look. Apparently someone had in the beginning, to name the town after its colorful backdrop. He supposed the people in Calico didn't pay much attention to the view anymore. For most of them, it was the color of what they dug out of the ground that mattered. Silver. Calico was the home of the Silver King Mine and the Oro Grande Mining Company. It even boasted its own stretch of railroad along with a church, a public school and many other businesses. It was those other businesses that interested Landon.

Most especially the saloons. Their presence meant liquor and cards. Besides a bath and a bed that didn't involve a blanket laid over dirt and rock, Lan wanted a glass of whiskey and a winning hand of cards. With a faint smile of anticipation, he guided his horse down the trail and into town. Clipping along the hard packed dirt of Main Street, he saw a dry goods emporium, hardware store, barber shop, and even a ladies hat shop that showed fancy bonnets accented with flowers, feathers and some kind of flimsy netting. Not that he knew much about such things. Ladies and their doings had always been something of a mystery to Lan.

Spying a hotel ahead, he made for it and dismounted in front of the hitching rail out front. After tying his horse, brushing the worst of the trail dust off himself and taking up his saddlebags, he stepped up on the raised sidewalk and sauntered inside. The small front lobby was neat as a pin with an actual potted plant of some kind sitting between two well used but spotless wing chairs. A couple of framed landscapes graced the walls, interrupting the delicate *fleur de lis* pattern of the wall paper. Across the room was a counter that was, at the moment, unmanned. Approaching its well polished length, he stopped in front of it and rang the bell that waited near a sign-in ledger.

In answer to that metallic summons a middle aged man dressed in serviceable shoes, crisp black pants, a white shirt and a black vest with a subdued paisley pattern, appeared through an open doorway. He brought with him the smell of something cooking. That savory scent made Lan's stomach contract.

"Good evening, sir. How can I help you?" the man asked, slipping behind the counter.

"You can start by telling me you have a room available and end with telling me how I can get some of whatever that is you've got cooking back there."

The man laughed and Lan relaxed at the good natured sound. There were crinkle lines around the man's brown eyes, a good indicator that he laughed often. "We do indeed have a room and for three bits extra, supper and breakfast come with it."

"Sounds good to me."

"If you'll just sign the ledger, I'll get your key."

Lan took the pen he was offered and signed his name while the man turned his back to retrieve a key from the small, multi-slotted cupboard behind him. "I'm Jack Snyder. I own the hotel. My sister, Letty, does the cooking, Mr. um, Jeffers," he added, taking quick look at the ledger. "Will you be staying a while or just the night?"

"Honestly don't know. Depends on how my luck runs."

"Ah. I didn't take you for a miner."

"No, sir. I find cards a more congenial way to earn my silver."

"Can't say as I blame you there. The reason I asked is because we offer a discounted rate for anyone who stays a week or more. As you're not sure, why don't you just pay by the day and if you're here after a week we'll split the difference to include the discount."

"Thank you. That sounds more than fair to me."

Mr. Snyder came out from behind the counter. "Follow me and I'll show you to your room."

He took the lead, crossing the lobby and climbing the nearby staircase. Lan's room was the third on the left. After unlocking the door, the hotelkeeper stepped aside so Lan could enter. It was clean and simple. There was a bed, a dresser, a wash stand and a straight-backed chair. The only objection he had to it was the fact that it was warm and stuffy. Crossing the room, he opened the window. The early evening air was just starting to freshen a bit. It stirred the curtains and felt good after the heat of the day.

"This is just fine," Lan commented, turning back to drape his saddlebags over the back of the sturdy wood chair.

After getting Lan's approval Mr. Snyder started out the doorway then paused. "Supper is served between five and eight. The kitchen will be closing down in about half an hour. I'll tell Letty to expect you. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Is there a place I can get a bath?"

"The barber shop has a bathhouse out back but they're closed by now. Best I can offer you tonight is a tin tub deep enough to wet your backside."

Lan grinned. "Much obliged but I'll try the bathhouse tomorrow."

Mr. Snyder smiled in return. "I'll have some wash water brought up. That should help a bit."

"That it would," Lan agreed with a nod. "I'd surely appreciate it."

The wash water appeared a few minutes later as promised, brought up by a boy of about thirteen. He smiled shyly, dumping the water from a bucket into the porcelain pitcher on the wash stand. Lan gently thanked him, giving the kid a dime for his trouble. With a wide grin, the kid rushed off.

Landon stripped down and, using a cloth from his saddle bags, gave himself a quick, all over wash. The water was warm and felt like liquid silk. The air coming in the window played over his damp skin leaving a chill kiss behind wherever it touched. He sighed with pleasure. If there was one thing he appreciated it was being clean. Unlike some men he'd run into, Lan couldn't take going for weeks without a bath. There were times when he appreciated some natural male musk but there was a hell of a big difference between natural and rank. Anxious not to miss the opportunity for a good supper, he quickly dressed in the clean clothes he pulled from his saddle bags and headed downstairs.

An hour later, with a full belly, he strolled along the rough board sidewalk, peering into each saloon and gambling dive he came to before moving on. He was looking for a particular kind of place. and with this many to choose from, he was sure he'd find it. The place would be lively but have a certain amount of class as well. There'd be no half drunk, rowdy miners being served rotgut. The clientele would be expected to behave in a halfway decent manner and pay for the privilege of good liquor and better company.

Sure enough, after the seventh place he'd checked, he found just what he was looking for. Landon walked in and took a good look around on his way to the bar. It didn't have the elegance of some of the places he'd seen in San Francisco but it wasn't shabby by any means. There was green felt on the gaming tables and gleaming polished surfaces on the others scattered around the room. A roulette wheel was doing a lively trade in one corner. Almost every table was filled with gamblers or groups of men just gathered to visit and drink. The confused buzz of chatter rose skyward with the smoke of cigars and cigarettes.

Lights flickered behind elegant glass shades along the walls and from matching chandeliers overhead. The gentle glow softened any flaws but left the room well lit. The bargirls' dresses were provocative but tasteful, and the dealers and bartenders were dressed simply in stark black pants and white shirts with black sleeve garters. High on

each of the four walls were large paintings of nude or nearly nude women, stylish, graceful paintings of plump, pale and shapely females draped in gossamer veils.

As was common in many saloons, the wall behind the bar shone with etched and polished mirror. Rows of glinting glass and bottles filled with whisky, rye, bourbon and the like marched along the low shelves built beside and beneath it. Lan sidled up to the bar and ordered a whiskey. With glass in hand he turned to admire the sight before him. *Now this, he mused, feels just like home.*

It wasn't long before he was concentrating on the tables where card games were in progress. At one such table, a man rose. Tipping his hat at those assembled, he walked out of the bar. Another man seated there, at least part Spanish by the look of him, caught Lan's eye and with a short move of his head indicated the empty seat. Lan sent him an answering nod and joined the other players. Seating himself with little fanfare, he bought into the game, was dealt his first hand and the play began.

For the first couple of hours the game went well. He won his share of hands and had a nice stack of chips in front of him. His fellow players were all obviously experienced but unaware of the fact that they were giving away their hands in subtle ways. As the game progressed Lan was learning their tells. One player would narrow his right eye just a bit when bluffing. Another would tug the corner of his mustache when he had a good hand. Ever so slowly, small bits of body language began to betray each players' mood and if he held good cards or bad.

One of the bargirls had taken a shine to Lan and made frequent stops at his table. Susie waited on Lan before anyone else and gave him sweet come-hither smiles and meaningful looks from big brown eyes. She also managed to show him quite a bit of her bosom in the process. Lan gracefully bore her attention, not about to enlighten her in this roomful of strangers that he preferred his partners a hell of a lot more flat-chested. And male. This pretty girl was sporting all the wrong equipment to engage Lan's interest, unlike the fresh-faced cowboy across the table. Lan could definitely see himself letting that beefy, blond-haired, young man ride his cock. Putting those thoughts aside, Lan kept his mind firmly on the game.

It was in the early hours of the morning that the trouble began. Lan had begun to suspect it for quite sometime but the last hand had proved it for sure. The duded up swell who acted like he owned the place was cheating. Lan threw his cards in before the hand began and started to gather his money in spite of the protests around him.

"I got nothing against losing, but I won't play with a cheat," he told them. His words brought a quiet hush to the table.

"Who are you accusing of cheating?" the dude asked.

"That'd be you."

The man sat there bold as brass and slowly nodded his head. "You don't know who I am, do you?"

Around the table chairs were pushed back. The tension quickly spread to the neighboring tables until they had an audience looking on with anticipation and dread.

"Would that make a difference?"

"The name's Roger Coburn."

"And that should mean what to me?"

"My brother is Daniel Coburn, Marshal of Calico. We own this town."

Lan felt a slight frisson of dismay which he more than adequately hid behind his calm demeanor. Every nerve in his body was trying to dance with the rising stress that winged through his veins and tightened each muscle in tiny, nearly invisible increments. This situation was far from unfamiliar but he didn't carry a gun for show. With composure only the best of his breed could exhibit, Lan put his life on the line.

"Do tell. Well, Mr. Coburn, where I come from a man wins at cards with luck and skill, not by intimidation and most definitely not by cheating. I don't give a damn who you are. No double dealing braggart is lining his pockets with my money." Lan rose to leave.

Across the table, in what seemed like the blink of an eye, Roger Coburn stood. His chair tipped back and fell. There were screams. Men and women scrambled to get out of the way. A gun appeared in Coburn's hand as he drew it from his holster. Without stopping to think about it, Lan answered the threat. Two revolvers fired. One

found its target, the other didn't. Coburn gasped and grabbed his middle, blood blossoming and spreading against his shirt in a flood of red. With a look of astonished disbelief on his face, he fell to the side, dead before he hit the floor.

