

A photograph of a very muscular man, shirtless, wearing a straw hat and a black choker. He is holding the brim of the hat with his left hand. He has a tattoo on his right upper arm. The background is a blurred outdoor scene with a blue sky and yellowish ground.

JUDAS STEER

Kiernan Kelly

JUDAS STEER

KIERNAN KELLY

mlrpress

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright 2009 Kiernan Kelly

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

Published by
MLR Press, LLC
3052 Gaines Waterport Rd.
Albion, NY 14411

Visit ManLoveRomance Press, LLC on the Internet:
www.mlrpress.com

Cover Art by Deana C. Jamroz
Editing by Kris Jacen
Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN# 978-1-60820-058-0

First Edition 2009

CHAPTER ONE

Thousands of hard hooves pounded across the prairie, churning the dusty soil into great, swirling, dun-colored clouds. Cattle, wagons, and cowboys alike were coated the same dull gold as the Earth. Nothing was spared from the bite of the prairie; not the horses, the water, or the food. Dust clogged the nose, parched the throat, and stung the eyes.

Wild-eyed steer jostled and bumped one another, their lowing drowned out only by the deafening sound of their hooves striking the ground as they raced across the open prairie. Granger got the feeling the herd was driven by fear, whipped into a panic by something more than the rolling thunder of the approaching storm. Flashes of frequent lightning gave brief, blue-white glimpses of the herd, and the cowboys who struggled to rein them in.

There wasn't anything that could stand in the face of a stampede, not God nor horse nor man. All the boys could do was to try to keep up, to get alongside the lead bulls and turn them, urge them into circling back. Milling the herd wasn't always possible, though, especially at night when the black was so thick a man might as well be wearing a kerchief over his eyes. Those times all you could do was hope the damned stupid animals didn't run off the edge of a cliff, or into a river to drown. The animals in the lead would eventually tucker themselves out, slowing and finally stopping, the rest of the herd following suit. By the time that happened, the drive might be twenty miles off course, losing a day or more.

Granger dug his heels into his horse's sides, giving a whoop. The horse reared, nearly tossing him off into the rioting cattle, then broke into a full-out gallop. Racing along the outside edge of the herd, using the flashes of lightning to guide him, his kerchief keeping the worst of the dust from choking him, Granger headed for the lead animals of the stampede. There was a big brindle bull out front. He aimed for the beast,

drawing up next to him. His horse crowded the bastard, forcing him to turn.

Just as Granger hoped, the rest of the herd followed the lead bull, slowly turning in a wide arc back toward where they'd been before stampeding.

The herd finally stopped, milling around a while before dropping their heads to graze. All told, they'd only gone about a mile off course. Granger spent the next few hours rounding up strays and helping turn the herd, but as he did, he wondered what in the blue blazes had panicked them in the first place.

The stampede was only the latest knot in a long string of mishaps. The drive had been plagued by trouble since it took its first step along the trail. Cursed, some were saying, but the trail boss was quick to still those wagging tongues. It wouldn't do to have the men cowering in their bedrolls, scaring themselves silly with ghost stories.

Still and all, Granger agreed they'd suffered an odd streak of bad luck from the very beginning. Animals took sick, sudden-like. It wasn't Texas cattle fever, Granger knew that right off. These beasts dropped in their tracks as if felled by an unseen bullet. They'd lost several head already. Carcasses were left where they fell, to be picked clean by crows and wolves. Cook was too worried the meat would be tainted to butcher them. Then the rear wheel of the chuck wagon broke free from its axle. The outfit lost an entire day and a goodly amount of their supplies in the accident when the wagon tipped to a precarious angle. Pots and pans went flying, a barrel of pickles was smashed, and several bags of flour ripped open, fine powder mixing with the wind-blown dust.

Granger was only grateful they hadn't lost the coffee or the whiskey. A man could live off the land if'n he had to, catching prairie dogs or hares, and picking wild onions for seasoning, but the thought of a thousand or so miles of trail ahead without a drop of coffee or swig of whiskey to warm him at night was too awful to contemplate. If that happened, the outfit would lose men like water through a sieve, disappearing into the darkness in search of better conditions, Granger among them.

He'd gotten the job like everyone else. A bulletin was posted up in the saloon in the tiny town of Gold Creek, where he'd holed up for the winter. The sign offered two months riding the range, driving a herd to slaughter in Oregon Territory. The pay was good enough, but more than that, it offered the freedom Granger sorely missed. After spending the long winter months cramped up in a tiny boarding house room, he was more than ready to move on, to try his luck somewhere else.

A man like him tended to keep on the move, and a cattle drive was a good way to put distance between himself and wherever – or *whoever* -- he wanted to leave behind.

"Name?"

"Granger Blue."

"You got an address, Granger Blue?"

"I've been staying at Molly's Boarding House, here in town. My family's from Virginia."

"You got experience?" The foreman asked, giving Granger the once over. Granger wasn't worried – he knew he'd pass muster. He stood over six feet tall and broad through the chest. His arms were sinewy, his legs long. He looked the part of the cowboy, too, dressed in worn denims and a flannel shirt that had seen better days.

"Yes, sir. Rode with Mac Farrell's outfit three years ago, and for Wilson the year after that," Granger answered.

"And last year?"

"Been panning for gold out in California."

"That so? Any luck?" The boss asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Would I be here if'n I had luck?" Granger countered.

The boss smirked. "You own a horse? A firearm?"

Granger answered "yes" to both questions, showing the man his Colt. It was a pretty piece, bought brand-new a year ago, his one indulgence.

The boss nodded and made a mark on his list. "The Lazy J pays twenty-five dollars a month, plus fifty cents for every head you pick up and brand on the trail. Slow elk are to be rounded up and branded, not eaten."

Wasn't the best deal Granger ever got, but it was better than nothing. It didn't matter much about the slow elk, those few stray cows left behind by – or purposely culled from -- rival outfits' herds, or from ranches passed along the way. He'd still be well-fed for the two months it would take to drive the cattle west from where they'd been wintered in Nebraska Territory to the markets in Oregon. Besides, putting distance between himself and Gold Creek was his main reason for signing up anyway. The pay was only a bonus.

Something was amiss about this drive, though.

His horse chose that moment to neigh and sidestep nervously. Even Hackneyed could smell something rotten in the air, and Lord knew he wasn't the brightest critter to ever prance on four legs.

Smitty, now he'd been a great horse, smart as a whip, fast, and as pretty as a sunset. Good-natured, too, not like Hackneyed, who'd just as soon chew on Granger's fingers as his oats. Smitty had up and broke a leg in Wyoming just before the winter snows. For Granger, it was like losing a brother. He still grieved.

But a cowboy needed a horse, and grieving or not, Granger had to buy another. He'd bought Hackneyed off a farmer a few weeks before he got to Gold Creek. Cost him twenty dollars cash money, and sometimes Granger thought the price was about nineteen dollars and fifty cents too much.

Hackneyed, for all that he was a little slow and a whole lot stupid, sensed something was wrong. He was off his feed, for one thing. Nervous as a one-legged cat in a dog pen, too, sidestepping, tossing his head, and spooking at the slightest sound. Granger found himself looking forward to the time he could switch mounts, something he'd never felt with Smitty. A man needed a couple three mounts during a day's ride, lest the beast get lathered and drop, but this was the first time on a drive that Granger looked forward to trading his own horse for another.

The streak of bad luck had the feel of a human hand. Granger had ridden the trail with too many others just like the Johnson outfit not to know the difference between accidents

and purposely planned trouble. He'd seen the wheel that came off the chuck wagon, had examined the axle himself. There were scrapes on the metal fittings; deep grooves that Granger was willing to bet hadn't come from the rough prairie.

He wondered if one of the drovers tampered with it, but kept his suspicions to himself, knowing that the surest way to force a drive to grind to a halt was dissension among the men, and that one poorly chosen word or accusation could lead to a well-aimed bullet. He held his tongue, but he watched everybody and everything, silently noting anything that seemed odd or out of place.

A young cowboy, one with big eyes the color of cornflowers that Granger had noticed before, was riding flank on the other side of the herd. He wondered what the boss had been thinking – or drinking – to have hired such a greenhorn for a drive. The boy's seat was piss poor; he was bouncing hard in his saddle, and Granger winced to think of what the boy's backside must look like after a solid week of that sort of punishment. It was probably redder than a whore's lip paint, and blistered to boot.

Yes, sir, there was something odd about that boy. His wide eyes looked too innocent, and he barely seemed to know which end of the horse bit and which shit. Granger doubted he was the cause of the outfit's worries – he didn't seem competent enough to pull it off – but whoever he was, he sure as hell wasn't a cowboy. The boy needed watching and figuring out, and Granger assigned himself the job.

The sun was already breaking over the horizon, and they'd have a full day's ride ahead despite the stampede. Later, when the sun was low, they'd pull up for the night again. Cook would dole out the victuals, and afterward somebody was sure to start passing the bottle around. Once the other men had a few under their belts, when they were drowsy and paying less attention, he'd try to befriend the boy, see what he could find out.

Granger filed his thoughts away for the moment, clucking softly to Hackneyed to get moving. Right now, he needed to see to the cattle, get the varmints moving in the right direction and keep 'em there.

But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to stop his mind and his eyes from drifting to the young cowboy.



The prairie was lit by a dozen small, winking campfires, smoke drifting upward to blend seamlessly with the night sky. Small, quickly pitched tents dotted the land, most men sharing so as not to have to pitch their own every night. The herd settled in, soft lowing and the occasional bovine fart the only reminder that they were there, covered by the blanket of darkness, and watched over by the boys who'd drawn the short stick that day.

Cook clanged the dinner bell good and loud, and the cowboys jumped, moving faster than they had all day, jostling for position as they lined up in front of his big cast iron pot with their tin dinner plates held at the ready.

Cook was a short man, and round, the years were carved deeply into the sun-browned, leathery skin of his face. Years of practice showed in his movements as he ladled out a helping of hearty stew onto each plate. The smell drifted over, making Granger's stomach rumble, angrily reminding him it had been a good long while since lunch.

He bided his time, though, waiting until he saw the young cowboy get in the chow line, and then stepped in behind him.

"Sure smells good," he said. The boy turned, and Granger nodded and smiled at him. "Don't think we met afore the drive stepped off. My name's Granger Blue."

"How do."

Those cornflower blue eyes were guarded, wary. There were secrets there, Granger decided. What sort of secrets could a kid like this have? He didn't look older than eighteen or nineteen.

Sure, there were plenty of men who were married to plump young girls with babies on each hip by that age, but those men were farmers, or working on a ranch or at a trade to support their family, not out riding roughshod over a herd in the middle of nowhere. Cattle drives were notoriously dangerous business. In Granger's opinion, a man with a family had no business going up against unfriendly Indians, stampedes, rattlesnakes,

flash floods, or any of a dozen other dangers Granger could think of off the top of his head.

Many boys, orphaned or looking for better pastures, joined up with outfits when they were barely out of short pants, but there was something about this one that seemed out of sorts, not the least of which was his riding ability.

Granger stole a look at the boy's hands. They were soft, pink from the sun. Fresh blisters dotted the pads of his fingers and his palms where calluses should be, where they *would* be by the time they reached Oregon.

Granger grunted softly to himself, satisfied that his first impression of the kid had been correct – he was no cowboy. He was no orphan, no street rat trying to survive. His clothing was new, and of good quality. The kid's boots were barely scuffed, and the heel wasn't worn down at all. *City boy, for sure*, Granger thought, *used to fancy carriages and gas streetlamps, not hard leather saddles and open campfires. What the hell is a city boy doing out here in the middle of God's hairy ass?*

The more Granger studied him, the more questions popped up, and the more he wanted answers.

"You got a name?" Granger asked the kid, as the chow line inched forward.

"Billy Bower." Again, only a two word answer. Not the friendliest cuss in the bunch, which only reinforced Granger's opinion that the kid was hiding something. Or hiding from *somebody*, he amended. Wouldn't be the first time a man tried to hide from the law among the hides and hooves of a herd.

"Good to meet you, Billy Bower," Granger said. His cheek hitched in a friendly, half-smile, but Billy turned away before he could see it. *Yes sir, Billy Bower, you're hiding something alright, and I aim to find out what, if'n it's the last thing I do.*

CHAPTER TWO

Sinopa lay flat on his belly, sprawled across the hard gray stone of the outcrop. Four thousand head of cattle were far below him at the foot of the canyon, all prime beef, double-wintered and ready for market.

His sleek black hair was gathered into a long, braided tail, clipped with a simple leather thong and entwined with bits of bone and feathers which, along with his dark eyes and bronze skin, were clear indications of his Blackfoot heritage. He'd been with the Red Earth Gang for a year, and while he trusted none of them entirely, he stayed with them as a means to an end.

Bartholomew Johnson lay next to Sinopa, his pale blue eyes focused on the herd below. He was the leader of the Red Earth Gang, and the only man in the outfit for whom Sinopa felt any respect. Bart took what he wanted when he wanted it, and left no one alive to tell the tale. Until now, that is, and Sinopa grew weary of Bart's sudden reluctance to spill blood. Starting stampedes and sabotaging wagon wheels made Sinopa feel as if they were small children causing mischief. He took it as a personal affront to his manhood that no blood had been shed in several moons and none at all since they'd begun following the drive.

He heard Bart swear softly. His plan to stampede the herd had failed. They'd only run for a mile or so before the wranglers were able to turn them. Below on the dusty plain, cowboys were already rounding up the few strays that managed to separate from the herd. Bart was angry -- Sinopa could read his emotions on his face and in his movements as easily as if Bart had given voice to them.

The injured bull started the stampede, just as Bart hoped, and they'd watched the rampaging cattle from their perch high up on the canyon wall. The drovers managed to catch up and turn the beast, circling the herd back away from the drop-off. The stampede was over almost as soon as it began. The herd

only drifted about a mile, hardly enough to inconvenience the cowboys.

