



Bitter
Creek's
Redemption

T. A. Chase

BITTER CREEK'S REDEMPTION

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BY

T. A. CHASE

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BITTER CREEK'S REDEMPTION
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*To all my readers who wanted an
Old West story. Thank you for indulging me.*

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*All that is necessary for the triumph of evil
is for good men to do nothing.*

—Edmund Burke

CHAPTER 1

The uneven clip-clop of an exhausted horse drew Eagle from where he'd been working in the livery stable. The sound stopped as he passed the barn door in time to catch the dirt- and blood-covered rider sliding from the saddle.

Torn between helping the man or the horse, the choice was made for him.

"Take care of him," Ralph Ramsey gasped, waving a weak hand toward the gelding.

"Yes, sir," Eagle mumbled and propped Ralph against the side of the barn.

Murmuring in the low tone he'd learned horses loved, he approached the gelding. The chestnut laid his ears back, but made no effort to run or evade Eagle's hand. He snatched up the reins

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and led the trembling horse into the barn. Everyone knew the chestnut was Ralph's pride and joy. The man babied it worse than a mother hen with a chick. Something bad must have happened to cause Ralph to run the gelding almost to death.

Eagle cooled the horse out, brushed him down and put him in a stall with water and hay. He went back out to Ralph and found the man slumped over, hand clutched to the bloody wound in his gut. Moving as carefully as he could, he gathered the man in his arms and carried him to his own room at the back of the livery. He lit a candle, making sure not to let the light shine through the one window. Something told him he needed to hide Ralph. He built the fire up and put water on to boil.

"Things are getting bad, Eagle," Ralph rasped out.

He grunted, not really answering. People might consider him a savage half-breed, but he wasn't stupid. When a good man like Ralph Ramsey got shot, things obviously were going to hell. Eagle gathered some clean rags and a bottle of cheap whiskey. With as much blood as covered Ralph and the man's saddle, Eagle knew there was no way to save him. All he could do was make him comfortable and hope he didn't live much longer.

Brushing back Ralph's blond hair, Eagle remembered the one night he and Ralph had spent together. Ralph had been lonely and a little drunk, but Eagle didn't care. Loneliness was an emotion he understood well and he'd been willing to offer Ralph a warm body to ease the long night. Of course, it was the only time Ralph had ever crossed that line, but Eagle stayed on in this wretched town, hoping for more and knowing it would never happen.

True night had fallen by the time Ralph died. Eagle sat, staring at the battered body of his friend and knowing that with the death of this particular man, any restraints holding back the land-hungry

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cattle barons were gone. Maybe it was time to return to his mother's people and learn to live with them, because life in Bitter Creek was going to get deadly soon.

He carefully wrapped Ralph in his best blanket and carried his limp body to a wagon he'd gotten ready earlier. Eagle brought the horses out, muffling their feet with blankets and murmuring to them. Horses didn't like moving at night. Too many predators hunted in the dark. He understood their fear because it grew in him as well.

Glancing at the moon, he figured he would have enough time to get to the burial ground and then out to Ralph's place before sunrise. Hopefully, whoever shot the man wasn't still there. He led Ralph's chestnut out and attached his lead rein to the wagon.

Eagle rode out of town, keeping an eye behind him to see if anyone noticed his departure. No lights came on and no shadows moved, so he was safe for now. Riding in the dark could cause a man to think and Eagle wasn't immune to thinking.

Before Ralph died, he'd entrusted a letter to Eagle, asking him to mail it. Eagle agreed, even though it meant he would have to go over to Sampson's Trading Post to do it since he couldn't trust anyone in Bitter Creek not to tell Buffert or Tansford what he was doing. Sampson was a good man and had always treated Eagle well, or as well as any white man treated a half-Comanche.

Night was half over by the time Eagle finished covering Ralph's grave with dirt. He tucked his hair behind his ears and stared down at the pile of dark earth. What words could he say? There was no one to comfort with words of how great a man Ralph was. Eagle didn't believe in heaven or hell, so he couldn't wish the man's soul to either one.