Landon didn't need any encouragement to get moving. Smoking gun in hand, he grabbed his money up. Keeping a wary eye on those around him, he crossed the floor and was out the door and gone. He didn't question the need for haste or the need to run. That Coburn had had the bald-faced gall to expect his cheating to be overlooked just because his brother was the town marshal boded ill. From the sound of it, this wasn't the first such incident. Apparently the marshal backed his brother. More than likely he wouldn't take kindly to someone killing the man, even if it had been a fair fight.

Walking swiftly to the hotel and entering, he took the stairs two at a time. Once in his room, he stuffed his belongings back in his saddlebags and was back outside in seconds flat heading for the livery stable.

Cursing the darkness, he fumbled in his saddlebags for matches and lit one just inside the stable doors. A lantern hung nearby and he lit the wick then made his way down the line of stalls, quickly finding his horse and tack. The roan gelding blew and stamped, disgruntled at being disturbed but he held steady while Lan got him saddled and bridled. Around him the other horses answered with low whickers. After adjusting his gear, reins in hand, Lan led his horse to the doors and replaced the lantern after carefully extinguishing the flame.

Heart pounding, he paused and listened. In the distance he could hear shouting. Without wasting another second, he was out the door, leading his horse. It was still dark and he wasn't about to risk injury to the roan. Taking his bearings, he started in an easterly direction and was soon out of town. So far there was no sound of pursuit. The ground rose steadily as he went. Glancing back he could see lights flitting around town like fireflies. They were searching for him.

Grimly, Landon turned his back and kept walking. When the sun rose high enough to make the landscape visible, he mounted up and headed east, intending to put a lot of miles between himself and Calico.

Chapter One

With sweat evaporating from his skin almost faster than it could form, Landon Jeffers cursed the posse that had dogged his heels for the last couple of weeks. At the same time, he blessed God or the good fortune that had made his path cross with the Mexican. Though taciturn and suspicious, the man had shared with him what kind of terrain lay ahead. He also sold Lan the now bloated water skins that were the only thing between he, his horse and the dehydration that could be so deadly to both of them in these climes.

This stretch of Arizona territory was nothing but sand, cactus and scrub accented by dry washes, rugged hills and mountains that grew steadily larger the longer he rode. Just about every living thing he'd seen so far in this arid desert-like land would bite, sting, or stick the unwary traveler. He still found it hard to believe that people would actually live in what appeared to be such a God forsaken place. Still, in a way, it was understandable.

When the government enacted the Desert Land Act, any damned fool who could afford to pay a dollar and two bits an acre got six hundred and forty acres of land. It was a chance to become king of your own little piece of heaven, was how most folks saw it. What they didn't realize was this place had a greater resemblance to hell than to that celestial place that remained unseen above. Some made it work and some didn't. Of those that didn't, there were always the mines to be worked. Seemed they were always finding new ones that dotted this parched and barren landscape.

There was no water but there was plenty of rock, rock that yielded a little gold but mostly silver. It was the promise of such riches that kept these small towns thriving. If it wasn't for the money, anyone with a lick of sense would hightail it out of there as quickly as possible.

Fierce blue eyes blinked under the shade provided by the rim of his Stetson. He studied the route he was on and headed for the higher ground in the distance. More than a cooling shower of rain, he wanted one thing, to look at his back trail and see nothing. No group of horses and men so close he could make out individual features. No distant, ant-like figures that would morph into a collection of hunters determined to see him hang. Not even a wisp of telltale dust that would rise beneath as yet unseen horse hooves.

He was sick and tired of running. He was a gunfighter and a gambler, not a murderer. That arrogant card shark in the saloon in California had gotten just what he'd deserved. But Lan had been proven correct in his assumptions about the marshal. He had set men on Lan's trail and, no matter the right or wrong of the situation, he was going to make Lan pay the price for killing his brother. Marshal Coburn had a real hard-on for the idea of seeing Landon dance at the end of a rope.

Guiding his horse into the foothills, Lan stopped and took a good hard look behind. Nothing. There was nothing but a heat shimmer wavering over the dull dun-colored landscape. A small smile of satisfaction curved his lips. It seemed that crossing the Colorado River at Olive City had been a good idea after all. Maybe his pursuers had decided that enough was enough. There was a lot of trail between here and California. The bully boy marshal's money or threats had to have stretched thin by now.

Breathing a provisional sigh of relief, Landon felt the tension ease from his shoulders. Time would tell if they'd truly given up but for now he was willing to err on the side of appearances. Perhaps this would be the time to put into action one of those plans that had formed during the long, endless ride. He'd heard tell that his friend Wyatt and his brothers had settled in a place called Tombstone right here in the Arizona Territory. From the sound of it, Wyatt had turned legit and was a deputy US Marshal.

It wasn't the first such story he'd heard. Gunslingers turned lawmen and peacemakers. Lan knew he had the physical skill and the mental acuity to handle such a job. He'd even given the notion of joining the Texas Rangers some play. Still, he decided maybe dropping in on Wyatt would be a good idea. Getting some first hand advice

straight from the horse's mouth couldn't hurt and it would be good to see his friend again.

With that idea firmly in mind, Lan continued on until near sunset. He found a likely campsite. Surrounded by rock with a flinty overhang it was a neat, half circle clearing sunk back into a good sized hill. That hill was a precursor to the Trego mountain range and was backed by even more hills that grew larger and higher as they went. It provided cover from ambush as well as unexpected shade not only by the ledge, but in the form of a small stand of stunted pine. After caring for his horse, an ugly, tough-as-nails roan with the smoothest gait he'd ever come across, Lan gathered pinecones and a few dead branches, hoping to keep a fire going long enough to brew some coffee.

Most camps along the way had been dark and cold. He hadn't dared light a fire lest it serve as a beacon to guide the posse straight to him. Tonight he was taking a chance. The fire would be sheltered from view and with the coming darkness its tale-tell smoke would be invisible. In the last fading light before sunset, he again checked his back trail. It was blessedly bare of movement.

Landon washed hardtack and jerky down with a robust if slightly bitter cup of coffee he'd managed to brew. Even mellowed by a bit of sugar it was enough to put starch in a man's spine but he didn't mind. He risked the dregs near the bottom of the cup to get as much of the bracing brew as possible. Afterward, with the fire banked and his bedroll spread, he stretched out. The long day in conjunction with the relief of no longer being followed allowed him to fall asleep with no more than a few drowsy blinks at the night sky.

Sometime in the night, the roan stamped and blew a loud breath of air out of his nostrils. Lan was instantly awake, his hand already resting on his gun. Lying still, he listened. Hearing nothing untoward, he silently rose, put his back to the rock and stared out over what bit of the surrounding land was visible. There was no movement, no unidentified sound. Easing forward, Lan changed position enough to enlarge his field of vision. From the corner of his eye, a small movement caught his attention.

The waxing moon had risen, painting the landscape with a gentle silvery glow. Not far away, crossing the low summit of a hill, Lan could clearly see the silhouette of a wolf. As though aware of his regard the wolf stopped, turning its head in Lan's direction. Man and wolf stared at each other. Never one to be taken by flights of fancy, Lan was shocked to feel a flutter of unease skitter down his spine. Even with the distance between them he felt the intelligence of the creature watching him. Something tangled within him. He felt a tug, a compelling pull of sensation as though someone had thrown a rope around him and was urging him forward.

Lan took a hesitant step. Shocked, he fought off the compulsion until it vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Eyes focused once again on the wolf, he could have sworn he saw a flash of reddish orange fire in the vicinity of the wolf's eyes before it turned and disappeared into the night.

At the wolf's departure, Lan felt as though he'd been examined and dismissed. He retreated once again to his bedroll. Lying there he contemplated the encounter. What would a lone wolf be doing out here so far from any decent game or cover? Seems like he'd heard tell they usually stuck to wooded areas where there were deer and such. But those things aside, where had that need come from to get closer? What in the world had he been thinking?

Puzzling it over, Lan couldn't come up with a reasonable explanation. Finally, telling himself he'd been on his own too long and that his imagination was playing tricks on him, he settled back down and was almost instantly asleep.

Landon rose at first light, immediately making a cautious foray to higher ground. He spent some time again scrutinizing his back trail and was once more rewarded with little movement. Beyond a jackrabbit and a couple of hawks swooping around in lazy circles in the gradually brightening, clear blue sky, there was nothing else in sight but the same dry land as yesterday. Satisfied, he went to relieve himself and shivered at the touch of cool air against parts that weren't usually exposed. For a place that was

borderline desert, it got damned cold at night and took a while to warm up with the rising of the sun overhead.

Finishing his business he glanced down at his cock, struck by the memory of the last time any other hand but his own had touched it. Seemed like a hell of a long time ago but he remembered it well. Instead of tucking himself away, he leaned back against the face of a nearby sun-warmed boulder.

It had been that unexpected encounter with a soft spoken blacksmith by the name of Tom Littleton, on the outskirts of Carson City, Nevada. Landon had been passing through on his way to California when the roan threw a shoe. That simple shoe replacement had turned into a three day job. From the moment Lan had laid eyes on Tom, he'd been hooked. *Lord*, that man was put together fine. All that metal work had put prime muscle in all the right places.

Lan had managed to keep his glances impersonal -- he wasn't a successful poker player for nothing -- but it wasn't long before he noticed Tom looking right back in a way that made his cock ache. Before the day was out, the two of them were going at it. The first time had been right there in a stall by the forge. As soon as the doors were locked and a closed for lunch sign posted, Lan had bent that fine body over the stall fence rails. With the aid of some spit and a little patience followed by long slow glide into the hottest, tightest ass he'd felt in forever, Lan had plowed a furrow straight to heaven and had taken the blacksmith with him. It had been a damned fine way to spend the better part of three days. The roan came away with four new shoes and Lan himself was the most sated and satisfied he could remember being in an age.