Bart had been convinced the stampede was a perfect plan, and positive it would work, although Sinopa had voiced his doubts. He couldn't understand the white man's wish to destroy the valuable cattle, when it would have been much simpler to pick off the cowboys and take control of the herd themselves. Although the cattle were branded, Sinopa knew there were many traders who didn't care if the men selling the beef were the same ones who owned the brand.

His eyes narrowed, watching the brindle graze. The animal was limping, bleeding out slowly from the arrow Sinopa had sunk into his flank. He would die eventually, either from blood loss or festering of the wound, and the arrowhead stuck in his hindquarters would be discovered. If it was, there was only one man on the drive who might recognize Sinopa's workmanship. He was the one man Sinopa most wanted to kill, regardless of Bart's orders, the one who called himself Granger Blue. Sinopa hated him with a passion that burned hotter than the sun, scorching his heart until it felt withered and hard in his chest. He was the reason Sinopa rode with the Red Earth Gang.

The stampede wasn't the first attempt they'd made to disrupt the drive. Bart tried a few other things earlier on, all of which Sinopa knew were doomed to fail. He had planted a man on the inside, a weak-minded man named Cyril, who hired on with the outfit back in Gold Creek. Bart ordered him to poison a few head, and debated killing the rest of the herd the same way, but decided against it. An entire herd dying at the same time would arouse suspicion. Sinopa, for once, agreed with Bart's decision. Like the stampede, the death of the herd by poison would have been an unnecessary loss of gold for the gang, had it worked.

Cyril loosened the wheel of the chuck wagon, too, but he'd failed to cause the catastrophe Bart hoped for. It hadn't tipped completely over, and the losses from the accident were minor. Then Cyril started whispers about a curse, hoping to frighten the superstitious cowboys enough for them to leave the outfit, abandoning the cattle, but that hadn't worked either.

Sinopa knew Bart was running out of ideas and patience. Sinopa frowned. When men grew angry and let their emotions rule them, they grew careless. Perhaps it was nearing time for Sinopa to kill Granger, and go his own way. If he did, he would kill Bart and his men for good measure before he left. It was a promise he'd made to himself a year ago, and second only to his need to see Granger's blood pool in the dirt.

Sinopa backed away from the edge of the cliff, crawling on his belly until he was sure he wouldn't be seen from below, then stood up. Bart followed him, swearing, blaming everyone but himself for the failure. Everyone, that is, except Sinopa. Bart was smart enough not to incur Sinopa's wrath, not unless he wanted a tomahawk buried in his skull. He and Bart understood each other – they were not friends. Each used the other as a means to an end, and neither would hesitate to kill the other if necessary.

"Don't fucking look at me like that, Sinopa. It was a good plan, goddamn it!" Bart swore, smacking the front of his pants free from dust.

"Except that it did not work, as I said it would not."

"Maybe you just shot the wrong fucking steer!"

Sinopa's jaw clenched. "You are the one who selected the brindle. I shot him and he began the stampede. It is the fault of the cowboys that the herd did not reach the drop off. Why do you not simply kill the men?" Sinopa asked again, his impatience finally showing in his irritated, derisive tone. "Kill them, take the cattle. They will bring a high price."

"I done told you before – it's too risky. The Lazy J has too many friends in high places. Kill the men and steal the cattle and the army will be out here quicker than you can blink, searching under every fucking rock until they find us. There ain't too many places on the prairie where you can hide a few thousand head of prime beef!" Bart spat on the ground, like an exclamation point to his statement. "Why do you care so much, anyway? You've been on my ass to kill them since the drive stepped off in Gold Creek."

“My reasons are my own.” Sinopa’s eyes remained inscrutable, flat, black abysses that gave no inkling to his thoughts.

“Yeah? Well, I think maybe it’s time to share those reasons.” Anger and disappointment were making Bart careless with his tongue, a fact that did not sit well with Sinopa.

Sinopa’s hand moved to the sheath at his waist, fingering the soft leather. Tucked into it was a flint blade as sharp as any of steel. Bart knew how fast Sinopa could whip it out, had seen how accurate he was with it many times. Sinopa didn’t have to say a word. Just touching the blade was enough to make Bart back down from questioning him further.

He knew his stoic expression irritated Bart, saw his level of trust slip a notch, and found he didn’t care. Perhaps his earlier thoughts were correct – their partnership was drawing to a close, and with it, Bart’s life. Their eyes met in a silent duel, neither one willing to look away first. Bart bristled like a cougar facing down a bear; Sinopa stood as impenetrable and unmovable as a rock wall.

Bart flinched first, and that seemed to make him angrier. “Just make sure your reasons don’t fuck up my plans,” Bart finally growled, turning away. He nodded toward the horses, and they mounted up, picking their way down the other side of the outcrop, the horses’ hooves unsettling a small slide of scree, to where the rest of the Red Earth Gang waited.

They’d earned their name in the Nebraska, Wyoming, and Utah Territories, where they left a trail of blood in the dirt from one end of the land to the other. Bank robberies, stages, and wagon trains, mostly, and a few homesteads as well, all of them resulting in a litter of corpses. Bart said it was easiest to kill everyone in sight, and then take what they wanted afterward. No witnesses meant no law on their tails. In that, Sinopa agreed with him.

The Red Earth Gang was a ragtag bunch of twenty or so men, mostly deserters from the army or men on the run from the law for one reason or another. Sinopa joined them along the shores of the Marias River, in the aftermath of an attack by soldiers on Sinopa’s village.

His jaw tightened as memories of the massacre flooded back, a wave of sharp pain, heavy guilt, and suffocating hate that struck deep and fast. If only he had not left his village, enticed away by the promise of riches; if only he had not believed the lies of Granger Blue, he would have been with his people when the soldiers struck.

Sinopa was not a two-spirit. He had not lain with men before, but when Granger came into their village, handsome and strong on the back of his horse, he'd seduced Sinopa with lies and pretty words. His hands and mouth had worked magic on Sinopa's body, confusing him, blinding him with lust.

"Come with me, Sinopa," Granger said one warm summer night. They lay together under a canopy of stars, their bodies still sticky and spent from their lovemaking. "They say the ground is dusted with gold in California, and men fish nuggets the size of your fist out of the rivers and creeks. We'll be rich men, you and me."

Sinopa had believed Granger – and that was his biggest mistake. He'd left all he knew behind, traveling the long miles west with Granger. They passed through small towns where people eyed Sinopa with hate and mistrust because of his skin, across wide prairies, over mountains, all the way to the mining camps in California, where men killed one another over lumps of yellow rock.

They never found the gold Granger had promised. Most of the claims that proved rich were already taken by other white men; there was very little left to pan from the streams and rivers, and far too many men working them already. The great rush to the gold fields had already been over for years.

Sinopa accused Granger of lying, of bringing him west for no reason. Granger insisted he hadn't known, that he'd been told the gold was there for the taking. He was already making plans to travel elsewhere, perhaps to find work on a ranch or as a scout. Sinopa wanted no part of it. He wanted what Granger had promised him. Gold.

The two men fought bitterly. Sinopa wanted what little gold was to be had, wanted to take it from the miners who were luckier than they, but Granger wouldn't allow it.

"The miners are weak, Granger," Sinopa insisted. "It is always nature's way - the strong always take from the weak. We are like the wolf and the bear. We take what we need to survive."

Granger wouldn't listen. "We're not animals. We're not savages. We don't take what don't belong to us, Sinopa. Get it out of your head right now. There's the law out here in California. They'd string us up if'n they caught us."

One night soon after, a pair of miners passed through their camp with a small purse of nuggets panned from the river. They were both old and foolish, drunk from the white man's whiskey, and flaunting their find. They were careless, easy to track and kill. Sinopa made short work of them both and brought their gold to Granger, thinking it would change his mind.

"Look," Sinopa said, feeling proud as he tossed the small black bag at Granger's feet. A few golden stones rolled free. "There is no need to go elsewhere. There is gold here, we only have to take it."

Granger stared at the bag, but made no move to touch it. "Where did you get that from, Sinopa?"

"I followed the miners. They were old, foolish. They went to sleep, but will not wake up. Their gold is ours now."

Granger was outraged; he seemed horrified that Sinopa had killed the miners in their sleep. "Do you know what you've done? You murdered them in cold blood!"

"Are you so weak, Granger? Are you a warrior or a woman, cowering and whimpering?" Sinopa laughed haughtily.

They fought again, worse than ever before. This time Granger drew his gun on Sinopa, and told him to leave, to not come back.

Sinopa hardened his heart, turning his back on Granger, and traveled back to his village alone, but by the time he returned, his people were dead. Soldiers had launched an attack on his village. They'd swept in with their guns, killing nearly every man, woman, and child. Sinopa met a few survivors in Ft. Benton, who told him the soldiers had burned the dead, and then turned the few people who survived out to wander the

cold plains without proper clothing or food. Most died before they reached Ft. Benton, ninety miles away.

Sinopa convinced himself the blame for the loss of his village could be laid squarely at the feet of Granger Blue. He had taken Sinopa's body, polluted him, confused him with lust and greed, and because of that, Sinopa's people were lost. He had not been there to protect them. Sinopa was a brave and strong warrior – surely he would have slaughtered the soldiers before they massacred his people.

He knelt in the middle of his burned-out village, and swore a blood-oath to the spirits of his people. He would take revenge for their deaths. The white men would weep as Sinopa carved a bloody trail through their world.

When he happened across the small camp of white men led by Bart, his first thought was to kill them. His bow was already drawn when he overheard their plan to rob the stage and murder everyone on board.

Instead of killing them, he'd joined them. With them, he was offered a small amount of protection. They knew the law, knew which areas were patrolled by soldiers and which were not. The gang wanted gold – Sinopa wanted revenge, and he took it whenever he could, killing with abandon. Most of the blood spilled in the wake of the Red Earth Gang was by his hand.

Now his path once again crossed Granger Blue's, and this time, Sinopa vowed, he *would* kill him, whether Bart wished him to or not.

CHAPTER THREE

Granger casually sauntered away from the chow line and hunkered down at the campfire closest to where Billy Bower sat alone, morosely picking at this food. Granger concentrated on eating, finished scraping the last of the stew from his plate, and spent a few minutes silently watching the crackling flames.

Granger noticed when Billy sat down he did so gingerly, like he was setting a fragile china cup onto a slab of granite. No doubt Granger was right about the boy having a blistered butt from riding all day every day for two weeks straight. It was a shame, Granger thought, Billy's rear end was small and round, the kind of ass that would fit neatly into a man's hands; the sort created for touching, for fucking, but not if it was covered in painful bruises.

Thunder had been rumbling and lightning flashing for hours again before the skies finally opened up. The rain poured down fast and furious, hitting the ground so hard it bounced back up, making the campfires sputter. Men swore, scuttling toward their tents, balancing half-eaten plates of stew or tin cups of hot coffee in their hands.

Granger had set his tent to the far side of camp. He noticed Billy hunkering near the chuck wagon, as if hoping it would shield him from the worst of the rain, and realized the boy hadn't even had the sense to pitch his tent afore dinner. Either that or he didn't have a tent to pitch in the first place, which only added to Granger's belief that he was a greenhorn.

"Billy!" Granger shouted over the roar of the downpour, "Come on with me, son. My tent's over yonder."

Billy looked up, squinting against the rain. He shook his head, and looked back down at his feet. The rain was turning the dust under them into a muddy mess.

"You can't stay out here. You'll catch the ague, or worse, and these bastards won't think twice about dumping your ass

along the trail if'n you take sick. Get up now, and move! I'm getting soaked to the bone!"

Granger reached down and caught Billy's elbow, feeling nothing but cotton and bone under his fingers. *The boy is skinny as a piglet runt*, he thought. *No meat on his bones at all. He ain't eating enough. Gonna have to change that, too.* Granger pulled Billy to his feet without much trouble, and dragged him along toward Granger's tent, ignoring his protests.

Granger crawled inside the tent, dragging Billy in after him. The tent was small, barely big enough for two men, although it helped if the second was as small and stringy as Billy. Once inside, Granger started stripping out of his wet clothes, wringing them out and laying them to the side to dry. He looked over at Billy, who was shivering in his wet duds.

"Boy, you ain't got the sense God gave a turnip! Take them clothes off afore you get yourself good and sick. I got an extra blanket in here, you can borrow it for tonight. Wrap yourself up and get some sleep. We'll be up and on the trail come sunrise."

Frequent flashes of lightning lit the tent through the thin canvas walls. Billy still didn't speak, but looked gratefully at the blanket Granger handed him. Granger watched him out of the corner of his eye as he stripped down. Sharp bones looked ready to poke through his skin, making Granger again wonder how much he was eating. Not enough, judging from the way he could count every knob on Billy's spine, and every rib.

He was a pretty one for all that he was skinny. Those big, blue eyes of his drew a man right in, reminding him of sweeter things than dusty trails and mangy cattle. His hair was as pale as corn silk, darker now from the rain, falling in a dripping fringe over his eyes. The sun hadn't had a chance yet to toughen Billy's skin; it was soft-looking, lightly browned with a brighter, red patch on the back of his neck, and as smooth as a baby's bottom. Granger caught a glimpse of Billy's cock nestled against a thatch of light brown hair, his balls dusted with dark golden fuzz, and that one quick look was enough to set his own dick to waking up.

Life on the trail was dangerous and lonely, and it was often months before the drive moved close enough to a town with a

cathouse. It wasn't natural for a man to go so long without tending the needs of his body, and most everyone indulged themselves now and then to relieve the ache. Most did it alone in the privacy of their tent or out in the bushes, spilling their seed onto the ground as quietly as they could. Others weren't so particular. It wasn't unusual to hear grunts and groans in the dark, or the sound of flesh slapping flesh.

Granger was a man who preferred the latter. He liked the feel of a man's body, favored it to the softer curves of a woman. Nothing swelled his cock faster than the scent of a hard-working man, the smell of sweat and leather and horse. It was one of the reasons he'd wanted out of Gold Creek – townsfolk were less forgiving of a man who fucked other men than the drovers riding the trail. He'd been less than discreet a few times, and folks in town were beginning to wonder, looking at him with hard, sideways glances. Rather than risk being branded a sodomite and swinging from the end of a rope, he'd signed on with the drive and left.

What he wanted to know was why *Billy* had signed on, why the trail boss had taken him, and whether he'd had anything to do with the bad luck that plagued the drive.

Lightning flashed again, and Granger saw that Billy had rolled over, wrapped up like a papoose in Granger's old blanket, a slim bundle of dark gray. Granger watched him until he stopped shivering and fell asleep, his breathing growing slow and steady.

Granger hadn't touched himself in over two weeks, not since the trail stepped off at Gold Creek. Now his dick roared to life, fueled by that one quick peek of Billy's privates. His hand slipped under his blanket, sliding over his hard belly, finger brushing through his pubic hair until they found his cock, already hard and leaking. In his mind's eye he saw Billy's bright blue eyes, and his prick, soft and surrounded by crisp, dark golden curls. His hand moved along his length, made slick by his own juices, and he bit back a moan. Faster, his fist squeezing good and hard, hips pumping up, his balls filled near to bursting.

He wanted to get up onto his knees, to pump his come onto that smooth, angel face, feed it into Billy's soft, cupid mouth,

but he didn't dare. No doubt the kid would start screaming, raising a ruckus, something Granger didn't need to happen. Instead, he settled for rolling to his side and spilling his seed into the dirt, managing to remain silent aside from a few soft grunts.

In the darkness, his head buzzing from his orgasm, Granger never noticed Billy's wide blue eyes flash open, and remain that way long after Granger's snores had begun.



"For the love of Pete, Billy, keep your goddamn heels down!" Granger shouted. He tapped Hackneyed's flanks, urging him into a trot to catch up to Billy's livelier chestnut stallion. The horse was high-strung, nearly too much for Billy to handle, especially since it was so clear Billy had little riding experience. It was yet another question Granger added to the long list he already had – what was Billy doing with such an expensive, spirited horse, when he couldn't ride worth a shit? "Lordy, you're going to be crippled by the time we reach Oregon if'n you don't learn how to ride proper!"

"I'm doing better. You said so yourself!" Billy countered. He was right – he was doing better, thanks to Granger's tutorage, but still not well enough to keep from hurting like a sumbitch come nightfall, and Granger knew it. He could tell by way Billy groaned in his sleep when he rolled over, or tried to get up in the morning. The boy was a walking black-and-blue.

They'd been sharing Granger's tent since the night of the thunderstorm. At first, Billy had staunchly protested, saying he was fine – until Granger pointed out to him that a man was more apt to get bit by a rattler sleeping out in the open than if he were inside a tent. It was a lie, of course, since the tent was only a sheet of canvas pitched over dirt and didn't do much to keep the critters out, but Billy, being the greenhorn he was, didn't know that. He eyed the shadows, as if expecting deadly serpents to be coiled there, waiting to strike, and agreed to share Granger's tent until he could purchase one of his own in the next town they came across.

Granger figured the next settlement would be Fort Bridger where the drive would turn due west, at least a month away.

That would give Granger plenty of nights to work on Billy, and get him to spill his secrets.

Lately, Granger was beginning to hope he could get Billy to spill something else, too.

Lying next to Billy night after night in his small tent was not as easy as Granger hoped it would be. He found himself more and more attracted to Billy, charmed by Billy's soft voice and subtle wit, beguiled by his boyish looks and big, blue eyes, and lusting after his lithe body. Whenever Granger took himself in hand – which was more and more often of late – it was Billy he pictured in his mind.

He stalwartly refused to make a move on Billy. He couldn't risk frightening the kid off, not now, when he'd finally begun to earn Billy's trust. He was too close to finding out Billy's secrets to risk it all because he couldn't keep his dick in his britches.

Finally, two weeks after the thunderstorm, he and Billy were sitting in front of their campfire, watching the stars wink on. Granger had pitched the tent on the other side of the chuck wagon, out of earshot from the rest of the outfit. It was a habit he'd gotten into when he realized Billy would be less likely to talk if he thought anyone else could overhear their conversation.

Granger stretched his legs out, and pulled a bottle of whiskey from his saddlebag. He'd bought it from Cook just that morning. Having had no luck in getting Billy to open up, he figured a belt or two might loosen his tongue. He took a swig then passed the bottle to Billy.

Billy took a drink and started coughing, choking until his face turned as red as the sunset. Granger rolled his eyes. *I should have known the kid would be no better at drinking than he was at riding*, he thought, taking the bottle back. "How old are you, Billy?" He asked, suddenly curious to see how close his guess was to the mark.

"Nineteen last November. How about you?"

"Me? I'm an old man," Granger laughed, taking another drink. "I'll be thirty next July."

"I got a brother your age," Billy said, reaching for the bottle. Granger gave it to him, and watching him turn red as he swallowed, although to his credit, Billy didn't choke again.

"He a drover, too?"

"Nah. Him and Pa had a falling out a few years back. He left, and we ain't heard from him since, except for once last winter when he wrote Pa for money."

"Your Pa send it to him?" Granger asked, feeling a stirring of excitement. Billy's father must have money, which only deepened the mystery of why his son was driving cattle. He got the feeling Billy's brother might have something to do with the reason Billy had joined the drovers.

"Nah. Pa said Bart was a no-account, and wasn't going to give him a nickel. Cut Bart out of his will, said he wasn't his son anymore." Billy took another swallow and hiccupped.

"You miss him? Your brother, I mean."

"Nah, not really. Sounds bad, don't it? It's the truth, though. Bart was always a mean cuss to me, my Ma, and my little sister, Emma."

Granger could see the liquor was going down Billy's pipes smoother now, and he pulled the bottle away from him. He wanted Billy drunk, but he wouldn't be able to talk if he was passed out.

"What did your Pa and brother fight about?"

"I'm not supposed to talk about Bart. Pa's embarrassed by him, I guess." Billy was swaying a bit, blinking his eyes as if he were having a hard time focusing them.

"You can tell me, Billy. I'm your friend, ain't I?"

"Yeah, I suppose so. Gosh, it's hot out here tonight," Billy said, popping the buttons on his shirt open.

Granger was distracted by the skin Billy exposed. It glowed golden in the firelight, as smooth as silk. "Er... so about your brother and your Pa...?"

"Oh yeah. See, Pa wanted Bart to hire on as a hand, work his way up to boss, but Bart thought he should be boss right off, on account of him being the ranch owner's son. They fought about it a lot, and the last one was a dilly. Calling each

other names and whatnot, nearly scared my baby sister to death, and had Ma in tears. Finally Pa threw Bart out, said not to come back no more."

Granger snapped to attention. "Your Pa is a rancher?"

"Yup. Owns the Lazy J. That's why I'm here. He said he wasn't going to make the same mistake with me that he did with Bart, and wait too long to put me to work. Made me sign on as one of the men, told me to use my Ma's name, Bower, and not to tell anyone who I was," Billy said, slurring a little. He suddenly looked worried. "You ain't gonna tell nobody, are you, Granger?"

"Oh, no, Billy. I won't tell. So you're the son of the owner, huh?"

Billy nodded. "I didn't want to come. Not because I wanted to be boss, though, like Bart. I don't really want to be a rancher. Ma taught me to read and cipher numbers, and I wanted to go to this school back in St. Louis, maybe be a writer like that Mark Twain fella. You ever read his books, Granger?"

"Nah. I don't read much. I ain't too good at it, and it hurts my eyes."

"I like to read. Like to write, too, but Pa said no. He said I'm his only other son and I had to learn ranching." Billy's plump lower lip stuck out a bit, his pale eyebrows knitting.

Damn it if Billy isn't as cute as a bedbug when he pouts, Granger thought. He took another swig of whiskey and tried to concentrate on what he'd learned. *Well, that's one mystery solved. Billy is a greenhorn, and he was hired on because he's the son of the rancher.*

Granger realized he'd learned something from Billy that might be important. The drive experienced one misfortune after another, troubles that had the feel of a human hand. Desperadoes would have attacked the cowboys outright, at night when they were relaxing and there were fewer men watching the herd. Plus, bandits used bullets, not arrowheads.

He'd found only one arrowhead, in the flank of the brindle bull he'd turned during the stampede. The shaft had broken off, though. No way to tell what tribe it came from. Besides, Indians would have aimed for the men, not the cattle, and they sure as

hell wouldn't have missed. If it had been a war party, there would have been a lot more arrowheads, mostly lodged in the chests and backs of the men, not the steers. If they were aiming to stampede the cattle to get the meat, they would've been whooping and hollering, chasing after the herd on horseback. The single arrow was the work of a renegade, Granger was sure of it.

But what about a man who was bent on revenge? What better way for the son of a rancher, tossed out on his ear and cut off from his father's fortune, to seek vengeance than to destroy his father's property, and to do it right under the noses of the men his father had hired to guard them? The use of an arrow on the steer might have been a decoy. Word would spread like wildfire, stories of freak accidents and stampedes, strange sicknesses, bad luck, and Indian attacks. No one would want to sign on with the rancher again. No men to drive next year's herd north to the grazing grounds of Nebraska Territory, and then west to Oregon, meant poor prices for the cattle sold in the beef-gluttled south. The rancher would be ruined.

Billy held his hand out for the bottle again, but Granger placed it out of his reach. "No more. I ain't gonna spend the whole day trying to keep you in the saddle while you're hung over. You'll be puking up last week's beans and bacon. Come on, now. It's bedtime anyway. Got us an early day again tomorrow."

"Every day is an early day," Billy grumbled as he crawled into the tent. "Don't we never get a day off?"

Granger laughed as he followed Billy inside and doled out the blankets. "Next day or so we'll come to the Green River. The boss will likely want to water the cattle, and rest the horses and men for a day before following it down to Fort Bridger and turning west."

Billy yawned wide, arching his back and stretching his arms up over his head. His shirt fell wide open, exposing a sleek chest marred only by two rosy-pink nipples, and a flat stomach. "That'll be good. Be nice to rest. Maybe we could do us some swimming and fishing."

"Could be. Best get some shut-eye," Granger said, staring at Billy's skin. Lord, he wanted a taste, a lick, wanted to rub his scruffy cheek across that smooth skin. Thinking about skinny-dipping in the river with Billy had Granger hard again in the blink of an eye. "G'night, Billy."

"Night, Granger." Billy lay down and pulled the blanket up, cutting off Granger's view.

CHAPTER FOUR

Trying not to sigh with disappointment, Granger followed suit. His balls ached, as they did most nights since he'd started sleeping with Billy. *If'n I don't stop pulling on my dick every night, my right arm is gonna be as muscled as a blacksmith's*, he thought, snorting softly. *Maybe I should jack-off left-handed once in a while, so's I don't get lopsided.*

He tried to ignore his cock, iron-hard and dripping, twitching uncomfortably against the fly of his denims. He tossed a while, turning from side to side, but couldn't get comfortable. His mind replayed the vision of the smooth skin of Billy's chest, and the hard, flat planes of his stomach. In his head, Granger pulled off Billy's shirt, lips locking on one of his pebbled nipples, hands working his pants open.

He bit back a groan and rubbed his hand over the hard outline of his cock, feeling a spot of wetness spread on the material. *Damn it! Get a hold of yourself*, he thought. *Get up and find some cowboy ready to get fucked good and proper. Stop thinking about Billy!*

Granger was about to take his own advice, when Billy suddenly rolled over flush against his back. He felt Billy's cock, hot and hard, rubbing against the crack of his ass. *The boy must be having a wet dream! Get up! Get up right now, afore you do something you'll regret!*

He couldn't make himself move. Billy's hands smoothed over his back, sliding around his waist, fingers finding gaps between the buttons of Granger's shirt, touching skin. Billy's hips ground against Granger's ass, his breath soft and sweet on the back of Granger's neck.

"Granger? I know you've been touching yourself. Most every night, I lay here listening to you. I heard other men doing it too, sometimes alone... sometimes not."

Billy's voice startled him. He was awake? Granger swallowed, suddenly feeling as dry as husk. He managed a hoarse croak. "What do you want, Billy?"

"Want... I don't rightly know what I want," Billy said, but his hips continued to press against Granger's butt, his cock nestled in the crack of Granger's ass. His breath was like butterfly wings tickling against the back of Granger's neck. "Feels good."

"You're drunk."

"I know it. Still feels good."

"Billy..."

"I know you've been with men, Granger. Seen you once, back when we first left Gold Creek. I got up to piss one night and saw you with that dark-haired cowboy, the one who works with Cook, hiding in the bushes. He had your cock in his mouth."

"What do you want, Billy?" Granger asked again, gritting his teeth against the wave of need that was rising to an unbearable level. It was all he could do not to back up against Billy's groin, to strip them both bare-assed and let Billy have a shot at the hole his cock was teasing through the denim.

"I want you to touch me. Please, Granger," Billy whispered. "I need it so bad it hurts."

Billy's soft plea cut through Granger's resolve like a sharp knife through tissue-thin vellum. He rolled over, his mouth finding Billy's in the dark. He threw one leg over both of Billy's, pinning him to the ground. Billy squirmed beneath him, hard cock pushing against Granger's meaty thigh.

Warm, soft, and incredibly hot, Billy's mouth opened for him, their tongues darting and sliding. He tasted whiskey, unsure if it was on Billy's tongue or his own, or both, not caring, only wanting more.

His hands slid across Billy's skin, feeling at last the flesh he'd hungered for, lusted after for weeks. Small and still thin, Billy had put on a few much needed pounds since falling into Granger's company. *He holds it well, it suits him*, Granger thought. His skin was so unlike Granger's, soft and pliant, not leathery and tough from exposure to sun and wind. His fingers found a

nipple, the tiny, pert nub hardening under his touch. He slid his hand over it, letting the calluses on his palm massage the tender, pebbled bud.

“Granger,” Billy moaned. His voice was breathless. No wonder, since Granger had barely broken their kiss long enough to allow him to breathe. His narrow hips bucked under Granger’s leg, his cock seeking friction.