He wasn't surprised to find himself hard and aching over the memory. While his mind had replayed that pleasant interval, his hand had begun a familiar action common to men the world over. It had been an age since he'd been able to relax enough to make even this much possible. Death at a man's heels had a way of taking the fun out of everything.

With long fingers wrapped around the stiff length of his now fully erect cock, Lan allowed himself to slip back into the past and another rousing memory. He

remembered the stifling heat that radiated from the forge and how sweat drifted in slow, teasing rivulets over the curves and valleys of any exposed muscle Tom happened to be showing. After Lan arrived, Tom had started showing quite a bit. He'd taken to working with nothing over his torso but a thick leather apron that left his arms and back bare.

While pumping the bellows to fan the red hot coals, limber muscles had moved with fluid ease under tanned, satiny skin. All that sweating had kept Tom's pores clear. There wasn't a blemish on the man save for a few cut and burn scars which were the marks of his trade. Lan could remember plain as day sitting on a stack of hay bales while watching him work. Tom was pure poetry in motion. Lan had never considered such a thing before. A man working at his trade could inspire awe, but here there was also a symmetry and grace to his motions that were strangely beautiful and mesmerizing.

As the minutes drifted by, Lan's desire had built. The pulse in his cock seemed to match the metallic clang of hammer and anvil against the bright orange glow of superheated iron. Under Tom's expert touch, the horseshoe was shaped and curved to fit the roan as though he'd been born with it already in place. Lan watched Tom's body twist and turn and bend, skin gleaming with sweat, muscles bunching and releasing until finally the work was deemed finished. The shoe, held by tongs, was dipped into water, creating a burbling hiss of steam heated air to rise. Through that fleeting white cloud, their eyes had met.

Setting his work aside, Tom came to Lan where he sat waiting, the thick bulge of his hard cock pressing visibly against his buttons. Without a word Tom had dropped to his knees, those sure, steady hands opening Lan's jeans. Releasing Lan's rigid flesh Tom had leaned forward, his tongue laving the swollen crown before his mouth engulfed the full length. Lan had never been able receive such attentions quietly.

Hands gripping Tom's shoulders, he panted and groaned, deep heartfelt sounds to accompany the wet slurps of Tom's mouth around his thickened staff. Head bobbing, Tom worked at Lan as diligently as he did at his forge. Relentlessly he drove the arousal

higher. A work roughened hand cupped the tightening sack that held Lan's testicles. A finger, dampened with saliva, slid behind and teased his clenching hole. For a few seconds it circled the wrinkled skin, then centered itself and sank deep.

Lan had had to clench his teeth against the scream that threatened to tear from his chest when orgasm exploded in his gut. It detonated deep within and rushed out in bursts of pearly, liquid heat. Tom had swallowed with a growl which sent vibrations to the core of Lan's balls. He'd jerked at the sensation, groaning as his body reacted by emptying every last drop into Tom's willing mouth. Tom had licked him clean and laid his head on Lan's thigh while Lan curled over him, breathing in the heavy musk of come and hard working man.

The present reasserted itself with the dizzying rush of Lan's climax. The vivid memory of Tom in combination with the firm grip of his own hand, sent him over the edge. Lan gasped and groaned, stroking the hard stalk in his fist while ribbons of white cream spattered into the dust at his feet. Glad of the rocky support at his back, he gulped in rough drafts of air. Staring down at the moisture that was already being absorbed into the parched earth, he felt a stab of emotion deep inside.

As always, Lan rejected the flash of loneliness that struck him bone deep. A man like him, gambler, gunslinger, couldn't form ties, couldn't stay in one place. It's not like he could have set up housekeeping with Tom, even if he'd been so inclined. For now, this was his life. He knew it and was resigned to it.

Taking a deep breath, he straightened, tucked himself back in his clothes and returned to the campsite. There was work to be done. No amount of mooning over the situation was going to change it. He'd learned that lesson long ago.

He took care of his horse, feeding him from the supply of grain they carried and poured him a measure of water into a collapsible canvas bucket. The Mexican had said there was a lake about a day's ride from where they'd met up. There was also a town. Another place built up around one of the mines. Silent it was called, but the Mexican said they had a post office, two saloons and even a dancehall. Not that Landon would find the kind of company he liked to keep there.

Still, it would be a welcome thing to oil his vocal cords with some whiskey and maybe find a place with a bed and a bath. It had been too long since he'd rubbed elbows with anyone other than prairie dogs and his horse. He could do with some socialization and a good game of poker. Not to mention a decent meal. The sight of that distant jack rabbit he'd seen while checking to make sure he was still alone had made his mouth water. What he wouldn't give for some fresh cooked meat.

It's funny how sometimes the answer to an unspoken wish will just appear in front of you, Landon mused. He'd looked up from hobbling the roan after checking his hooves when a relative of that rabbit he'd been drooling over came hopping into the clearing. Lan had moved the roan to the scrubby stand of trees to give him the opportunity to graze any bits of green foolish enough to force their way up between the blanketing layer of pine needles that littered the ground.

The wiry little beast sat there with its nose twitching then hopped deeper into the curve of rock where Lan had made his bed the night before. Lan eased his gun free, crouched down a bit and crept forward. The shadows deepened beneath the rock ledge. Peering within, Lan saw no sign of his prey. Frowning, he straightened and holstered his gun.

"Where'd you go?" he muttered.

Truly puzzled, Lan walked the far inner perimeter of the rock wall. In the dim light he found the rabbit's tracks. They approached the wall then disappeared. Reaching out, Lan touched the rock, running his hands over the surface until his fingers encountered open space. Intrigued, he peered around the curve and realized it was actually an opening. The shadows made it appear as if the rock wall was solid when in reality a large fissure had split its surface.

Lan breathed in. It smelled earthy and damp. Could there possibly be water beyond that opening? Fascinated by his discovery, he decided to check it out. First, just to be on the safe side, he again made for high ground to check out the surrounding landscape. It was hot. Dry puffs of dust rose under his footsteps and small pebbles rolled as he made his way up the hill. Careful to stay low when approaching the crest,

he dropped to his knees, laid out and crawled the remaining distance. He silently cursed the dust that tried to fill his nostrils.

Reaching the top, he peered cautiously over. All was quiet. There was cactus and sagebrush below, even a bit of tumbleweed lazily rolling with the gentle breeze. Other than that, nothing stirred. When he was absolutely convinced there wasn't a thing in sight that didn't belong there and no one creeping up on him, Lan returned to his campsite. Rummaging in his saddle bags, he brought out a candle and matches.

With excitement tightening his gut, he returned to the opening, lit the candle and inched his way inside. Sandwiched between two layers of rock, it was a tight fit. If not for his clothes, he'd have left layers of skin behind on the rough surface. As it was, he heard a tearing sound when his shirt caught on a particularly sharp shard of stone. Cursing a low voiced blue streak, Lan continued his advance and nearly stumbled and fell forward when the wall in front of him abruptly ended, revealing an open pocket.

He just had time to draw a deep breath when a crazed ball of fur started bouncing around his feet. With a startled yelp, Lan drew his revolver but froze short of pulling the trigger when he realized it was the rabbit he'd seen earlier. The panicked creature finally found the entrance and disappeared, leaving Lan awash in adrenalin. With the electric zing of passing danger fading from his system, he leaned back on the cavern wall and began to chuckle with relief.

"Damn fool thing," he muttered with a grin while holstering his six shot Colt revolver with its well worn ebony handle.

By some miracle he'd managed to hold onto the lit candle, and by its flickering light, took his first steps deeper into the open space before him. It wasn't a large area by any stretch of the imagination but rather gave the impression of being inside a grossly outsized, hollowed out egg. The roof curved inward as it disappeared in the engulfing shadows. There was room for perhaps three men to stand arm's length from each other. The floor was fairly flat and clear of debris as though any loose bits had been swept back against the walls. While that in itself was unusual and cause for further

examination, what really caught Lan's attention was the glints and glow of certain ore and stones embedded in the rock wall.

Frowning, he moved closer. Sure enough, revealed in the soft light of the candle was a rich vein of silver. "I'll be damned," he breathed.

Gaze wandering further, he was drawn by a blaze of reddish orange. Embedded in the walls along with the silver were crystals of some sort. They caught the light and shimmered with a faint glow. Drawn by the jewel-like crystals, Lan extended a finger and ran it over a smooth, yet sharp-edged surface. Cursing at the resulting sting, he snatched his hand back to see blood beading on his fingertip. A small flash caused him to blink then stare at the crystal he'd touched. For a split second it seemed to burn with some inner fire before becoming just another sparkling rock nestled against its fellows.

Absently putting his finger in his mouth, Lan sucked the blood away then examined the cut. It wasn't there. Thinking his eyesight had gone wonky, Lan rapidly blinked. Using his thumb he pulled at the site of the wound. There was no separation of flesh, no sting, nothing.

"What the hell?" he muttered.

Looking at his fingertip from every possible angle while poking and prodding the surrounding skin, he still found nothing. No cut, no abrasion, not even any lingering tenderness. It was as though the cut had never happened. The only sign of it was the lingering coppery taste of blood in his mouth. With nothing to be gained by his continued attention to it, Lan put that particular puzzle away for later contemplation. He went back to his examination of the space around him. He found the source of the damp smell he'd noted before breaching the crevice. A fast moving trickle of water had carved a channel through part of the rock. It surfaced between some cracks in the rock above Lan's head. Gliding downward in a smooth sparkling ribbon, it had etched a shallow channel in the stone wall and disappeared into another crack in the floor, gone as mysteriously as it appeared.