“This what you want, Billy? You sure? Tell me now, if’n you don’t. Ain’t no turning back once we get going. I ain’t that strong a man, Billy,” Granger said, finally forcing himself to pull back and look Billy in the eyes. He could barely see them in the dark, but what he *did* see took his breath away.

Guileless and wide, Billy’s need was reflected in them, and it bored into a place inside Granger’s heart that he thought he’d walled off a long time ago. He held Granger’s eyes without blinking. “Yes. Yes, please. I want you, Granger. I *need*.”

He needed, too. Sweet fuck, did he need! He ground his hips upward, feeling his cock brush the hard lump Billy’s cock made against the coarse denim of his trousers. Granger refused to waste anymore time – he couldn’t, not unless he wanted to spill in his pants like an untried boy. He rolled over to his back, arched up, and opened his pants, sliding them down over his hips. Freed, his cock popped up like a tall tree on a flat prairie. He felt Billy reach for him, gasping when Billy’s fingers brushed his swollen prick.

“Wanna touch you, Granger.”

He grabbed Billy’s wrist, pushing his hand away. “No, not yet. Gonna make you come first.” Granger’s voice was gravelly, his need so great it was as if his throat was filled with sharp-edged pebbles. He knew that a single touch of Billy’s long fingers on his prick was all it would take to send him over the edge. He rolled to his side again, quickly opening the fly of Billy’s trousers, and working them down over Billy’s hips.

Billy’s cock was slender and pale, even in the darkness. Leaning over, Granger traced the hard edge of Billy’s hipbone with his tongue, laying a wet trail across the flat plane of his stomach to its mate. Billy groaned, his fingers threading into Granger’s hair. Billy’s cock bumped against Granger’s chin,

reminding him of its presence, as if Granger might have forgotten. He felt the wetness of Billy's pre-come dapple his jaw.

No time for playing, Granger thought. *Maybe later, on another night - there would be many between here and Oregon. For now, we both need too badly.* Granger turned his attention to Billy's cock, taking him into his mouth, all the way in, to the root. He tasted soft silk and white-hot iron, heard Billy's gasp like the whisper of the wind. His fingers cupped Billy's balls, heavy, swollen, filling his palm, and tasted splashes of bitter salt against the back of his throat as Billy came, his strangled cry filtered through gritted teeth.

Granger couldn't wait another minute. He'd held back too long, fantasized about it for weeks. Awkwardly struggling to his knees, his movements hindered by his pants bunched at the knees, he loomed up over Billy's body. He wrapped his fingers around his shaft, pumping only once or twice before he shot his load.

It was only after he'd drifted back into himself, breathing hard and still enjoying the tingle that he realized Billy had lifted his head up and was busily licking Granger's cock clean. The tip of Billy's tongue flicked along his shaft, danced over the head of his dick in light feather-soft touches that were barely there, and kept at it as Granger's prick softened.

Lordy, the boy learned fast, and that was the gospel truth.

Granger slumped down on his back, quietly staring into the darkness, waiting for his heart to stop hammering. He felt Billy roll over, his cheek, stubbled with a beard too light and sparse to be seen, pressing against Granger's chest. Billy's warm breath ghosted over his skin, one arm wrapped around Granger's waist.

Most men were content to fuck and skedaddle, clearing out nearly before their peckers had finished shooting. It had been a good, long while since Granger had another warm body cuddle up to him, not since... he slammed the door shut on the memories that threatened to surface. He wouldn't allow them to ruin the moment, although why he wished to preserve the memory was something he didn't want to really think about. It

wasn't the first time he'd shared his tent with another man, it certainly wouldn't be the last. He shouldn't encourage Billy into thinking there was something more between them. It wouldn't be fair.

Still and all, it wasn't every day he had the opportunity to lay with someone as pretty or as sweet as Billy. The men Granger bedded were rough, scarred by years of hard work, only looking for a quick fuck in the dark. *Yeab, that was it*, Granger thought. *Ain't nothing more than the novelty of it. No harm done, if'n it's only for a few nights. Once we hit Fort Bridger, I'll see he gets a tent of his own.*

Granger slipped an arm under Billy's shoulders, pulling him in, holding him close. In a short while, they both fell asleep.



They reached the Green River two days later. The river cut a wide swath through the territories of Utah and Wyoming, its waters beckoning cattle, horses, and men alike with the promise of cooling parched throats and warm bodies. The drovers would herd the cattle south from here, following its meandering banks to Fort Bridger, but first they would rest for a full day and night, letting the cattle and horses drink their fill.

Most of the men were looking forward to reaching Fort Bridger. It wasn't much, certainly not as civilized as Kansas City or Independence, but maybe that was just as well. The drovers weren't looking for god-fearing folk and citified living. They wanted women, but not the marrying kind. They wanted the sort who wore face paint and little else, who wouldn't mind spreading their legs for a coin or two. Fort Bridger, home to several regiments of cavalry, had a good supply of such women who lived in a few sun-weathered log homes on the outskirts of the fort.

There were a few men who'd do the same. They were harder to find than the women unless a body knew where to look, as Granger did. In a small, ill-kept cabin set well back from the high walls of the Fort, there lived several men who were more than willing to drop to their knees, or shed their trousers and bend over for money. They were a motley crew, as Granger remembered, smelling of body odor and waste, covered in grime, living only for their next bottle of cheap rotgut.

The thought of touching any of them suddenly repulsed Granger, although it had never stopped him before. Three nights spent exploring Billy's firm young body had spoiled him, he reckoned.

Both nights since that first, quick time, Granger and Billy had crawled into his tent, shed their clothing like a pair of snakes slithering out of their skins, and found each other in the dark. They spent hours touching, kissing, tasting each other, trying to hold off coming for as long as they could. It was never long enough. All too soon one or the other would shoot, drawing the other's orgasm like a fish yanked out of water on a line.

Neither had breached the other's body. Their night play had been limited to mouths and hands only. Although Granger wanted Billy to fuck him, wanted it badly, lusted to feel Billy's slender cock slip into his ass, sharp hipbones banging, feel come fill him up to bursting, he held back.

Granger was used to hiding his desire. He fucked, as often as possible, but nowadays never allowed anyone to breach him. There was only one man on earth who Granger had given leave to enter his body, and that man had first stolen his heart and then trampled it into the dirt. He'd turned out to be a stranger, someone Granger hardly knew at all and found he didn't want to know, even though they'd traveled together for months.

He remembered Sinopa's hard body, the pleasure his clever fingers and tongue had given Granger. His ass clenched with the memory of the stretching, the fullness, and the burning of being taken, of the connection they'd shared. Then he remembered the reptilian coldness that pushed the warmth out of Sinopa's dark eyes when he'd dumped the small bag of gold nuggets into Granger's lap, the way he'd laughed about killing the two old miners for it.

No, he'd satisfy himself with Billy's warm, wet mouth, and his gentle hands, and Billy would have to remain content with the same. Granger might indulge himself, show Billy what it was like to be ridden hard, knees and hands digging into the dirt as a man slammed a thick, hard cock into him, but Granger would withhold that same pleasure from himself.

He would not risk losing that part of himself again.

CHAPTER FIVE

The small, nearly smokeless fire flickered, tiny embers crackling. Sinopa fed the fire spirit another thin branch, then leaned back on his hands and stared up at the night sky. A thousand stars twinkled, the hearths of his ancestors, and he pictured his slaughtered family looking down on him, wondering if they were pleased with the blood he had already spilled in their memory. *If it were me, I would not be satisfied. It will not be enough until Granger is dead, and perhaps not even then.*

He closed his eyes and thought of his people, remembered the wreckage of their village, the smell of charred flesh mixing with the heavy smell of smoke that still lingered there. He could hear their voices calling to him on the wind, crying out for vengeance. Their pain washed over him, he felt their fear, their rage, and again made them his own. His resolve renewed. He would not rest until he had avenged every drop of blood shed by his people.

The drovers had brought the herd to water not a mile away, just out of sight around the bend in the mossy bank of the river. Somewhere amid the milling cattle and horses, Granger waited. Sinopa felt every passing moment Granger lived as a personal affront, and every breath he took as a physical pain. He wanted Granger dead, wanted to bathe in his blood, and the more days that passed, the sharper the urge to kill him grew. He let it meld with the fury he'd culled from his people until he felt it surging through his blood, speeding the beat of his heart.

Scuffed boots kicked a small shower of dirt and rock into the fire, angering the fire spirit. It sputtered, hissing its displeasure. Sinopa grit his teeth at the interruption of his meditation and looked up at Bart, his lip curling in a sneer, a parody of a smile.

"Get up. I want to circle around near the boulders on the far bank of the river. We'll get a good view of the drover camp from there," Bart ordered.

Sinopa forced himself to stay his hand, even as his entire being cried out for him to kill, to take Bart's skin and wear it like a cloak. He didn't know how much longer he could force himself to remain in Bart's company without doing so. Bart issued orders to Sinopa as if he were a slave instead of a warrior; the sound of his voice grated on Sinopa like the rough bark of a tree against an open wound.

Instead, he ignored Bart for a moment, knowing his inattentiveness was irritating. He scooped dirt up with his hands and carefully smothered the tiny flames, apologizing for Bart's ignorance, and murmuring his thanks to the fire spirit. He rose slowly, insolently, to his feet, glaring at Bart. As usual, Bart looked away first, and Sinopa smirked. *Weak. They are all weak and deserve to die.*

Soon, he promised himself. *Very soon.*

The two men mounted up and urged their horses into the river, the water rising to their horses' chests as they made their way to the far side. Following the steep bank, they kept to the shadows of the trees that grew in a thick line several yards from the water, cautiously inching closer to the herd, stopping just short of the clearing where they saw the first few steer, and wisps of smoke from the drovers' campfires.

Sinopa slipped silently from his horse's back, his feet touching the sharp gravel that dusted the bank of the river. He tethered the reins to the branches of a brambly bush, and waited for Bart to dismount. Crouching in the tall grass, keeping his head low, he led Bart even closer to the camp, to the pair of large boulders sitting on the bank, partially jutting into the water. Climbing up, careful to keep the stone between him and the camp, Sinopa peered over the edge. His keen eyes picked out individual tents in the moonlight. He felt Bart climb up beside him smelling of tobacco and sweat. Hunkering down, they watched.

They could see no sign that the drovers thought they were being trailed. No extra guards were posted; only two or three men remained on horseback, keeping a desultory watch over the herd. Sinopa was sure they watched for predators, but not of the two-legged variety. Their task was to keep any of the

steers from straying too far from the herd. None of the men looked especially wary; none held weapons at the ready.

The rest of the drovers lay around campfires, playing with cards or dice. One had a mouth organ, and another a squeezebox, the discordant, brittle notes drifted through the darkness. Many had bottles they tipped to their lips every so often. Sinopa could smell the strong fumes from the whiskey on the breeze that carried to them from the camp.

Sinopa counted forty men, at least a dozen less than he'd seen when they'd been back at the canyon. His smile was predatory, his teeth gleaming white in the darkness. At least twelve drovers had left the outfit, running like frightened rabbits, chased away by the streak of bad luck. Twelve men would keep their lives, a dozen too many, as far as he was concerned, but at least the one man he most wanted to kill was still with the drive.

He spotted Granger Blue after only a few minutes of searching. There was no mistaking him. Sinopa recognized his height, his broad shoulders and ambling gait. Sinopa's eyes followed him as he walked from the chuck wagon to a tent pitched at the outer limits of the camp, and squatted down near the fire. Another man, shorter, slim and fair, sat with him.

Sinopa frowned, feeling a sharp stab of jealousy pierce the hard shell of fury that surrounded his heart. Granger was not the sort of man to look for casual companionship. He had not frequently mingled with the townspeople or the miners while Sinopa had traveled with him, unless they had something he wanted. Who was the yellow-haired man? Sinopa squinted, wishing he could get closer. The man looked young, much younger than Granger. His son? No, Granger would have spoken of him if he'd sired a son.

There was something in the way Granger sat, close to the younger, almost touching, which seemed too intimate for their relationship to be merely friendly. Granger's head ducked closer to the fair-haired one, he seemed to be whispering, and the younger's shoulders bobbed as if in laughter. Sinopa remembered many times when Granger had done the same with him.

YellowHair was Granger's lover, then, the one who had replaced Sinopa in Granger's bed and heart.

He will die first, Sinopa decided, baring his teeth. *Slowly, painfully, and I will force Granger to watch as I take YellowHair's scalp. But first he will lead Granger to me, like the one the drovers call the "Judas Steer."*

The *Judas Steer*, Sinopa knew from his association with Granger and other drovers, was the one steer in a herd that the cowboys always looked for -- the docile one, the trusting one, who would walk boldly into the slaughterhouse without fear, regardless if the stench of death surrounded the place. The rest of the herd would blindly follow the Judas Steer to their ends. He would betray them. In Sinopa's mind, Granger's young lover would be such a man, trusting and docile, easily led, like Sinopa himself had been, once upon a time. Sinopa would find a way to make YellowHair betray Granger as the Judas Steer betrayed the herd.

A soft grunt brought Sinopa from his musings. "We should try to stampede the cattle again," Bart whispered. He pointed toward the left, drawing Sinopa's attention away from Granger and his yellow haired whore. "Send an arrow into that big, black bull. See him?"

"No, Bart. That would be foolish. Stampede them now and they might head this way rather than cross the river. We would be crushed beneath their hooves before we could get to safety. Even if we were not, the drovers would chase them and find us." Sinopa hissed. Either Bart was far more dim-witted than he'd realized, or far more desperate. "We must wait until the herd clears the fort. There are many ravines between Ft. Bridger and Oregon, many chances to stampede the herd, if that is what you insist we do."

Bart frowned and looked displeased, but for once listened to Sinopa's advice.

They continued to watch the camp. Laughter and song drifted across the river, along with the smell of whiskey and coffee. Suddenly, Sinopa felt Bart tense next to him.

"Over there, near the far end of camp," he said, pointing his finger toward the area. "See that tent there, on the very edge?"

Those two men sitting by the fire, one is big and dark, the other smaller, and fair?"

Sinopa *had* seen them. Bart was talking about Granger and YellowHair. He nodded.

"That's my brother! Fucking snot-nosed bastard was always Pa's favorite. He gave Billy everything, never made him work for nothing. Little runt always walked around with his nose stuck in a book, like he was too good to get his hands dirty. What's he doing here?"

What indeed, Sinopa wondered. *Besides warming Granger's bed at night*, he amended. He said nothing, letting Bart work himself into a black anger.

"My Pa must be grooming Billy to take over as boss. He probably made him his heir, instead of me! It should've been mine, all of it, the Lazy J, the cattle, the money, not Billy's! He's the second son, always pretending to be better than me, hiding behind Ma's skirts when I got after him."

Sinopa's mind worked quickly. He saw his opportunity and grasped it. "Kill him. Kill him and remove the only barrier between you and your father's fortune. Once he is dead, and your father as well, there would be no one left to dispute your claim."

Bart shook his head. "There's still my baby sister, Emma."

Sinopa snorted and shrugged. "You would let a little girl stand in your way? Kill her, too. You will own everything."

He watched Bart's eyes narrow, his lip curling. "She'd be easy to get rid of, sure enough. Pa might be a little more difficult. I'll have to think on it a while. I might have to change our plans. If I'm gonna take over the Lazy J, then the price those cattle will bring at market will be mine."

"We will only kill your brother, and the man he is with," Sinopa lied. He intended to slaughter everyone he could, including Bart, when the time came.

Bart shook his head. "Not yet. Gotta make it look like an accident, just like with the wagon wheel and the stampede. Can't afford for anybody to suspect I had anything to do with it."

"Then I will kill them for you."

Bart's gaze cut toward Sinopa, and he was careful to maintain a stoic expression. He would not let Bart see the excitement that made Sinopa's heart pound, or his eagerness.

"Yeah, you can do it. Not now, though. We gotta get them alone, so's the rest of the drovers will think they abandoned the drive."

"When they reach the Fort, then. We'll ride ahead – we'll reach it much faster than the drovers – and wait for them. Most of the men will seek out the whores and the saloon. There will be very few left to guard the herd. I will slit their throats and hide their bodies, and any who might bear witness."

"What makes you think Billy won't go into town? He's young, but he's got a dick, and he must've learned what to do with it by now. He's been on the trail for over a month. Sure as shit sticks, he must be looking forward to finding himself a whore."

Sinopa grunted, shifting his gaze back to Granger and YellowHair, still sitting close together, whispering and sharing secrets. If there were two things Sinopa remembered about Granger, it was that he liked men, and he didn't like to share. He wouldn't let his lover touch anyone else. "He will be there."

"Well, we'll see. If not, we can get 'em later on, after they leave the Fort."

As Sinopa continued to watch Granger, a slow, malicious smile creased his cheeks.



"I'm about as dry as an old husk of corn," Granger said, swatting the dust from his hat. "Lordy, that river sure looks tempting. What say we go take us a dip, Billy-boy?"

Billy looked up at Granger and a wide smile split his cheeks. He let out a whoop and threw down the rope he'd been coiling. With one backward look at Granger, he was off, running pell-mell toward the bank. By the time Granger caught up with him, he'd stripped down to the suit God dressed him in and was toeing the water.

He surely is a sight to behold in broad daylight, Granger thought, kicking off his boots. His eyes never left Billy's lithe body,

dappled with sunshine. A quick look over his shoulder told him no one else was heading toward the river -- it was nearly chow time and the drovers were rustling up their plates and cups, too anxious to fill their bellies to take a bath. He looked to the right where the river bent. A quick swim in that direction might provide them with all the privacy they'd need.

Granger stripped off the rest of his clothing, dropping it on the bank next to Billy's, and splashed into the water. It was cold enough to make him gasp, and he ducked under, popping to the surface like a cork from a jug.

Billy was floating on his back a little further out; Granger struck out with a sure stroke. Reaching Billy, Granger wrapped an arm around him and pulled him under.

When Billy surfaced, sputtering and madder than a wet hen, Granger laughed and started swimming toward the bend in the river. "Come on, boy! Can you catch the old man?"

It was quiet and peaceful around the bend, the small beach shielded from sight of the drovers by a pair of enormous rocks that jutted out over the water. The far side of the boulders was as smooth and flat as a piece of glass, perfect for sunning and drying. Granger clambered up out of the water and climbed the rock, knowing Billy would follow.

Naked, they lay side by side, letting the hot sun dry them. Granger was all too aware of Billy's body lying next to him, smelling sweet and clean. He let his hand stray over, stroking Billy's thigh, grown strong from riding every day. Turning his head, he found Billy's lips waiting for him. They were cool from the river and as eager as his own.

Rolling to his side, Granger took his time kissing Billy, hands roaming over his thighs and flat stomach, teasing his rosy nipples, until Billy began to squirm. His cock was hard, casting a shadow over his belly, and Granger's was the same. His resolve not to let Billy breach him had withered and blown away like seeds on the wind. Their nights of passion left Granger with a deep, aching need. The more time he spent with Billy, the more he wanted him, simple as that. It was all he'd thought about for the past few days, and his need had grown stronger with each passing hour. Alone on the wide, flat rocks, the opportunity

presented itself and Granger seized it “Want you Billy. Inside me. Think you want that, too?”

Billy’s eyes flashed open wide, but there was interest mixed in there with the surprise. A small nod answered Granger, all he needed to see. He kissed Billy again, then rose up onto his hands and knees. He watched over his shoulder as Billy got up, too. He looked at Granger, biting his lower lip. *He’s nervous*, Granger realized, and somehow the thought warmed him. “You know what to do, don’t you, Billy?” He asked softly, not wanting to embarrass him, but needing too badly to hold his tongue.

Billy smirked, and Granger felt relieved. *At least he knew the basics*, Granger thought, chuckling to himself. *For a minute I thought I was going to have to draw him a map*. When Billy moved behind him and he felt the head of Billy’s cock, slick with spit, press between his cheeks, he moaned softly. “Atta boy, Billy. Right there, easy now,” Granger said, lowering his head to rest on his arms.

“Oh, sweet Jaysus!” Billy groaned as Granger felt him slide deep inside his body.

The stretch, the burn, the fullness, the feeling of Billy’s cock buried to the hilt inside him was enough to take Granger’s breath away. “Move, Billy! For the love of God, *move!*”

Billy did, probably going on no more than instinct, picking up a rhythm that was both punishing and perfect, riding Granger like a wild and powerful stallion. “Granger! Gonna... gonna...”

“Do it Billy! Come! I’m right there!” Granger cried, his hand fisting himself hard and fast. Just as he felt Billy’s white-hot spunk fill him, he shot his load onto the rock, wet heat covering his fist and splashing his belly, his body wracked with spasms of ecstasy.

Billy pulled out of him and lay beside him, a silly, proud look on his face. “Done good, huh?”

Granger laughed, slipping an arm under Billy’s shoulders, pulling him closer. “Yeah, you done good. Real good.”

Lying on the rock, Billy’s seed leaking from his body, his own drying on his stomach, the man himself cradled in his

arms, Granger had a revelation. For all he'd tried to keep Billy from touching his heart, it was too late. He'd roped and hogtied it, just as sure as any cowboy roped a calf, and there was no way it would be getting loose anytime soon.

CHAPTER SIX

Fort Bridger had been built over thirty years prior, and hadn't changed much at all with the passing of time. Unlike Fort Laramie, a bustling and thriving center of trade, Fort Bridger remained a crude, barely civilized outpost. The walls, which surrounded the army's bunkhouses and officers' quarters, were built of rough-hewn wooden poles daubed with mud. As the years went by, several rows of cabins were built in the shadow of the Fort's walls by trappers, using the same drab, coarse materials as the fence.

Overall, the Fort was an inhospitable place, dreary, rough, and barely inhabitable, but it looked like paradise to the weary drovers after spending over a month on the trail without a home-cooked meal in their bellies, and only each other and the cattle for company. There were no saloons or restaurants as such, but there was always someone with a large kettle of hearty, fresh venison stew and thick cornbread for sale, or a few bottles of whiskey – or more likely, home-brewed moonshine – corked and ready for purchase. Someone was always ready to rattle the dice or deal the cards, and the atmosphere often got rowdy in a hurry.

Best of all -- in the opinion of most of the drovers, at least -- there were several cabins shared by women who were less than picky about whom they took to their beds, providing of course, that their suitors' pockets jingled with coin.

With faces painted as colorfully as the gaudy, tattered dresses of cheap satin they wore, the women would lounge outside the doors of their cabins, leaning against the walls, calling to any and all men who passed by. Flashing their legs and cleavage, they vied for the attention of the drovers. Finding one who was interested in what they offered, they'd take him inside the cabin. Often the cabin held only one room, necessitating several of the women to entertain their guests at the same time. Quite frequently the "entertainment" lasted only a few minutes – just as long as necessary for the woman to flip

up her skirts and the man to grunt and grind and relieve himself. Coins would be exchanged as agreed upon, and the woman would return to her post immediately after, her kohl-rimmed, tired eyes scanning the crowd for her next gentleman caller.

There were many older men, mostly drunkards or gamblers needing money for their next bottle or game of cards, or trappers more at home in the wilderness than a settlement. Often wearing nothing more than long johns gone gray from overuse and infrequent washings, they would gather at a cluster of cabins near the rear of the settlement.

These were the men who offered the opportunity for the drovers to buy or barter for a few luxuries, like tobacco, soap, or dressed skins. None were of the best quality, but better than none at all, and the prices were usually reasonable. Sometimes, if a drover were of a mind, they'd offer something more personal for sale as well. A smile, a wink, a subtle touch, and they'd head off into the bushes to conclude their business.

The Johnson outfit arrived at the Fort shortly after noon three days after leaving the river. The men were in good spirits, looking forward to relaxing for two full days and nights of eating and gambling, drinking and whoring. Hooting and hollering, they drew straws to see who would be the first to leave the herd and enter the Fort. Those who drew the short sticks would be left behind to guard the herd. Come morning, a few men would come back to relieve them, although it often didn't work out the way it should. Someone was bound to get into a fight and beaten unconscious, sometimes killed. One or two would curl up in a dark corner somewhere to sleep off a drunk. Either way, it was likely that not everyone who went into town in the first wave would come back as planned. Because of that distinct possibility, no one wanted to get the short draw.

Granger would have gladly passed on drawing a straw at all. He could always ask Cook or the boss to buy him a bottle or a wad of chaw – he was content to stay behind with Billy. If he volunteered to stay with the herd, there would be more than ample opportunity to strip Billy naked. No rushing, no struggling to keep quiet – no one but the cows would be around

to hear them, or care what they did. The other few men left behind would be spread out too thin to take notice.

There was another reason Granger was reluctant to take Billy into the Fort. He had no idea whether Billy would want to indulge himself with a whore, and sharing Billy with a painted woman – or anyone else -- was not something Granger was eager to do. He didn't want to admit it, but deep inside he knew he'd be busting with jealousy if Billy chose to avail himself of a woman, or worse yet, one of the men.

For his part, Billy was so excited that he'd barely stopped bouncing for three days. Every step their horses took closer to the Fort, the more wound up he became, until finally Granger suspected the grin that stretched his cheeks might just split them wide open. As much as he wanted to pass on drawing straws at all and volunteer to stay behind, Granger stepped up and took his turn. It didn't matter what length he pulled, as long as Billy pulled a short one. Granger would gladly give his away to stay behind with Billy.

Luck was against him. He pulled a long one, and so did Billy. They probably heard Billy's whoop of delight clear back to Independence. He ran toward Granger, waving his stick in the air, kicking up his heels. Granger rolled his eyes and sighed. Like it or not, they were going into town. With a little bit of luck, he might be able to convince Billy to go back to the camp early, relieve the men left behind, and still have time left for what Granger had planned for them, but he couldn't take Billy's happiness away by suggesting they stay behind.

"Lookee here, Granger! Got me a long one!" Billy cried, racing up to him. His fist clutched his straw as if it were made of pure gold, an incalculable treasure. To him, Granger supposed, it was.

"I can see it. Me, too. Guess we're going in together, huh?" Granger smiled, showing Billy his straw. He stuck it between his teeth, chewing on it. "You ready?"

"Yes, sir!" Billy grinned. He patted his pants pocket. Granger heard the telltale sound of coins jingling.

"You'd best not advertise what you got in there, Billy. I've known men to kill for less," Granger warned. "Don't show it to

none of the whores, either – they’ll pick your pocket cleaner and quicker than vultures pick a carcass. As a matter of fact, take most all of it and shove it into your boot. That way nobody can get to it but you.”

Billy dutifully sat down and pulled off his right boot. Fishing his money out of his pocket, he dribbled all but a dollar of it into the heel, and pulled it back on. He made a face, stamping his foot down. “Feels mighty funny,” he said, frowning.

“Better that than losing it to some quick-fingered whore,” Granger said. He tamped down his hat, and hitched up his britches. “Well, we’d best be going afore most of the good chow gets eaten.”

They melted into the crowd of men heading toward the Fort. Billy stayed close to Granger’s side, his blue eyes wider than Granger had ever seen them before, flicking here and there, as if trying to take in everything at once.

“Lordy! Those women don’t practically have nothing on but what God gave ‘em!” Billy gasped, tipping his chin toward a cabin where three women lounged. None of them were very young, or especially pretty. Two of them had dull brown hair shot through with silver, and one was blond. The fairer one was smoking a cheroot, a ribbon of blue smoke curling around her head. All three wore dresses of jewel-colored satin cut well above the ankle, with necklines that showed dirty shoulders and grime-creased cleavage, trimmed with tattered black lace.