Brushing his fingers against the stone, Lan wet them and brought them to his lips. It tasted like well water, full of minerals but clean. That explained the stunted trees

outside. This water must run somewhere beneath their roots allowing them just enough moisture to flourish in this inhospitable place. It also solved any worry he might have had about running out of water. For as long as he chose to stay here, that particular problem was no more.

Turning from the water, he inspected the debris on the floor. Nudging his toe through it, he found bits of rock and nuggets of silver. Squatting down, he noted that strangely enough, none of the orange/red crystals littered the ground. From the looks of it, someone knew this place was here but they had no interest in the silver. There were marks of digging on the rock wall. The silver had been discarded as worthless, but apparently the red crystals had been taken. Who would want these pretty but insignificant and valueless crystals when silver was in the offing?

Shaking his head over the mystery, Lan decided to let it go. This unknown person apparently had no use for silver but Lan certainly did. As long as he'd been on the run he'd been unable to earn or gamble his way into any significant amounts of cash. His funds had about run dry and here before him, with just a little effort involved, was the opportunity to live the good life. Now that the posse had given up, he was going to spend a few days prospecting. With the silver literally throwing itself at him, he'd have a substantial stake gathered together in no time. For the first time in weeks, Lan felt his spirits soar. Finally, something was going his way.

Glad of the supply of candles he'd thought to add to his saddle bags which would make this work possible, he took one last look around before heading out. His stomach was hitting his backbone, letting him know in no uncertain terms that breakfast was expected. Things were definitely looking up. Lan even felt optimistic about the possibility of catching a rabbit.

After another breakfast of jerky, hardtack and coffee, he set up some snares. Checking first to make sure the roan was comfortably settled, he gathered his supplies together, squeezed back through the fissure in the rock and started to work. Trying to always be prepared for the unexpected while on the trail, Lan carried a small hatchet

with him. Meant for chopping branches and such, it now went into service as a pseudo pickaxe.

He diligently worked for hours, stopping only to take an occasional sip of water and to sift through what he chipped free of the rock wall. Separating the silver, he dumped it into the roomy canvas bag he normally used to carry his shaving kit and other personal items. As he labored, several times he felt short of breath and lightheaded. The feeling passed quickly enough but each time it was accompanied by a rush of dry heat that left him feeling as though he'd just been removed from an oven like a well done biscuit.

After the last such incident, Lan decided to call it a day. His canvas bag was nearly half full, the hefty weight of the silver more than an exchange for the sweat and energy he'd expended to dig it free. He opted to leave the bag inside the cavern figuring it would be safer there on the off chance that anyone should stumble upon his campsite.

He emerged to find fading daylight and a rabbit trapped in one of his snares. Efficiently dispatching it, that evening there was fresh meat roasting on a spit over his fire. He went to bed tired and satisfied, with a belly that rejoiced at not having to digest hardtack and jerky again. Sometime in the night, the dreams began.

First there was the heat, stifling and nearly unbearable. Lan tossed on his blankets then settled when it relented a bit. What remained shimmered around him and through the blurred haze he saw himself. Dressed in stark black from head to toe, every article of clothing he wore sported silver. His Stetson was ringed with a chain of silver conchos. Silver buttons of the same design studded the front of his vest. His gun belt was all leather and silver inlay. He wore silver spurs on his heels and silver tips on the toes of his boots.

Silently he laughed at such a gaudy display. No matter how rich he became he'd never succumb to such an obvious display of greenhorn finery. The heat spiked again and the silver began to glow and melt. It ran in dripping rivulets down his body, dissolving his clothes in its wake but never stinging his skin with its liquid flame. Lan watched, confusion filling his mind at the incomprehensible visions that opened before

him. The silver puddled on the ground and swirled around and around until it formed a solidified disk.

Out of the darkness, great wings beat a tattoo upon the air and an owl appeared. Cool air wafted over his skin, driven by the owl's wings. Gooseflesh marched over his body and Lan shivered. Swooping down, the owl snatched the disk in its talons and flung itself into the heavens. Far above the earth it released the silver disk and silently disappeared into the night sky. That bright silver disk began to glow, shedding its opalescent light over the world below. Under its revealing radiance, Lan stood, unashamed of his nudity. Against his naked skin, he felt the brush of fur. His cock thickened and rose. A warm body passed within arm's length. He heard the almost silent footfalls of paws against the dirt and suddenly a series of howls broke the silence.

Catapulted from his dreams, Landon was on his feet almost before his eyes were fully open. His gun cleared his holster in one smooth, lightning fast move and he stood frozen, listening in the dark. All around was silence. His eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness. Moon-cast shadows lay upon the ground, the roan's silhouette indicating he was at peace. Had there been a howling wolf nearby, his ornery horse would have let him know.

His gaze wandered the clearing and he tensed. Was that a face among the shadowy trees? Between one blink and the next it was gone, if it had ever truly been there. Frowning, Lan watched, but there was no movement of any kind. Convinced it was his imagination, he slowly relaxed, scrubbed a hand over his face and holstered his gun. That was twice in less than twenty-four hours he'd drawn his weapon after being unexpectedly startled. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad one. While it was good to be prepared, he wondered if perhaps he was becoming wound a little too tight. There was certainly something about this locale that put a man on edge. One more day of working that silver deposit, and he was out of here and on his way to Tombstone.

Mind made up, he took a deep breath and returned to his bedroll. Stretching out, he wiggled to find as comfortable a position as possible on the hard ground. With little

effort, Lan relaxed. His drowsy mind replayed snippets of his dream. The bits and pieces mixed and blended, coalescing into a face. Sharp cheekbones, defined features, fathomless black eyes and silky black hair. The shining moon had highlighted and shadowed flesh covered angles and valleys. It defined and obscured until reality became imagination and that strong human male face morphed into a wolf with eyes whose reddish orange glow competed with the moon in brilliance.

Barely twitching, Landon's drifting consciousness accepted the vision. With a barely mumbled protest, he turned on his side. Shivering against the cool night air that brushed the back of his neck, he fumbled for his blanket pulled it tight around him and for the rest of the night, was granted a deep and dreamless sleep.

Out in the darkness, a lone wolf padded softly around the perimeter of Landon's camp. While it wore the outward appearance of its wild brothers, within, human intelligence dwelled. Careful to keep downwind of the horse, it investigated the intriguing scents of the man who inhabited the nearby camp. Finding the place where the man had shot his seed onto the thirsty earth, the wolf felt the stirrings of mate fever. He was unsurprised by this turn of events. This too was just another piece of his visions falling into place. Driven by instinct to know and protect his mate, the wolf approached the camp as close as possible without being detected and tested the air.

The man's scent was strong, distinct and arousing. With every passing moment it was also changing. His humanity was being threatened, encroached upon by the beast that had found release within. Somehow this white man had triggered the stones and now he was reaping the reward for his unwitting discovery.

The wolf tilted its head, gauging the size of the moon overhead. It was a waxing moon, each night showing more and more of its face. In two nights it would be full and the man's transformation would be complete. He would have to remain close. His mate would need him.

Once more he turned his gaze toward the sleeping man. It all made sense now. The signs, the portents, his dreams. It was all coming together.

Padding away, the wolf resolved to take care of more mundane chores. His belly was empty. He would hunt, feed and gain strength. He would need all his strength in the coming days.

Chapter Two

Lan woke and rolled to his back. His eyes felt gritty and his bones ached. It was cold within the shadow of the rocks and he gave the brightening daylight a yearning look. Before long it would be too warm, but for now that heat was all he desired.

Groaning, he levered himself up on his feet. After making sure his boots were sans any biting or stinging critters, he stamped his way into them. His natural caution quickly reasserted itself and he did his usual reconnoiter of the surrounding area before attending to the morning necessities.

After taking care of his personal needs, he poured feed and water for the roan. Smoothing his hands over the horse's withers, he leaned briefly against his warm bulk. "I feel like shit," he confided to his only companion. The horse's ears flickered at the sound of his rider's voice, but he continued to eat without interruption. "Guess I'll get no sympathy from you." Lan sighed, straightened and stretched to work the kinks out of his back.

He turned his attention to scaring up breakfast which consisted of a lumpy stew made of oatmeal and leftover bits of rabbit. Unpalatable as it looked, Lan's stomach, which had been taking occasional queasy dips from the moment he'd woken, settled after he ate. He was even able to enjoy the coffee he brewed. Feeling better, he gathered his things together and returned to the hollow in the hill.

Just as happened the day before, Lan began experiencing those inexplicable rushes of heat and dizziness. He stopped more than a few times to wet a bandana in the cold water, wiping down his face or placing the cold cloth to the back of his neck. Doing so sent shivers down his spine, but it was bracing and cleared his head. He chopped away at the vein of silver, ignoring hunger when noon rolled around, but indulged himself with cool sips of water whenever thirst beckoned.

As soon as a big enough pile of ore and rock lay at his feet, he would pause long enough to transfer the nuggets to his canvas bag. At some point during the day, the silver began to have an adverse effect on him. For some reason it felt warm to the touch, a warmth that grew startlingly uncomfortable as the day wore on. He found himself becoming strangely reluctant to touch it, especially as the last piece he handled nearly blistered his fingertips. Finally he was forced to don a pair of leather gloves in order to handle it. Even with the leather between the silver and his skin, he could almost feel the fine hairs on his forearms stir as though they were trying to distance themselves from that shiny, metallic ore. Try as he might, Lan could find no earthly reason to explain it. Being near the silver had become almost repugnant, as though it held some kind of putrefaction that repelled as surely as maggot-ridden, rotted meat.

By the time evening rolled around, he found merely breathing an effort and his cramping stomach was tied in knots. The heat had finished coming and going in flashes. Instead, it rolled off him now in constant, sickening waves. Vision blurring, he wiped the sweat from his eyes and with a final choking curse avowed himself done with this place. He gathered his things together, and grabbing up the canvas bag bulging with silver, practically clawed his way out of the cavern.

The sun had set. Outside the entrance he dropped everything and stumbled away from the jumbled pile, feeling better the more distance he put between it and himself. To take care of his horse first and foremost was a habit ingrained long ago. Taking deep, calming breaths he made his way to the roan and doled out more grain and water. He checked the animal over, making sure the hobbles weren't chafing.

Satisfied that all was well, Lan collapsed into a heap under the shade provided by the pines. "Just need to rest a minute," he muttered before closing his eyes.

Hours later he woke to moon shadows and darkness. He felt hot and cold all at once and lay shivering on the ground. Confusion filled his thoughts but the one thing he was sure of was the need to relieve himself. Crawling from beneath the trees he rose on unsteady feet and wobbly knees, taking himself a few steps further into the

encompassing dark. Opening his pants, he worked himself free and groaned with relief at the strong stream that marked the emptying of his bladder.

Feeling much better, Lan tucked himself away and was distracted a dry rustling sound at the base of some jumbled boulders some fifteen feet away. A mouse was busily making its way to the entrance of its den. Lan could clearly see the yellow orange aura of warmth that radiated from the tiny creature. Dismayed at the odd shift in his vision, he shook his head and immediately regretted the action when the world tilted on its axis.

Staggering, with arms flung wide, he sought for something to hold onto. Finding nothing, his body twisted and tipped, heading for the hard ground like a felled tree. Seconds before impact, firm, sure hands and an iron hard body came between Lan and the unforgiving earth. With a startled yell, he tore himself free and stood weaving unsteadily. Before him was the face from his dream.

By no means an expert on Native American tribes, Lan's befuddled mind whispered a name. *Apache*. It was like having the devil appear in the guise of a virile, masculine and oh-so-beautiful, red-skinned angel. Forehead marred by a frown, black brows shadowed the man's dark eyes. They stared at him from above sharp cheekbones made even more prominent by the hollows beneath them. The well defined blade of his nose led down to a chiseled yet generous pair of lips. Long, black hair flowed free but for the braid at one side. He was tall, clean limbed and well formed. From their fleeting contact, Lan had felt the hard muscled strength of his body. For a split second he felt the stirrings of arousal, until visions of torture and scalping sent a spear of pure terror piercing his gut. He fumbled for his gun, hand coming away empty. It was gone.

"Is this what you seek?" The Indian's voice was silky smooth. The words, spoken in English, were totally unexpected. In his hand he held Lan's gun. From the way he gripped the handle, he was not unfamiliar with the use of a revolver.

Barely able to stand, Lan gave a fleeting thought to the knife in his boot and the effort it would require to fight the man before him. At that moment his stomach gave a resentful heave and, bending, he retched the contents of his stomach into the dirt.

Spitting to clear the acrid, sour taste from his mouth, he slowly straightened. Sick, humiliated and resigned to his fate, Lan's last thought was purely altruistic. "Just do me one favor after you kill me. Take care of my horse." Eyes rolling up into his head, he lost consciousness and crumpled to the ground.

Lan was sure he'd died and gone to hell. Fire rippled over his skin until he was sure it must be crisp and black and ready to burst. Despite the rising temperature, no sweat appeared to cool his burning flesh. The inferno raged inside with nothing to bring relief. Unable to remain still, his body twitched and shuddered. Groaning, he instinctively turned his head to the side when his wayward stomach lurched. There was nothing left inside to lose. The dry heaves were painful, wrenching his insides while tearing whimpers of distress from his raw throat.

Lost in this pit of perdition, he was unaware of the movements of the person near him until he was touched. Cool hands brought tiny currents of relief wherever they brushed against him. Unconsciously he sought them out and welcomed the contact, uncaring that he was being carefully undressed. The removal of his boots and clothing was a blessed relief, the animal hide beneath him a boon against his sensitized skin.

A strange tightening began in his limbs. Bone and muscle shifted. As though determined to rearrange themselves, joints creaked and popped. Excruciating pain flared across raw nerve endings. Lan screamed and thrashed but was held in place by strong hands and a stronger body. An itching, tickling sensation flowed over his skin, adding to the maddening nightmare that had overtaken him. It seemed to go on for hours. For endless moments he was forced to endure the agonizing, macabre dance taking place beneath his flesh. It would stop as suddenly as it began, only to renew itself again and again. By the time it was done, his screams had stopped. His vocal cords were inflamed and swollen past the point where uttering more than a raspy moan was impossible.

A cool, wet cloth journeyed over his body and slow tears leaked from the corners of Lan's eyes at the respite it brought from the burning torture. A deep, gentle voice murmured soft and low, the words incomprehensible but calming. The spoken words morphed into a mesmerizing chant that soothed Lan and eased the ache from his trembling frame. By slow degrees the heat and pain lessened until he was able to open his eyes and understand where he was and with who.

He was back at his campsite, beneath the rock ledge, sheltered by the curve of stone in the hillside. The Apache warrior, dressed only in soft buckskin pants, was looming over him. Half delirious, Lan looked down at himself, sure he would see his body turned into a ruined, wreck of torn flesh and broken bone. Everything was normal, not a cut, scratch or drop of blood anywhere. He tried to laugh, but was rewarded by only a rusty croak. Not only had the man not brutalized him, he had apparently been caring for him. Lan's head spun at the implication.

Dark, unsmiling eyes studied him for a time before the man rose from where he knelt and went to the fire. Lan watched him go and return with a cup. Kneeling again at Lan's side, he slid an arm beneath Lan's shoulders and easily lifted him. The cup was brought to his lips. Lan could swear he smelled honey moments before he accepted the warm brew. It filled his dry mouth with sweet warmth and trickled down his tortured throat, spreading a feeling of well being as it went. He could swear he felt it pool in his stomach and ease that protesting organ. Body and mind went totally lax. He was asleep before his shoulders were lowered to the blanket.

The next time Lan woke it was to heat of a different kind. His cock was throbbing, the skin almost painfully tight. In the light of the flickering fire, he could see it rising full and distended from his groin. He started to reach for it only to have his wrist enwrapped by a band of restraining fingers. Beside him, the Apache rose up on his elbow. While he'd slept, the man had stripped and joined him on the soft hide.

Startled, Lan tensed. Blue eyes met black. There was no animosity, censure or encouragement in their mutual gaze. Merely a quiet waiting. Lan broke eye contact and

let his gaze wander down the length of his unexpected bedmate's body. The sight only intensified the ache in his groin. Just as he'd thought, the man was all delineated muscle under sleek, satiny skin. The ready hardness of his cock matched Lan's.

The fingers that held Lan's wrist subtly tightened and released, drawing Lan's attention again to the man's face. There was a question in those dark eyes and slowly Lan nodded, lying back against the supple suede beneath his body. He was beyond questioning what was happening to him in this place. He needed. For now, that's all he wanted to think about. The Apache rose up and the same fingers that had held Lan's wrist, glided with practiced intent over his skin.

"Wait," Lan murmured. "Who are you?"

"Dark."

"Dark?"

"It's complicated. You?"

"Landon. Lan."

Nodding, Dark continued where he left off. Lan's chest was stroked and his nipples teased and tweaked by bold fingertips. His groan intensified when a thick fall of hair tickled his skin moments before wet, warmth and suction surrounded one nipple. Without stopping to think about it, his hands came up, fingers sliding into silky black tresses before clenching them in his fists. His hold didn't prevent Dark from lavishing the same treatment on his other nipple or stop him from moving lower.

Lan's stomach muscles jumped when a rough tongue and pearly teeth teased and nibbled the rim of his belly button. He gasped and released Dark's hair when his cock was taken in a firm grip. Seconds later that same tongue laved the swollen crown that tipped his rock hard shaft. Dark's teeth delicately skated over the well defined rim of Lan's corona. Lan's fingers scrabbled for purchase on the soft hide and he groaned, his thighs spreading, his hips convulsively lifting.

A large hand cupped his balls at the same moment Dark's encompassing lips slid down the length of his cock. Cursing a blue streak, Lan arched into the touch. Dark growled, a sound that sent a buzzing tickle down the length of Lan's shaft and straight

into the heart of his balls. Dark drew his mouth from Lan's cock in a long sucking glide, leaving it wet and practically begging for more attention.

Protesting his desertion, Lan, opened his eyes at the sound of Dark rummaging in a leather pouch. "What are you doing?"

"Finding this," Dark replied, withdrawing his hand from the pouch to reveal a small, opaque bottle made of thick glass. A cork plugged the top to keep its contents inside.

"What's that?"

"Oil. I want it to feel good when I fuck you."

"Whoa, wait a minute. Who's fucking who?"

Without waiting to argue, Dark opened the bottle and poured a bit of the contents into his palm. Setting the bottle aside, he anointed his fingers and resumed his previous position. Slick digits glided over Lan's balls, across his perineum and circled the wrinkled skin of his entrance before sliding deep. With unerring accuracy, Dark found the nerve rich pleasure button deep inside Lan's body.

Lan's back bowed. "Hell yeah," he groaned.