Granger frowned, and tugged on Billy’s elbow. The last thing he wanted was for Billy to take it into his head to go visiting with any of them. Lord knows what he was apt to catch if he did – all of the women looked well-worn, and none of them looked like they’d had a bath since before Moses was a dribble down his mama’s knee. “Lookie there, Billy! That fella is selling stew with fresh bread, and ain’t that an apple pie? Lord, I ain’t tasted apples in a good long while. Let’s go get us some, afore the drovers fall on it like a pack of slat-ribbed dogs.”

Billy looked torn, but eventually his stomach won out over his dick, much to Granger’s relief.

They took seats on one side of a wooden table, set near a house with faded gingham curtains, a sure sign that a woman lived inside the walls. She appeared out of the back of the house, a grandmotherly woman in a starched white apron over a black, bombazine dress. The table wasn't fancy, nothing but a long wooden plank covering half a dozen sawhorses, but it was crowded, lined with hungry men. He and Billy had to squeeze in beside two other men, sitting thigh-to-thigh and elbow-to-elbow.

She took their money without a smile, slipping it into a deep pocket in her apron, then waddled off back to the house.

Their two bits bought each man a plate of stew, warm bread with fresh butter, a tall glass of rich milk, and a thick wedge of apple pie. Granger could have sat there all day, stuffing himself until he split open along the sides, but by the time he paid for and ate a second piece of pie, Billy was fidgeting, his head twisting this way and that, obviously anxious to get up and explore, but too polite to leave Granger behind.

Granger banged his chest with his fist and belched, standing up. "Okay, kid. Let's go. I want to see if anybody has any chaw for sale."

"I can use another bar of soap. Mine's worn down to a sliver I can practically see through," Billy said.

One of the men who sat next to them looked up. "Thar's a fella down that-a-way," he said, pointing one dirty finger toward the rear of the town, "who's got chaw. Don't know about soap, though."

Granger nodded his thanks and they set off in that direction. They found the man selling tobacco in a cabin nearly at the end of the dirt road that ran next to the fort's walls. He grinned at them with brown-stained teeth, and happily sold Granger two small tins of chaw. "Last two," he said, pocketing his money. "Had a few more, but yesterday them other fellas bought me out."

"What other fellas? Drovers?" Granger asked. He knew that visitors to the Fort were few and far between. Wagon trains heading west had dwindled from the vast numbers of proceeding years, when canvas-covered wagons rumbled across

the plains heading for California or Oregon in long, snaking trains. To have two different groups of strangers come into town within so a short time was surprising.

“Oh no, they wasn’t cowmen. They were rough boys, all of ‘em, maybe twenty or so. Desperadoes are my guess. Had an Indian with ‘em, too. Bastard walked into town with the rest of the gang, just like he owned the damned place,” the man said. He turned his head and spat a wad of yellowed juice at ground. His dislike of the people who’d lived in the west long before his own kind set foot there was evident. Granger wasn’t shocked – he’d seen it too often before when he’d traveled with Sinopa.

Granger’s hand unconsciously slipped to pat his gun. “They still around here, these men?” *If there were gunslingers in the area, the boss might want to know. More guards would need to be posted with the herd,* he thought.

“Don’t know. Could be, but I ain’t seen any of ‘em since yesterday.”

“Much obliged.” He tucked his tins of chaw into his pocket, and led Billy away. “I think we ought to see if we can find the boss.”

“You think they might try to rustle the cattle?” Billy asked, eyes wide.

“You never know. Better to be safe than sorry,” Granger replied. He didn’t add that if they needed extra guards, the boss was just as likely to send the messengers back as anyone else – more so, since they’d be standing right in front of him.

“What about my soap?”

Granger paused. Another few minutes wouldn’t hurt, he guessed. He nodded. “Okay, first we’ll go see if anyone is selling soap. Then we’ll find the boss and tell him.” He looked around, saw a cabin with several promising baskets of wares set out front, and set off in that direction.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It turned out that the man who owned the cabin with the display of baskets out front was a trapper who called himself DuBois, and hailed from far across the border in Canada. He was a grizzled, stooped old man with a scar that ran from the top of his balding pate to the corner of his mouth in a jagged, bumpy white line. He held a diamondback snakeskin in his gnarled fingers, rattling the tail to attract the attention of passersby.

Granger and Billy wandered closer, nodded pleasantly, and perused DuBois' wares. He had a good selection of foodstuff and skins, making Granger wonder what DuBois had to barter for them – surely he was too old to do much trapping anymore.

One basket held a quantity of early berries – tiny wild strawberries and blueberries, and a few others. Another contained potatoes and yams, probably left over from last year's harvest. Granger smelled lye, and his nose led him to yet another basket that held small, hard, irregularly shaped wedges of soap. Piled in uneven stacks in between the baskets were the cured skins of several species of small animals – rabbits, possum, and raccoon.

"Got any sweets?" Granger asked, eyes scanning the baskets. He had a sweet tooth, and was partial to peppermint.

"No, sir, I sure don't. Had some peanut brittle t'other day, but I traded it to Ol' Moses for a few jars of his pickled beans. Had some dried mushrooms, too." He gave Granger a wink and a smile that showed pink gums and all three of his teeth. "Picked 'em myself last fall, but I sold the last to an Indian fella come through here yesterday." He pointed to a heavy buffalo hide draped over a chair on the other side of his door. It was carefully cured, with the thick head fur attached as a hood. "He gave me a fine hide for them. Got the best of the bargain as far as I'm concerned," he chuckled.

Granger smiled. From DuBois' nearly toothless grin, he figured the mushrooms he'd been selling weren't the kind a body would want to put into a stew. That would explain what DuBois used to barter with, though. Mushrooms like that, the kind that could make a man see heaven or hell, would bring a good price in skins and food.

He fingered the hide absently. It was old, balding in a few small spots. Brain-tanned, he realized, feeling the soft quality. He'd always admired the Indians' methods of tanning using brains – usually from the animal that once wore the skin -- tallow, and vegetable products to dress the hide. Running the soft fur through his fingers, he noticed a small marking stained into the skin on the underside of the hide, and felt a ghostly chill ripple up his spine. He'd seen that mark before, many times, but never thought he'd see it again. Granger picked up the skin and shook it out, pretending to admire it so that he could get a better look at the marking.

It was the same as the marks he'd seen on the skins Sinopa carried with him from his village; a small series of chevrons stacked one atop the other that distinguished Sinopa's band. Granger's fingers tightened on the hide, crushing the soft fur in his fists as a wave of unexpected emotions surged through him, anger and betrayal chief among them. For all he thought he'd known Sinopa, had trusted him, it turned out he hadn't really known the man at all. Sinopa murdered a pair of harmless old men for a bag of tiny gold nuggets. Their argument when Granger found out had been bitter and fraught with threats from both sides.

"Granger? You okay?" Billy asked, putting a hand on Granger's arm. "You look a bit peaked all of a sudden."

"Nah, I'm fine. Too many good vittles, I guess. Upsetting my delicate constitution," Granger lied, forcing his lips to curve into a smile as he replaced the hide on the chair. His mind was racing, a million questions buzzing in it like a swarm of bees. Had Sinopa been here, or did the hide belong to another of Sinopa's band? If it was his, then who were the desperadoes he'd joined up with? What might happen if their paths crossed? One thing Granger knew for certain – if outlaws were planning to rustle the herd then blood would be spilled, and if it Sinopa

was indeed a member of the gang then the first blood to soak the ground would be Granger's.

"Granger?" Billy looked worried, and Granger summoned a smile for him.

"Hurry now and get your soap, Billy. We need to go find the boss."



The boss refused to cut the drovers' stay in town short and call all the boys back. He insisted there was no proof that whatever gang had ridden through the town yesterday was still in the area, and if they were, that they had plans to rustle the Johnson cattle. "They're probably long gone," the boss said.

Finally, after an hour of arguing with Granger – who sunk his teeth in deep and refused to back off – the boss agreed to send a couple of men back, just to make sure everything was okay, and to help keep an extra eye out for trouble. Just as Granger had predicted, the two men closest to the boss at the time were the men he picked for the job – Granger and Billy.

That posed an immediate problem for Granger. The last thing he wanted was for Billy to be anywhere *near* the camp with the possibility that Sinopa was about. Let him spend all his money whoring – at least he'd still be breathing come morning. That might not be the case if rustlers attacked, especially if Sinopa was with them.

He didn't want Billy to overhear him, although since the boss didn't have any such qualms, he figured it was a lost cause. "He's a greenhorn," Granger whispered hoarsely, "Keep him in town. Send Brown or Abernathy back with me."

"I don't see Brown or Abernathy. I see you two,"

"I ain't afraid of them, Granger. I'm a grown man!" Billy cried, sounding younger than his years even as he argued the opposite. "I'll be fine, boss."

"Of course you'll be fine, 'cause you'll be sitting your ass right here," Granger said, without losing eye contact with the boss. "He's too green. He ain't a good shot. He ain't a good rider. He'll get hisself killed."

“Granger!” Billy yelled, giving him a good shot – the boy was stronger than Granger gave him credit for, nearly knocking him off his feet. “Mind your own goddamn business!”

“Yeah, Granger, mind your beeswax,” the boss parroted with a sardonic grin. He was obviously enjoying the show Granger and Billy were putting on, but had had enough. “He goes, you go, and that’s final! Now, both of you get the hell out of my sight!”

Granger opened his mouth to argue again, but a black look from the boss changed his mind. He wouldn’t be of value to anyone if he was fired and tossed out on his butt. He threw Billy an exasperated look. “Fine. Come on. I’ll be sure to send your Mama my sincerest condolences when some rustler plants a bullet in your thick skull.”

They made their way out of town and back to where the herd grazed peacefully. Granger’s eyes darted from side to side, fingers twitching over his gun every time the wind rustled the leaves of a tree, or a small animal rippled the grass. He imagined outlaws crouched just out of sight, an ambush waiting behind every bush, every boulder.

Hackneyed was just where Granger left him, grazing peacefully near Billy’s spirited stallion, Thunder, just a few feet away from his tent. He watched Hackneyed carefully as he approached. For all that he was finicky, desultory, and sometime plain ornery, Hackneyed was the best barometer Granger knew of to tell of coming danger. The horse sensed thunderstorms long before a single cloud gathered at the horizon, knew the difference between plain ol’ rainstorms and those that might spit out a twister. If danger was nearby, Hackneyed would know it, he reasoned, but he could detect no tenseness in his horse, no undue prancing or nervous twitches.

Seeing Hackneyed untroubled and nibbling delicately went a long way to soothing Granger’s ruffled nerves. He let out a sigh and turned to Billy. “Stay here with the horses. Keep your gun ready, anything moves that don’t have horns... shoot it.”

“I’m not a child, Granger. Stop treating me like one!” Billy huffed. “I’m a man, goddamn it!” His cheeks were flushed with

righteous indignation, his eyes sparking with anger. He looked furious, and as sexy as all hell.

“Damn straight you are,” Granger growled, his voice suddenly husky. His body tightened, forcing his worry to the side. He grabbed Billy’s face between his calloused palms and kissed him hard, wanting more, wanting to strip him naked, throw him down, and fuck him until he screamed and stampeded the fucking cattle. He settled for a kiss, deep and hot, a promise of things to come as soon as he made certain they weren’t in any danger. “You watch this end of the herd. I’m gonna ride out to the other side, check with the drovers over there, ask if they’ve seen anything out of place. Let ‘em know there are outlaws in the area. You see anything, you shoot first and holler second, got it?”

Billy was breathless, even more flushed, but he didn’t look angry anymore. “Yeah, I got it.” As Granger turned and mounted up on Hackneyed, Billy called, “Be careful.”

“You bet. Ain’t gonna get myself killed now. I got plans for you later on.”

That put a smile on Billy’s face and his own as he nudged Hackneyed’s flank and started to weave his way through the herd.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sinopa had skinned the carcass in a hurry, and it showed in the stringy tendons, clumps of fat, and bits of flesh that clung to the underside of the hide. Black flies buzzed, biting him as well as the skin he hid beneath, but he paid them no mind. The steer's skull was heavy, worn on his head like a hat. The long, curving horns would help him pass as one of the herd, at least from a distance. In a group of four thousand, he would blend in as seamlessly as a single leaf in a forest.

Instead, he concentrated on edging closer to the herd, letting the steers become used to the smell of death that clung to him. It was a necessary disguise. He would keep to the periphery of the herd, slowly working his way toward Granger's tent where YellowHair stood alone and unprotected.

When Granger kissed YellowHair, jealousy filled Sinopa's mouth with a bitter taste of nostalgia. He well-remembered Granger's velvet tongue and calloused hands, as much as he'd tried to forget how they once made him feel. It was all he could do to wait patiently for his opportunity, and not kill both men with a couple of well-aimed arrows. In fact, he debated doing just that, even though it would rob him of the satisfaction he craved in forcing Granger to watch YellowHair die.

In the end, he'd convinced himself to wait. Soon, though, in a matter of minutes, he would have YellowHair, and when Granger came for him – as Sinopa knew he would – Sinopa's revenge would at last be at hand. His village would be avenged; Granger would pay in blood for his crimes.

The stallion sensed Sinopa's presence. He danced on his toes, nickering nervously as he caught the scent of blood and man on the wind. Luckily, YellowHair was either too inexperienced or dull-witted to take notice; he glanced once at the horse and called out a rebuke, then returned to staring out in the direction Granger had ridden.

Foolish, Sinopa thought as he crept to within a few yards of him. *Bart's brother has even less sense than his elder. He lets lust blind him to danger.* Moving quickly, he threw off his disguise and dashed toward YellowHair on silent feet. A hard blow to the back of the head with the horn handle of his knife, and YellowHair slumped silently at Sinopa's feet.

Sinopa kicked the unconscious man, disgusted. "Granger wastes his affection on one so unwise," he said, bending down. He tied YellowHair's hands and feet together with a length of rope. A grim smile touched his lips when he noticed YellowHair's hat lying on the ground where it had landed when YellowHair fell. He stuck one of his arrows through it, embedding the sharp flint arrowhead through the wide brim and into the ground.

He was tempted to take YellowHair's horse – the stallion was in his prime and worth a good price – but the beast was already unsettled by the smell of death that clung to Sinopa. He might be difficult to handle, and Sinopa couldn't risk a bucking, agitated horse attracting attention of the drovers on the far side of the herd. He left the stallion where it was and, moving quickly, still smiling a death's head grin, dragged YellowHair toward the shelter of the trees.



Granger checked with every cowboy who'd been left to guard the herd, and nobody'd seen a single, fucking thing out of the ordinary. No outlaws, no Indians, nothing but horns, hides, hooves, and cow pies. Granger turned Hackneyed around, heading back toward his tent. His instincts must be off, or maybe he was just getting old. He'd let himself jump to conclusions, and now he'd look a fool to the boss and Billy. What was he thinking? Getting himself all worked up over a marking on a hide; could be the hide was traded to another Indian, or stolen. It definitely wasn't proof that Sinopa was in the area.

Granger chided himself as he threaded his way between the steer. If he had a lick of sense, he'd make this drive his last. Find himself a cabin somewhere up in the mountains, and spend the rest of his days fishing, maybe do a little trapping.

Get set up on a nice little homestead, nothing fancy, just a cabin in the middle of a whole lot of nowhere, someplace where the ghosts of his past couldn't find him. Maybe he could even convince Billy to come with him.

Granger smiled, feeling his body harden as he thought of cold, snowy nights holed up in a cabin like that with only Billy's lean, young body to keep him warm. Now, that was a life a man could get used to in a hurry. His balls swelled, cock filling, pressing against the fly of his denims, and he urged Hackneyed forward, suddenly anxious to get back to his tent and Billy.

Funny how a stringy little beanpole like Billy could set fire to Granger's skin, but he couldn't deny that Billy's body got him hot and bothered every damned time he thought about it. There was more to it than that, when he considered it. He liked the way Billy's eyes shone with admiration whenever Granger told him stories of Granger's younger days, how he was always eager to touch Granger, or have Granger touch him. The way Billy leaned in when Granger kissed him, and the noises he made when he came.

His dick twitched eagerly when he remembered how sexy Billy looked when he'd been riled up. He grinned, Billy would be lucky if Granger waited until they ducked inside the tent before he stripped him naked.

As he cut around the outside edge of the herd, he could see his tent. Granger frowned, eyes darting from left to right. Thunder was still there, although from a distance the horse looked agitated. The tent looked fine, but there was no sign of Billy anywhere. A sudden, icy-cold finger tickled Granger's spine, and he urged Hackneyed into a trot.

He froze when he spotted a crumpled cowhide, recently skinned with the skull still attached, and nearby, Billy's hat lying in the dirt with an arrow stuck through it. Granger's heart did an odd flip-flop in his chest, and his stomach dropped, leaving him feeling nauseated.

Sliding out of the saddle, he stared down at Billy's hat, feeling the blood drain from his head to his feet. The arrow was frighteningly familiar. He'd handled others just like it, admiring

the smooth, chokecherry shaft fletched with three crow feathers, and carefully knapped, razor-sharp head.

Sinopa had always taken great pride in his workmanship.

Granger yanked the arrow out of the ground, and pulled it free from the brim of Billy's hat. A quick inspection of the earth and hat thankfully revealed no blood; Sinopa had taken Billy but not killed him. A whirlwind of questions whipped through his mind. Was it happenstance that crossed his path with Sinopa's again, or had Sinopa been tracking him all along? If so, why had Sinopa waited until now to make his move? Surely there were many times Granger had been wide open for attack. It would have been easy to pick Granger off during the drive. Why now, and why take Billy?

The answer came to him easily.

Sinopa had spied on him and Billy; he knew Billy and Granger were lovers. He wanted revenge, and took Billy as bait. Sinopa knew Granger would try to get Billy back, and was using him to lead Granger to exactly where Sinopa wanted him.

It would be stupid to follow. Sinopa was a deadly hunter; Granger had seen him in action too many times not to know that he could make himself virtually invisible, blending seamlessly in with the brush, until it was too late. By the time Sinopa revealed himself, Granger would be dead. Billy was probably already gone, and if he weren't, he soon would be.

Billy, too young, too green, who'd never hurt anyone, who only wanted to please his father, the trail boss... even Granger. Billy, who tried so hard to be a cowboy, who'd touched Granger's body and his heart, and who'd never done anything wrong. He was being used as a pawn, caught up in a deadly game between Sinopa and Granger that should have ended years ago at the moment Sinopa laid the small bag of gold at Granger's feet, and Granger had seen the black hole where Sinopa's heart and conscience should be.

Granger knew he'd acted like a coward, although he'd never let himself admit it before. Instead of killing Sinopa, instead of ending it there and then, he'd chased Sinopa away, then packed his things and fled.

Now his past had caught up with him, and poor Billy was going to be the one to pay the price for Granger's cowardice.

It was his fault, Granger's, all of it.

Impotent rage fired his blood, and he snapped the arrow in two, tossing both pieces as far from him as he could. He threw his head back and roared his fury, both Hackneyed and Thunder shying at the sound.

His mind was a black cloud of anger as he stalked to where Hackneyed stood, the poor creature's flanks twitching nervously, and tore through his saddlebag. He popped open the chamber of his Colt, making sure it was fully loaded, then shoved a fistful of bullets into his shirt pocket, the casings jingling. He strapped a sheath to his right thigh, tying the ends of the rawhide tight, and slipped his Bowie into it. Another knife was stuck behind his belt at the small of his back, and yet another slid into the side of his right boot along his lower calf.

He knew he was walking right into Sinopa's trap, but he was going to be prepared when he got there. If he was to die, so be it, but he knew one thing – he was going to do his damndest to take Sinopa with him.

Granger forced himself to stand still for a moment and take a deep breath, to calm down. He was going to need his wits about him if he was going up against Sinopa. Sinopa held all the cards – he knew who Billy was, what Billy meant to Granger, and that Granger would come looking for him, ready to kill to get him back. Sinopa would be ready for him when Granger caught up. He couldn't afford to go barreling after them half-cocked.

Bending down near the spot where he'd found Billy's hat, Granger carefully examined the earth. He spotted a footprint, soft and rounded, pressed into the dark dirt. There was no boot heel, or toe marks. It hadn't been made by either a cowboy boot or a bare foot, but might have been left by the soft buckskin moccasins favored by the Blackfeet. The grass was bent; a large area flattened entirely, the earth disturbed. Something – or someone – had been dragged across it

A grim smile creased Granger's cheek as he followed the trail, heading off toward the dark, closely wooded forest at the

edge of the clearing. He followed a trail of snapped twigs, softly rounded footprints, and broken stalks of grass deep into the tree line. It veered east, continuing on for a spell until it cut north, going ever deeper into the forest. The trail was easy to follow, Sinopa had made damn sure Granger could track them.

Sunlight dappled the ground, filtered through the thick canopy of interlocking branches overhead. Birds twittered in the distance, but fell silent as Granger drew near. He listened carefully for anything that sounded out of place, but heard nothing out of the ordinary. He knew that even though he was being led – herded, like a fucking steer – to where Sinopa wanted him, Sinopa wouldn't be stupid enough to give away his position. He kept his right hand held ready over the butt of his Colt, his skin itching with nerves. Every step he took intensified the feeling that he was being led into a trap. His instincts were howling, he was close, and getting closer by the minute. Alert for the tiniest sound, a scent, anything that might give away the position of his former lover, he pressed on.

CHAPTER NINE

It would not be long now, Sinopa mused. He crouched behind a thicket, screened from view by the brush. In the center of a small clearing before him, YellowHair lay still upon the ground, bound hand and foot. He wasn't dead; Sinopa was saving killing him for when Granger arrived, although he had been sorely tempted many times during his trek through the forest to slit YellowHair's throat and leave a trail of blood for Granger to follow. YellowHair's chest continued to rise and fall, but he had not gained consciousness since Sinopa had hit him over the head.

Not that it mattered if he ever did. It was not YellowHair's eyes Sinopa wished to see when he killed him – it was Granger's. Sinopa wanted to see them widen, see the pain YellowHair's death would paint in Granger's expressive eyes. Would he weep for his lover? Or was YellowHair like Sinopa himself, easily cast aside?

He hoped for the former. He wanted Granger to suffer before he died.

His thoughts turned momentarily to the Red Earth Gang. Bart would be looking for him. He was supposed to return with news of the drovers' positions, how many men had stayed behind, and where they were in relation to the herd. He had promised Bart he would not kill Bart's younger brother or Granger beforehand, but when the opportunity to take YellowHair presented itself, Sinopa had seized it.

He shrugged and shifted his weight minutely to ease the cramping in his thigh from remaining crouched for so long. Let Bart fume, once Granger was dead, Sinopa would kill Bart and his men as well.

YellowHair moaned softly, and his head rolled from one side to the other. Sinopa tensed, waiting to hear a shout or cry of protest, but none came. YellowHair's eyes never fluttered open, and his voice never rose above a pained whisper.

Sinopa's brow knit. He would rather YellowHair be awake and screaming. He found himself hoping Granger was not as adept at tracking as he remembered him to be; the longer he took to find them, the more time YellowHair would have to recover.

Granger would be armed, of course, but it wouldn't matter. Sinopa was close enough to YellowHair to reach his side in an instant. The moment he heard Granger approach, he would move from the brush, and use YellowHair as a human shield. Granger wouldn't dare fire.

Once Sinopa had slit YellowHair's throat, Granger would be too blinded by grief to see Sinopa's knife, still red with YellowHair's blood, fly through the air until it was embedded in his chest.

The thought brought a smile to Sinopa's lips, and he settled down again to listen and wait.



Granger forced himself to slow, although every fiber in his being urged him to rush ahead, crashing through the brush until he reached Billy's side. Through a small gap in a thick screen of leaves, he could see Billy curled on his side in the dirt, hands and feet bound. Bits of leaves and bark dusted his blond hair, his face and hands were scratched and dirty.

But he was breathing, and that was all Granger needed to know. He felt an easing of some of the tension that had knotted his back. He wasn't too late. Sinopa hadn't yet killed Billy, and instantly Granger knew why. Sinopa wanted to murder him in front of Granger, make Granger witness the terror in Billy's eyes as he died.

Not in my lifetime, he thought. *Sinopa, you're a dead man, even if you don't know it yet.*

He pulled his Colt from his holster and almost smiled as he wove his way silently through the brush, taking care not to make the slightest noise, knowing Sinopa would be nearby, listening for his approach. It was Sinopa himself who'd taught Granger to move like a ghost through the forest, never suspecting that a time would come when Granger would use that skill against him.

Slowly, Granger began to circle around the clearing. Sinopa was here, he was sure of it, hiding in the bushes, waiting for Granger to show himself. He knew Granger would be armed, knew how good he was with a gun. No doubt Sinopa planned to use Billy to shield himself. The only hope Granger had was to reach Sinopa before he knew Granger was there.

He took one step, then another, placing his feet with care so as not to disturb a single leaf or branch. More than once he forced himself to pause, to listen, his ears straining to catch the slightest sound on the breeze. A movement nearly caused him to fire a shot from the Colt, but it was only a rabbit. It scurried across Granger's path and down a hole, out of sight. *Damn it!* Granger swore, taking a deep, calming breath. *Can't be shooting at shadows, not now.*

He crept around the trunk of a giant oak, and stopped, his heart pounding in his chest. Through the tangled bramble of a blackberry bush, he caught the sight of a dark head and a long braid knotted with feathers and bits of bone. Sinopa was crouched not twenty feet away, staring intently at the spot where Granger knew Billy lay. He raised his Colt, sighting carefully, his thumb slowly cocking the hammer. It clicked, and he fired.

The sound of the hammer clicking was like thunder in the silence of the forest, and Granger realized it was all the warning Sinopa needed. Sinopa didn't hesitate, he threw himself forward through the brush, scrambling to reach Billy, and Granger swore as the bullet whizzed by so close to the side of Sinopa's head that he surely felt the breeze it made. Granger fired again, but it did nothing but kick up a puff of dirt and leaves near Sinopa's right foot as he broke into the clearing and raced to his captive. His knife was already in his hand as he yanked Billy up and held his body against his, facing the direction where Granger hid.

"Granger! Show yourself!" Sinopa cried, putting the blade to the soft skin under Billy's chin.

"Don't have to happen this way, Sinopa! You kill Billy, I kill you. Let him go, and you live. It's that simple." Granger struggled to keep his voice from betraying the wild beating of his heart. One slip, one false move, and the knife Sinopa held to

Billy's throat would slice through it. He prayed Billy didn't regain consciousness. If he did and began to struggle, he'd die.

"No. You will be the one to die here today, Granger," Sinopa replied, his lips curling in a sneer. He dropped his arm from around Billy's waist, grabbing a fistful of blond hair. He snapped Billy's head back, exposing his throat and the knife pressed against it. "You and him."

Granger held his tongue, and began to edge slowly to his left. If he could get far enough to the side, he might be able to get off a clean shot without hitting Billy.

"Show yourself!" Sinopa yelled again. He moved the blade slightly; it broke the delicate skin of Billy's throat, drawing a thin trickle of blood.

The sight of red against the pallor of Billy's throat refueled Granger's rage. His breath caught, and his fingers reflexively tightened on the Colt. "Stop it! I swear to God if you hurt him—"

"What do I care what you swear to your god? Because of you, my people are dead! Because of your lies, your treachery! I swore to them I would take revenge for them!"

"What are you talking about?" Granger asked, moving again to his left. "I did nothing to your people!" *Keep him talking, keep him distracted*, he thought. The sight of Billy's blood had shaken him. It was only a scratch, but the next cut would be much deeper, he was sure of it.

"I trusted you, followed you! I was not there to fight because of you!" Sinopa roared.

"As I recall, you wanted to come with me," Granger retorted, and took another step.

"Liar! You confused me, seduced me!"

Billy chose that moment to begin to stir, moaning softly. Granger froze and held his breath, if Billy woke up with a start, he'd slice his own throat on Sinopa's blade. He had no choice, not if he wanted Billy to live.