For the first time since they'd met, Dark smiled. He brought his lips close to Lan's ear. "*I am fucking you.*"

"Damn straight you are. Get on with it," Lan readily agreed. "Just... take it easy, huh? Been a long time since I was on the receiving end of things."

Dark nodded and went back to preparing his soon to be lover.

For his part, Lan couldn't find a single thing to complain about. Dark's mouth worked magic on his cock while slick, gentle fingers eased him open with a skill that left him breathless and nearly begging out loud. While he managed to keep from saying the words, his body more than conveyed its urgent willingness and need, a need Dark was more than happy to see to. He withdrew his fingers and urged Lan to roll over.

Knowing what was expected, Lan went without demure and drew his knees up, eagerly presenting himself to be mounted. Dark's gravelly growl of approval made Lan's cock jerk and his hole flutter in anticipation. He felt Dark move into position

between his thighs seconds before the thick, blunt head of his cock nudged against him, seeking entrance. Lan bore down, knowing it would ease Dark's way in and sure enough with a little pressure, the head of Dark's cock breached the tight ring of Lan's sphincter.

Lan groaned and tensed at the bite of pain that accompanied Dark's penetration, but relaxed as it quickly morphed into pleasure. A long, slow and silky glide of flesh against flesh found Dark buried deep inside. Lan panted and groaned. He'd never felt anything so good. He felt filled and stretched and *taken*. His cock was rigid and leaking clear drops of pre-come while his body accepted, craved and demanded more. Impatient, he pushed back, impaling himself and grinding his ass against Dark's pelvis.

Firm hands grasped his hips and the movement began. Long, slow thrusts that became shorter, urgent strokes which ended as pounding jabs that brought climax closer and closer. Both men were groaning, panting, sweating, throwing their all into the headlong rush for satisfaction. Dark reached around, took hold of Lan's cock and gave it a few rough strokes. Nothing more was needed. Stomach muscles clenching and rippling, a guttural groan tore free from Lan's throat. Ineffable pleasure stole his breath away. Shuddering with the force of it, his seed burst forth in ropes of liquid pearl with every blissful stab that pierced his gut. It soaked Dark's fingers and puddled on the blanket below.

He felt the jerk and swell of Dark's cock fighting against the grip of his tightened sphincter. Dark's rolling growl and the last, convulsive thrusts of his hips signaled his release. Tension melted from Lan's body, taking his remaining strength with it. He collapsed and took Dark with him. The two of them lay sprawled in a heap of tangled limbs and sweat soaked skin while laboring lungs fought for air. Lan gave an appreciative moan when Dark lifted his weight from his back and settled at his side.

He turned his head and met Dark's eyes. A lazy satisfied smile curved his lip. "In the morning. Tell me what's going on."

"I will. Sleep."

Lan didn't argue.

Lan woke for the third time in twenty-four hours and this one was by far the most pleasant. Experimentally he shifted, tensing and relaxing various muscles. Other than a distinct ache that hovered around his tailbone, he felt good. He sat up with a smile then grimaced when the blanket beneath him sat up as well. He'd gone to sleep in the wet spot and woke with the soft hide glued to him. A low chuckle sounded out from nearby.

Frowning, Lan turned his head to find Dark walking toward him. He was obviously just returning from caring for the roan. Lan's horse was busily chomping grain. Dark bent and reached into a pot that sat near the fire. He came up with a wet cloth from which he rang the excess water before winging it to Lan.

"Hey!"

"Thought you might want to soak yourself free. And by the way, I took care of your horse."

"I see that." Lan ducked his head at the teasing twinkle in Dark's eyes.

The last words he'd spoken before passing out came to mind. Convinced he was about to die, Lan had asked Dark to take care of his horse.

Using the damp cloth to help loosen things up, Lan peeled the blanket from his side. Dark was dressed again in just his buckskin pants with the addition of moccasins on his feet. He approached with a silent, predator's glide.

He seated himself on the edge of the soft hide. "I didn't kill you."

"I see that too. I'm grateful." Heedless of his nudity, Landon sat crossed legged and waited.

"I did stab you a few times but I got the feeling you liked the weapon I used."

Lips curling in a sardonic smile, Lan raised one brow and gave Dark a look of disdain. "Very funny. You should do an act at the dancehall for the folks in Silent." Dark smiled and Landon felt his breath catch while his heart gave an extra thump. Taking a deep breath, he urged himself to calm. "You said you'd explain."

"I did."

"Start with your name."

Dark spoke a stream of incomprehensible syllables. "It means, He Who Sees in the Darkness, which is why I go by Dark."

"How is it you speak English so well?"

"There was a man, he was educated and a cripple. He wanted to learn the red man's culture. He began with eastern tribes more accepting of the white man and worked his way west. He became known, tolerated and upon closer acquaintance, embraced as a lost brother. I am a shaman. What you whites refer to as a medicine man. From the time I was small I saw things in visions none of my people could see, knew things no other could know. I knew that learning the white man's language and culture would be the only way to protect my people from annihilation or imprisonment and so I taught him. In return, I learned what he had to teach."

"Imprisonment? Are you talking about reservations the government has set up?"

"Reservations, prisons. They take our freedom, our pride, treat us like mindless, unloved children who can't see them stealing all the best of what we are."

"How will you change that?"

"We will change ourselves." Again Dark uttered a string of words for which Lan could attach no meaning. "You found the red stones." Dark's words were a statement, not a question.

"Yes. I was cut by one and bled but it left no wound behind."

"When you arrived in this place, I had just invoked a rite given to me in visions. The red stone bestows a gift for those who know how to unleash its power."

"What gift?"

"The gift of the moon wolf."

"Moon wolf."

"Tonight, the first full moon since the stone drew your blood will ride high in the night sky. You felt the power of it move through you last night, but the time was not yet right. Tonight you will change."

Lan felt his throat grow tight and his stomach jump. "Change?"

"You will become the wolf. Like this."

Before his eyes, Dark was surrounded by a nimbus of what appeared to be heat shimmer. His body blurred within that encompassing sphere and emerged changed. Dark had become a wolf, fierce, magnificent, untamed and most especially huge. A wild surge of pure panic hit Landon. He scrambled away, reaching for his gun. Before he could touch it, the wolf was on him. On hands and knees, Lan was pushed down, his body straddled by the wolf. Hot breath hit his shoulder and sharp canine teeth clamped down on the side of his neck. A warning growl rumbled against his skin and Lan froze.

Shocked into immobility, he remained still, even as the wolf crouched and settled its body over him. Coarse fur brushed against him from neck to ass. Picturing himself being fucked by a wolf, he had just enough time for renewed panic to take root when skin replaced the fur. The teeth against his neck eased their hold and were replaced by a wet tongue that soothed over the indentation left by the wolf's hold.

Dark was pushing against him, his erection more than obvious, even contained as it was by his soft, buckskin pants. Torn between arousal, relief and pure rage, Landon cursed and bucked beneath him. "Get the fuck off me, you red-skinned bastard!"

"I did not mean to frighten you," Dark soothed, holding on tight while licking and sucking a path from Lan's neck to his shoulder.

"The hell you didn't," Lan gasped, chills running down his spine. There was no way he'd admit to being scared. Fear was no longer the problem anyway. Desire was. He was already hard and aching.

"I smell your need. Do you wish to fight or fuck?"

At Dark's word's Lan stopped struggling. It only took a moment to come up with the answer. "Damn you." There was no way to deny it. He wanted it, wanted Dark's cock buried balls deep within him.

"Not the invitation I was hoping for, but I accept."

Dark lifted himself from Lan's back and pulled him to his knees. There was a bit a fumbling as he got his pants open then nothing but groans of satisfaction from both

men when he buried himself to the hilt. There was no slow build up this time just wild, fucking. Both of them had been aroused to a near frenzied pitch, Lan by the passing fright that pumped his veins full of adrenaline and Dark from the albeit short chase and subduing of his lover.

The resultant rush of passion hit fever pitch within a few short minutes of Dark pumping his cock hard and fast within Landon's tight, hot channel. With a guttural yell, Lan shot so hard his head whirled. Teeth once again pinched the skin of his shoulder. Dark bit down, slammed deep one last time and emptied his seed deep inside the vise of Lan's body.

Dropping down and to his side, Dark took Landon with him. The two of them lay spooned, panting out rough, gasping breaths.

"Is this what being a wolf does for you?" Lan asked when he'd recovered enough to speak.

Dark uttered a low laugh. "Thrill of the chase," he muttered.

"Some chase. For the record, I wasn't running. If I'd 'a got hold of my gun, I'd have shot your ass."

"I liked this result better."

"So those red crystals did this to you?"

"Yes. And for those of my people who choose, I will invoke the power of the stones. Our tribe will take shelter in the great canyons to the north. With the wolves to guard us and warn of danger, no white man will be able to take us unaware. To force us to give up our homes. We have fought and lost. Of the whites there are too many and too much greed to allow us those places where we have dwelt in peace. It's a good plan, yes? It came to me in visions from our spirit fathers."

"It's a hell of a plan and I wish you all the luck in the world with it, but why am I involved?" Landon complained with nearly wild-eyed panic. "I don't want to be a wolf. How the hell did you do that? Didn't it hurt? Last night it felt like the bones were gonna break right through my skin. You didn't let out a whimper. Last night I couldn't stop

screaming like a little girl. Did I get a shitty spell? Is this what's gonna happen again tonight?"

"Calm yourself," Dark soothed, uttering a word Lan had yet to hear.

"What's that mean?"

"It is an... endearment."

"Endearment," Lan snapped.

He moved away from Dark and sat up. The damp cloth he had used earlier had been crushed under his body. He reached out and scooped it up, plucking at the raw edges while pondering the reasons Dark would employ endearments. He wasn't given long to wonder. Dark too sat up and they found themselves in their previous position, knee to knee and face to face.

"This you will like even less than becoming a wolf. I saw in a vision a white man who is was granted the gift of the wolf. His wolf would call to mine. This same man was to become my mate."

Stunned, Lan was unable to voice the questions that boiled inside his roiling mind. He stared wide-eyed at Dark who had the grace to exhibit a certain discomfort.

"I cannot tell you why. Only what I saw. I can answer your other questions. Tonight there will be pain but not as much. The moon is full, the change will take you swiftly. The first transformation is the worst and you were not prepared, afterward you will be able to change at will as I did. Another reason you were so ill and experienced so much pain is because of the silver. You kept yourself in close proximity to it for the entire day. The moon wolf cannot tolerate silver."

"What!" Lan was shaken from his shock by the thought of losing all that easy money.

Dark shrugged. "Did you notice the heat of it against your skin?"

"Yes."

"It burns us. The closer to the full moon it becomes, the more severe the effects." He shook his head. "You're strong and stubborn. Such exposure would have felled a lesser man long before you were finally undone by it."

"Son of a bitch! Did I think my fucking life was taking an upward swing? Instead I've hit a downward spiral and things just keep getting worse." He glanced at Dark.

"No offence, considering the mate thing and all."

"None taken."

"You know, this won't pan out. Your people won't accept a white man in their midst."

"They accepted the man who taught me white man's ways. He was not a strong man physically but he was a true warrior. He was honest and brave and dealt fairly with all who did the same with him. My people accept others on their own merits. Your coming was foretold to me and I have prepared them for your arrival. They will reserve judgment until you are known among them as the good man you are. My people put great store in portents and visions."

"Don't know what makes you so sure I'm a good man, but be that as it may, I don't know as I believe in these visions."

Dark nodded. "What you thought was your dying wish was for the benefit of another. This is the action of a good man. As for my visions, all things, even belief come in their own time. For now we must prepare for tonight."

"Prepare how?"

"There are certain rituals and chants I need to perform. These will make the coming ordeal easier for you. I must also take your horse elsewhere."

"Why? And where the hell do you plan on taking him?"

"At the moon wolf's first change he is driven by two things, a taste for prey and fresh blood and the need for release."

Lan's brows rose but he held his peace.

"Do you wish to make your horse your first kill?"

"Hell, no."

"Then he must be gone, taken away from this place. I will not be able to keep you from him should he remain here. You did ask me to take care of him."

"Stop reminding me." Lan scowled as he watched Dark struggle with a smile. "So where will you take him?"

"There is a lake half a day's ride from here. Several of my brothers await me there. I will give your horse into their keeping and return here by nightfall and the rising of the moon."

"How are you going to get back here in time with no horse?" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Landon realized the stupidity of his words. Dark gave him a significant look. "Yeah, I know. You'll turn into a wolf and run back."

"You learn quickly."

"My momma always said I was smart."

"You must tell me of her someday. For now, dress, eat, rest. You will need your strength for what comes this night."

Lan nodded but made no move to rise. His eyes met Dark's. "This is crazy."

"And yet it is all too real. You will love being the wolf. You see, smell and hear everything. You will run like the wind and be stronger than normal men. Even now your body changes." Dark drew the knife from the sheath at his waist. He sliced the flesh on the underside of his forearm. Blood ran from the cut, slowed, then stopped. Motioning for Landon to hand him the damp cloth that rested on his knee, he accepted it when Lan handed it over. He casually wiped the blood from his arm. There was no cut beneath. "You will instantly heal all hurts but those caused by silver and you will live long."

"How long?"

"I cannot say for sure but years beyond that which you normally would have had."

Lan dropped his gaze to the soft suede of the blanket beneath him. He was afraid, he knew that now, but wouldn't admit it, wouldn't speak the words that would make him appear weak in the face of Dark's strength. "It still doesn't change the fact that this is crazy."

"You are not alone."

Landon quickly looked up. There was understanding in the black eyes that gazed at him. Grateful, he gave a curt nod and rose to his feet. Dark did the same and went about his preparations while Lan dressed.

Chapter Three

With trepidation overshadowing his spirits, Lan watched the sun set. Against all reason he'd let what surely amounted to a near stranger ride away on his horse. Much as that thought went through his head, he really couldn't put much conviction behind it. Dark wasn't a stranger. Not since last night. It wasn't just the sex either, he mused. He'd had plenty of one time encounters and never felt a significant emotional attachment to his erstwhile partner.

It was something else with this man. Some connection that sang between them. Lan could feel it in his blood, bone deep and on a visceral level that defied all logic. Was it love? He snorted in self derision. Not at this point in time. He found himself grinning at the thought of mooning over Dark. Serious as he was, the man would laugh himself silly. No, this was something of an "other" nature. Something that was inexplicable. Lan shrugged and accepted it. What else could he do?

What the hell else could he do but accept all of it? Always a reasonable and thoroughly grounded man, it seemed ironic that he'd been overtaken by spells and visions and glittery red-orange stones that turned men into wolves with no tolerance for silver. Landon let his gaze wander across the clearing to the bag of silver under the rock ledge. Some of the contents gleamed sullenly in the waning light.

Unable to resist testing what Dark had revealed about that tempting ore, Lan had gone to the canvas bag where it lay just outside the entrance to the small cavern behind the rock walls. He'd untied the leather thong that held the bag closed, reached inside and took a nugget between index finger and thumb. He'd been rewarded with a sizzling pain and withdrew his hand, nursing the almost blistered burns on the pads of his digits.

Dropping his hold on the bag he'd backed away and watched in fascination as it fell forward and spilled some of its contents free. The silver had taken on a menacing quality. It was like watching a rattler approach. Lan breathed a sigh of relief when the last nugget stopped its short rolling bid for freedom. He retreated from that curve of rock in the hillside and examined his finger and thumb, watching the burn slowly heal. It was amazing and downright spooky.

With nothing else to do, Lan took up residence under the stunted pines. He thought about the chants Dark had performed and the warm, honeyed brew he'd insisted Lan drink. It would help with the coming transition from man to wolf, he'd said. Though not a religious man, Landon prayed he was right. He never again wanted to experience the agonizing pain he'd gone through the night before.

With nothing to occupy him but his thoughts, it wasn't long before Landon dozed off. He slept hard and woke to the sound of hoof beats, the jingle of tack, the creak of leather and the murmur of men's voices. He scrambled to his feet just in time to watch half a dozen men on horseback file into the clearing. At their head was Marshal Coburn, brother to the gambler Lan had shot. Guns came out and were pointed in his direction.

"Well, would you look here, boys? I told you persistence pays."

Lan stood his ground and silently cursed his luck. He'd been so right earlier when he'd told Dark that his luck had taken a downward spiral. He glanced at the darkening sky. The sun had set and the moon was on the rise. Its light bathed the clearing making it almost as bright as day. At the sight of that silvery orb he felt something stir inside. *Dark, where the fuck are you?*

"Lose the gun belt."

Landon did as he was told. Around him men were dismounting. The marshal kept his gun trained on Lan while his men went about preparing a camp. Two of them held the horses while two others set a picket line. Another found the remains of Lan's fire and rebuilt it. Before long they had a fire blazing.

All the while the marshal stared at him and Lan could see his death written in the man's eyes. When the camp was set, Marshal Coburn motioned Lan to the middle of the clearing. He holstered his gun. "The boys lost you for a time. Good thing I caught up with them and set them in the right direction. So you're the piece of scum drifter that murdered my brother."

"No. I'm the man who objected to being cheated and tried walking away. Your brother drew his gun first. He paid the consequences." Lan waited expectantly, tensing for the blow. He was not disappointed.

A rock hard fist connected with his jaw. Lan swayed but remained on his feet. At first. Then the others joined in. By the time they were done, Lan was beaten and bloody. He'd been punched repeatedly, then kicked when he went down. Through it all he refused to fight back, knowing it wouldn't make a difference. They'd shoot him like a dog. He didn't want to take that chance.

Dark was coming. Lan could almost feel the beat of his paws against the dirt. The moon was full and riding high in the sky. Even as the injuries were inflicted, Lan could feel the healing take place. Not that he wasn't in pain. He suffered a broken nose, cracked ribs, bruised kidneys and more. If he could just hang on he'd get a chance for payback. He couldn't do anything that would tempt them in to killing him too soon.

"Where's your horse, you son of a whore?" the Marshal growled, practically spitting the words.

"Lost," Lan gasped through bloodied lips.

Marshal Coburn administered a final kick. "Danby, tie his hands behind his back. Smith, bring that rope tied to my saddle. These trees aren't tall enough to set you on a horse, but by God, we can still hang you." Lan was hauled to his feet, his hands roughly tied behind his back. "You're gonna die six inches from the ground with your toes stretching to reach the dirt."

Landon was marched to the trees, a noose dropped over his head and tightened around his neck. He breathed in deep, calm and steady breaths. Any second now. Past

the sour smell of these unwashed men who surrounded him, he could smell the mesmerizing musk of wolf. His cock thickened.

"When I give you the signal, you boys haul him up and tie the rope off. We'll watch him dance until the devil claims his soul," the Marshal proclaimed with a sanctimonious air.

Heat built behind Lan's eyes, he remembered the glow of Dark's eyes and threw his head back, laughing like a loon. The men gathered around him stared in shock. Before they could move, an eerie howl rang out in the sudden silence. Lan flexed his arms and the rope around his wrist snapped and fell away. He reached up and pulled the noose from around his throat.

"Wrong place, wrong time." His voice grew steadily harsher with each word.