"I'm coming out, Sinopa!" He called, tossing his Colt out of the bushes. It landed in the dirt outside of Sinopa's grasp.

"And your knife!" Sinopa yelled, and Granger cursed him silently for knowing he'd have one. It followed the gun. Granger stepped out from behind the screen of brush, holding his hands in the air.

"Okay. Here I am. Let him go, Sinopa." His blood froze at the grin that bared Sinopa's teeth. It was more a grimace than smile, malicious and insane.

"G-Granger?" Billy's eyes blinked rapidly as if he couldn't quite focus. "W-hat...?"

"Shh, Billy. Don't move," Granger said, willing him to listen and understand. "Sinopa, let him go."

"Why? He is your man now. You took my family from me, and I will take your man from you!"

"No!" Granger yelled. He judged the distance between himself and Sinopa. There was no way he could reach Sinopa before the deadly blade bit deeply into Billy's neck.

Suddenly, there was a loud noise coming from the direction of the herd. Granger heard bodies moving quickly through the forest, and the voices of men shouting to one another.

"Here! There's footprints here!"

"This way!"

Sinopa's head whipped from side to side, first looking toward Granger, then toward the sounds of the strangers' voices. From the look on his face, Granger understood that while the voices were unfamiliar to him, they weren't to Sinopa. He knew who was coming.

A man with dark blond hair burst through the brush on the opposite side of the clearing. He looked vaguely familiar to Granger, although Granger couldn't recall meeting him before. Then Granger realized he looked a lot like Billy, although older.

"What are you doing, Sinopa?" The man spat out, advancing on Sinopa. His gun was drawn, and aimed at Sinopa's head.

Sinopa moved, dragging Billy around to shield him from the gun. It was the moment Granger had been waiting for. He dove for his gun, took aim and fired.

The shot brought the attention and the guns of the blond man and his companions to bear on Granger, but he didn't

care. All that mattered was that his aim hadn't been off. The bullet hit Sinopa in the meaty part of his arm, and he dropped the knife he'd held to Billy's throat. Uncaring of the guns trained on him, Granger dashed across the clearing and pulled Billy free from Sinopa's grasp.

"Granger? What's going on? What happened?" Billy asked, leaning heavily against Granger. He touched his head and winced. "Who's the Indian?" Looking around he gasped. "Bart? Is that you?"

"You know this man, Billy?" Granger asked, nodding toward the blond.

"Yes, he's my brother, the one I told you about."

"Yeah, we're brothers," the blond said, his lip curling into an ugly sneer. "But I'm about to be an only child. Sinopa jumped the gun, so to speak. The stupid bastard wasn't supposed to kill Billy until after we got a report on who was guarding the herd." The gun in his hand swung to point directly at Billy's chest. "Guess it can't wait now. Gonna have to kill both you and him."

Granger turned, putting himself between Bart's gun and Billy. "You want the herd? Take it! Be my guest!"

Bart laughed. "Sorry, that's not good enough. Gotta get rid of Billy, since our father went and made him his heir. When I get back to the Lazy J, I'm gonna kill the old bastard, too. The whole operation will be mine, then... well, after I get rid of our Ma and little sister."

"No!" Billy screamed, trying to twist toward Bart. "Not Ma and Emma!"

"Oh, shut up, you little mealy-mouthed baby! I listened to you whine for almost eighteen years and I'm sick of it! I'm gonna kill this sodomite you've been sleeping with, and then kill you!" Bart barked.

Granger heard the click of a hammer, and closed his eyes, thinking for sure the next thing he heard would be the bullet shattering his skull. He heard the shot, but felt no pain. Instead he heard a howl of agony coming from in front of him.

Opening his eyes, he saw Bart fall, Sinopa's knife embedded in his chest. Granger turned again, pushed Billy roughly to the ground and quickly took aim.

Gunfire erupted from the weapons of the men who'd come with Bart. Sinopa did a crazy dance as the bullets tore into him, blood soaking his buckskins. He died on his feet, gone before he hit the ground.

Granger and the men of the Red Earth Gang stood staring at one another for a few long, tense moments. Between them, Bart's breath bubbled, and finally stopped.

"We're no threat to you," Granger said softly. He made eye contact with each of the men, then slowly lowered his gun. "We have nothing you want. You want the herd? Take it. Just leave us in peace."

One of the men looked down at Bart, then turned his head and spat on the ground. "Never did like the asshole anyway," he said. His small eyes flicked toward Granger. "But we didn't come all this way, and through a heap of trouble for nothing. Don't want the herd, not enough of us to drive 'er, and we're too close to the Fort to chance it. What else you got that'll convince us to let you live?"

Granger nodded, then slipped his hand inside his shirt, slowly, and pulled out a small black bag he'd kept in the waistband of his pants. He weighed it a few times in the palm of his hand, then looked at Billy and smiled. "This was never mine in the first place. Couldn't bring myself to spend it; couldn't bring myself to throw it away, neither. I'm glad to be rid of it," he said, tossing the bag at the feet of the man who'd spoken. "Take it. There's more than enough in there to pay for your troubles, I reckon."

The man cocked an eyebrow and scooped the bag up from the ground. He fussed at the rawhide that held it closed, and opened it, spilling some of its contents into his hand. The gold caught the last few rays of sunshine filtering through the leaves, glittering in his palm. His cheek twitched in a half-smile, and he nodded. He motioned to the other men. "Let's clear out afore the law comes sniffing around."

Granger breathed a sigh of relief when they turned and melted into the forest, leaving Billy and him alone in the clearing with the bodies of Bart and Sinopa. He turned to Billy, who was shaking and pale. "You okay, kid?" he asked, gently probing Billy's head. The wound had stopped bleeding, but he knew Billy would have a headache for at least a couple of days afterward.

"He was my brother, Granger. I knew he hated Pa, and he was always as mean as a badger, but I didn't realize he hated me, too."

"He was twisted up inside with greed, Billy. I knew someone just like him," Granger said, glancing at Sinopa's body.

"That was a lot of gold you just gave away," Billy said softly.

"Yeah, well, I ain't the greedy sort. As long as I have what I need, I figure I'm doing okay." Granger smiled softly at Billy, running a thumb along the curve of his jaw.

"Yeah? You got what you need now, Granger?" Billy asked, leaning in to him.

"That depends. You gonna stay with me after we see the herd to Oregon?"

Billy smiled up at him. "I never did want to be a rancher."

"Well, then I guess I have everything I need then," Granger said softly. He drew Billy close and kissed him, then held him just because he wanted to, and he could. When he finally let go and began to lead Billy out of the clearing, he felt lighter, as if he left a heavy burden behind him.

CHAPTER TEN

They returned to the clearing the next day and laid both Sinopa and Bart to rest under the sheltering arms of the trees. Neither felt inclined to say a prayer, instead they spent a few moments in silence, both thinking about the men they were burying and the way their paths had crossed.

Then they turned their backs and left the glade, knowing they'd never return.

The next two months were hard, but not because of the work. Billy continued to improve as a drover, under Granger's tutorage, quickly growing competent as a rider and a cowboy. What was difficult was keeping their growing feelings for one another secret. They had to constantly be on guard to keep their distance when in sight of the other men.

What a man did after dark to relieve the loneliness of the trail was one thing, flaunting it in broad daylight was another. At night, Granger was glad to tuck himself and Billy away in his tent, but during the day, he kept Billy at an arm's length, and with each passing hour, it grew more and more difficult to live the lie.

Finally, though, they brought the herd in. Granger and Billy watched from horseback as one of the drovers shooed the Judas Steer into the pens that surrounded the slaughterhouse, the rest of the herd following meekly behind.

From there Billy and Granger rode south to California, along the sheer cliffs that dropped away to the rolling waves of the Pacific. Neither had any specific place in mind to settle down, but when they happened across a small valley not far from the Baja border, they both knew they'd found it.

They were living in Granger's old, worn tent, slowly hauling wood from the forests that edged the valley, eventually to be hewn into logs for a cabin. The sun was a burning hot, yellow ball in the sky, and both men were soaked with sweat when they decided to take a break. Billy washed up in a hurry then

stretched himself out under the shade of a nearby tree, arms tucked up under his head, hat pulled down low over his face.

Bending over the creek, Granger scooped the clear cold water into his hands and splashed his face. Suddenly, something glittering at the bottom of the shallow creek caught his eye. Reaching in, he scooped up a handful of silt, letting the gently babbling water sift through it, washing away the dirt. In his palm lay three small golden nuggets.

He laughed, thinking Fate had a funny sense of humor, tossed them back in, dusted off his hands, finished washing his face, and went to join Billy under the tree.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KIERNAN KELLY lives in the wilds of the alligator-infested U.S. Southeast, slathered in SPF 45, drinking colorful tropical, hi-octane concoctions served by thong-clad cabana boys. All right, the truth is that she spends her time locked in the dark recesses of her office, writing gay erotica while chained to a temperamental Macintosh, drinking coffee, and dreaming of thong-clad cabana boys. Sigh. You can find Kiernan on the internet at: <http://www.KiernanKelly.com> or <http://kiernankelly.livejournal.com>

MLR PRESS AUTHORS

Featuring a roll call of some of the best writers of gay erotica and mysteries today!

Maura Anderson

Victor J. Banis

Jeanne Barrack

Laura Baumbach

Alex Beecroft

Sarah Black

Ally Blue

J.P. Bowie

P.A. Brown

James Buchanan

Jordan Castillo Price

Kirby Crow

Dick D.

Jason Edding

Angela Fiddler

Dakota Flint

Kimberly Gardner

Storm Grant

Amber Green

LB Gregg

Drewey Wayne Gunn

Samantha Kane

Kiernan Kelly

JL Langley

Josh Lanyon

Clare London

William Maltese

Gary Martine

ZA Maxfield

Jet Mykles

L. Picaro

Neil Plakcy

Luisa Prieto

Rick R. Reed

AM Riley

George Seaton

Jardonn Smith

Caro Soles

Richard Stevenson

Claire Thompson

Kit Zheng

*Check out titles, both available and forthcoming, at
www.mlrpess.com*

THE TREVOR PROJECT

The Trevor Project operates the only nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. Every day, The Trevor Project saves lives through its free and confidential helpline, its website and its educational services. If you or a friend are feeling lost or alone call The Trevor Helpline. If you or a friend are feeling lost, alone, confused or in crisis, please call The Trevor Helpline. You'll be able to speak confidentially with a trained counselor 24/7.

The Trevor Helpline: 866-488-7386

On the Web: <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

THE GAY MEN'S DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROJECT

Founded in 1994, The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project is a grassroots, non-profit organization founded by a gay male survivor of domestic violence and developed through the strength, contributions and participation of the community. The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project supports victims and survivors through education, advocacy and direct services. Understanding that the serious public health issue of domestic violence is not gender specific, we serve men in relationships with men, regardless of how they identify, and stand ready to assist them in navigating through abusive relationships.

GMDVP Helpline: 800.832.1901

On the Web: <http://gmdvp.org/>

THE GAY & LESBIAN ALLIANCE AGAINST DEFAMATION/GLAAD EN ESPAÑOL

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) is dedicated to promoting and ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a means of eliminating homophobia and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

On the Web: <http://www.glaad.org/>

GLAAD en español:

<http://www.glaad.org/espanol/bienvenido.php>

SERVICEMEMBERS LEGAL DEFENSE NETWORK

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, legal services, watchdog and policy organization dedicated to ending discrimination against and harassment of military personnel affected by “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT). The SLDN provides free, confidential legal services to all those impacted by DADT and related discrimination. Since 1993, its inhouse legal team has responded to more than 9,000 requests for assistance. In Congress, it leads the fight to repeal DADT and replace it with a law that ensures equal treatment for every servicemember, regardless of sexual orientation. In the courts, it works to challenge the constitutionality of DADT.

SLDN

Call: (202) 328-3244

PO Box 65301

or (202) 328-FAIR

Washington DC 20035-5301

e-mail: sldn@sldn.org

On the Web: <http://sldn.org/>

THE GLBT NATIONAL HELP CENTER

The GLBT National Help Center is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization that is dedicated to meeting the needs of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community and those questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity. It is an outgrowth of the Gay & Lesbian National Hotline, which began in 1996 and now is a primary program of The GLBT National Help Center. It offers several different programs including two national hotlines that help members of the GLBT community talk about the important issues that they are facing in their lives. It helps end the isolation that many people feel, by providing a safe environment on the phone or via the internet to discuss issues that people can’t talk about anywhere else. The GLBT National Help Center also helps other organizations build the infrastructure they need to provide strong support to our community at the local level.

National Hotline: 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564)

National Youth Talkline 1-800-246-PRIDE (1-800-246-7743)

On the Web: <http://www.glnh.org/>

e-mail: info@glbtnationalhelpcenter.org

If you're a GLBT and questioning student heading off to university, should know that there are resources on campus for you. Here's just a sample:

US Local GLBT college campus organizations

<http://dv-8.com/resources/us/local/campus.html>

GLBT Scholarship Resources

<http://tinyurl.com/6fx9v6>

Syracuse University

<http://lgbt.syr.edu/>

Texas A&M

<http://glbt.tamu.edu/>

Tulane University

<http://www.oma.tulane.edu/LGBT/Default.htm>

University of Alaska

<http://www.uaf.edu/agla/>

University of California, Davis

<http://lgbtrc.ucdavis.edu/>

University of California, San Francisco

<http://lgbt.ucsf.edu/>

University of Colorado

<http://www.colorado.edu/glbtrc/>

University of Florida

<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/multicultural/lgbt/>

University of Hawai'i, Mānoa

<http://manoa.hawaii.edu/lgbt/>

University of Utah

<http://www.sa.utah.edu/lgbt/>

University of Virginia

<http://www.virginia.edu/deanofstudents/lgbt/>

Vanderbilt University

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/>



Stimulate yourself.
READ.

www.manloveromance.com

THE HOTTEST M/M EROTIC AUTHORS & WEBSITES ON THE NET