Before the first gun left its holster a whirlwind of enraged fur and snapping teeth descended from the surrounding hills. Dark attacked without mercy, driving the men from his mate. Lan hit the ground with a thud, a spasm racking his entire body. As had happened the night before, his skin rippled and his bones shifted, but this time it happened *fast*. There was no struggle, little pain and no holding it back. Fur sprouted from every pore as his body rearranged itself.

Shuddering, he panted and rose on four paws. Shaking himself like a dog coming in from the rain, his humanity took a backseat and watched the beast have its way. Blood and screams drew his attention. The men had scattered. Three had found their horses and managed to mount the riled animals, spurring away into the night. Dark had taken one down and was working on his second. Marshal Coburn had run into the hollow curve of rock and fallen over the discarded silver.

Lan saw him recover from his sprawl in the dirt, draw his revolver and take aim at Dark. With a fierce snarl and bared teeth he attacked. The gun was turned in his direction. Lan twisted at the same moment it discharged. A flare of heat hit his shoulder, the bullet digging a furrow beneath hair and skin. It slowed him not one whit. He hit the hated man with claws and teeth, ripping and tearing. Shrieks rent the night.

Blood and gore spattered and flew. Lan kept at him until all resistance faded and the man's bodily fluid released, signaling his death.

He stood over the bloody pile of unrecognizable gore. The blood and flesh called and he dipped his muzzle to take another taste. A rolling growl stopped him. Whipping around, Lan faced Dark. He bared his teeth and growled a warning.

Before his eyes Dark transformed. "Not that," Dark said, speaking the words quietly. "Do not foul yourself with that unclean creature, Lan. Come with me. Hunt with me. We will take the prey wolves are meant take."

In the blink of an eye, Dark was again a wolf. He turned, nose pointing out into the darkness. Looking back at Lan, he waited. Lan wrestled his inner beast into submission and followed Dark out into the night. The two of them ran. Under the shining moon they raced along for miles. Landon reveled in the stretch and strength of his muscles and effortless way he and Dark nearly flew across the arid plain.

Soon he smelled water and trees. There were also men and horses. Dark led him away from the men and into the trees and low hills. The scent of rabbit and deer tickled Lan's nostrils. A deer broke cover and they gave chase. Dark managed to fasten his teeth into the deer's flank. The deer went down. Instinctively Lan did what any wolf would do. He went for the throat, giving his prey the most quick and humane death possible. Side by side the wolves feasted.

His hunger satisfied, Lan made for the scent of water and drank from a shallow bank at the edge of the lake. He transformed and washed the blood from his body and watched without surprise when Dark appeared at his side and did the same. Suddenly exhausted, Landon stumbled away from the water and sank into the cool grass. Above, the moon glowed, its serene face denying the battle and death that had taken place below.

Without warning, Lan began to shiver. Reaction set in and his teeth chattered, his body shuddering. A wall of heat plastered itself against his back and strong arms pulled him close. Incomprehensible murmurs, soothing and deep, filled his ears and he eventually quieted and relaxed.

"You're going to have to teach me Apache," he warned Dark softly.

"I will."

Sure hands skated over his body and found his hardening cock. Behind him he felt Dark's cock rise full and hard to nestle in the crevice of his ass. Together they rocked.

Lan groaned and gasped out a question. "Where did my clothes go?"

"Wherever you sent them."

"What do you mean?"

"It's all part of the magic. You pick a fine time to ask such questions," Dark growled, adding the endearment Lan heard before.

"Tell me later."

"Yes."

Dark withdrew, giving himself enough room to urge Lan to roll and face him. Lying close, Dark's hand encircled their rigid cocks. Lan's hand joined Dark's and they pumped and stroked the thick lengths. Leaking pre-come made the doing easier. The cool night was driven back by heat rising from sweat-slick flesh. Lan breathed in the untamed scent. The musk of two aroused males accented by crushed grass, clean water and cradling earth. Hovering on the edge of impending climax, Lan let his eyes meet Dark's. Curiosity and desire got the better of him. He leaned in and took a kiss. Dark's free hand curled around the nape of his neck holding him in place.

Their lips parted and tongues swept in, petting, exploring, teasing and tempting. Two heartfelt groans were smothered within the confines of their mouths. Lan's climax exploded over him in a wild rush of sensation that bowed his spine and tore a guttural yell from deep in his chest. Dark echoed his move, their seed erupting between them to spatter over entwined fingers and rigid stomach muscles. But it didn't end there.

Though he'd just come, Landon was still rock hard, still needing, still wanting more. His hands moved over Dark, learning and exploring the hard planes, muscled hills and valleys. Ducking his head, he tasted Dark's skin, painting a wet path with his tongue that ended on the peak of one hard, tanned nipple. Dark's groan, filled with

pleasure, electrified Lan. Holding it between his teeth, he rapidly swept his tongue over and over the swollen bud before sucking it.

Drawn to the heat that seemed to radiate from Dark's groin, his fingers found Dark still every bit as hard as he himself was. Using the combined fluid from their previous release, he pumped Dark's cock. Lifting his head he stared down. The light of the moon made it easy to see the slip and slide of Dark's foreskin and the way his red swollen cap appeared on each downward stroke.

Lan transferred his gaze to Dark's face. It was a study in passion. Swollen lips parted, eyes dark and dazed with desire. "I want to fuck you this time. Want to be inside you."

Dark nodded and laid his head back, wordlessly giving himself into Lan's care. Excitement tore through Lan. His hand left Dark's cock and gathered more of their come from Dark's belly. Sliding spunk-covered fingers behind Dark's balls, Lan found the entrance he sought. Patiently, one by one, he worked his fingers in until Dark was gasping and pushing with thinly disguised impatience against three tightly fluted digits.

Feeling near ready to burst, Lan withdrew his fingers, moved between Dark's thighs and urged them up and over his forearms. Pushed back and lifting, he raised Dark's hips and centered himself. With steady force against the tiny opening, he pushed forward. Dark's sphincter surrendered to Lan's gentle assault and blossomed opened, accepting his invasion. The heat and pressure were incredible. Lan felt his cock enveloped in a tight sleeve of shockingly warm silk. Resisting the urge to slam himself forward, he kept a tight rein and eased deep by slow, tortuous degrees.

Dark had stilled with the first penetration but now he was moving, pushing, grinding himself against Lan's body. Landon took the hint and began with long, gliding thrusts, in and out, a steady rhythm he felt could last forever. Until the urgency of impending climax began to rise.

"More." Dark gasped.

His harsh demand let Landon know they were riding the same high, drawing closer to the ultimate culmination of the act. His hips moved faster, slammed harder, pushed deeper until they were both grunting and panting with the effort. There was no room left for thought or words. They'd gone beyond civil and into pure primal mode. Nothing mattered but the aromatic, testosterone-laden sweat that coated their skins, the uninhibited sounds of passion and the fire in their groins that burned hotter and hotter until it burst free in ribbons of hot seed that spattered deep within Dark's body and coated both their bellies and chests.

Pleasure was a sharp knife that cut deep. It left no wound, only slash after slash of blissful ache. Lan welcomed it, embraced it, consumed and was consumed by it until all the tension in his body dissolved and he melted against his lover. He lay there for a few seconds while a feeling of happiness and wellbeing spread throughout his body. A grin curved his lips and he gave a quiet chuckle. It was echoed by Dark and Lan rose up enough to see the fever-bright joy that lit his dark eyes.

Irresistibly drawn by that look, he touched his lips to Dark's and shared a long and languid kiss. It was soft and warm and wet and oh so sweet. Shaken by the depth of feeling that hollowed a space around his heart, Lan slowly withdrew and collapsed to his back. That welling emotion was unexpected but not, he mused, unwelcome. It would certainly give him something to think about in the coming days.

He shivered but this time it was brought on by pleasure as the damp grass cooled his overheated skin. "Damn. I could sleep for a week," he muttered through pants as he recovered his breath.

"Will you settle for a few hours? We must return to the campsite."

Given that unpleasant reminder, Lan sighed. "Yeah. I'll take a few hours."

Beside him he felt Dark shift. Lan followed suit and the two of them rose, found a sheltering thicket within the wood and slept.

Lan took a final look around the clearing. He mounted his horse without regret, anxious to leave this place. Morning had sent him and Dark back to the site of his near demise. They were met by three Apache warriors, one of whom had the roan in tow. Dark had quietly made the introductions and they set to work, cleaning up the mess. The men who'd dogged Lan's heels for so long and wrongly tried to hang him, were buried in a shallow grave covered by rocks.

Lan and the others waited patiently while Dark disappeared into the cavern. He returned with a leather pouch brimming with the red-orange crystals he'd harvested. "For my people," he explained to Lan before slipping through the fissure in the stone.

Lan watched Dark easily mount his horse. "Are you ready?" Dark asked, throwing out a question that could be interpreted in many ways.

"Guess I'd better be." It wasn't going to be the life he'd envisioned, but it had its compensations. A slow grin spread over Landon's face as he locked gazes with the best one. "Let's go."

With a barely perceptible smile of satisfaction, Dark urged his horse forward. Lan eagerly followed.

Kate Steele

What is it they say? Watch out for the quiet ones? Kate Steele has found that writing is the ideal way to release all those wild inner urges and she's just getting started. "I'm aging in reverse. With the help of lots of plastic surgery and vitamins I fully expect to have my own male harem by the time I hit 90." For now she's settling for the quiet life in rural Indiana with family and pets. Guilty pleasure: Singing in the car. "With the volume loud enough I sound just like Celine Dion!" You can contact Kate and sing-a-long at katesteele27@yahoo.com or visit her website at www.katesteele.com.