Finally, he simply wished for justice. No man deserved to be

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gut shot, beaten, and run off his land like Ralph was. Eagle didn't know where the justice would come from, but he hoped someone would stand up to the men who did this to Ralph.

Tossing the shovel in the wagon, he climbed up on the seat and clicked to the horses. They didn't move, and he tensed, sensing the presence of someone. He leaned back, getting a hold of his rifle before the figure stepped from the shadows of the few oak trees around the burial ground.

"What are you doing here, brother?"

He relaxed slightly. Barking Dog was his half-brother and not inclined to cause Eagle problems, though burying a white man in their sacred ground might make him change his mind.

"I'm burying a friend." He gestured behind him. "Someone shot Ralph Ramsey and he died an hour ago at my place."

Barking Dog grunted, but didn't speak.

"I have to mail a letter for him and gather his horses. He made me promise not to let anyone have them who isn't family."

"How will you know who is family or not?"

He shrugged. "Ralph said I'd know. I'm taking his horses to the canyon. Will you let the others know they're mine?"

Barking Dog studied him through the darkness, and Eagle made sure not to let any doubt show on his face. Some braves in his mother's tribe looked down on Eagle because of his half-white blood and his choosing to live with the white men, but Eagle never backed down from them, as he never did from the white men either. He would make his own way in the world and the rest would just have to accept his decision.

"I will do that, brother, and I will help you gather them tonight." Barking Dog led a small Indian pony out from the trees and swung aboard. "Give me your letter. I will take it to

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Sampson's. You should not be gone long, if you do not want them to wonder where you are."

Eagle bowed his head. "Thank you, Barking Dog. You are a true warrior."

He handed over the letter and allowed the burden to roll off his shoulders. If Barking Dog said he would deliver it, he would, and Eagle could worry about other things, like moving thirty head of horses in the dark.

The sun was just breaking the horizon when Eagle entered his room behind the livery. There would be no time for sleep today. People would be arriving to rent horses and stable theirs while they were in town. He built up his fire and put water on to boil. Washing up was the first thing on his list, along with putting the rags he'd used to clean Ralph's wounds in to soak afterward. When the water was boiling, he quickly cleaned up and tossed the rags in. Banking the fire, he pulled on clean clothes and started out to the barn.

"Hey, Breed, where the hell are you?"

Eagle hid his grimace and headed to where his boss stood, just outside the stable. Irv Johnson stank of sweat, whiskey and cigar smoke. Eagle often wondered if the man ever bathed. His stench and the fact he was one of the cruelest men Eagle had ever known were just two reasons why he and the horses hated Irv.

"Did you need me, boss?"

He kept his eyes down, knowing Irv hated anyone who might be tougher than him. As much as Eagle disliked Irv, he loved the horses and his job, so he did what he had to do to deal with the man.

"Yeah, the sheriff needs three horses saddled and delivered to the jail pronto."

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“Yes, sir.”

Shuffling off to where the rental horses were kept, Eagle stuffed his hands in his pockets. It wouldn't do to let Irv see his hands trembling. Was the sheriff heading out to Ralph's? Had someone reported Ralph missing and his horses gone?

Eagle wasn't worried about the sheriff or his scouts finding the trail of the herd he and Barking Dog had moved. The best warrior in the tribe, Barking Dog's father, had trained them and neither would risk his wrath by letting some drunk white man find those horses.

“After you've delivered those horses, get your dirty Injun ass back here and clean out those stalls.”

He nodded, but didn't answer. Another day had started, just like it always did, but this one held a hint of fearful anticipation to it. Eagle knew it would only be a matter of time before hell broke loose, and he hoped he managed to survive the outcome long enough to deliver Ralph's horses to his brothers, then he would leave. Maybe find someplace where being half-Indian didn't matter to folks.

CHAPTER 2

The disappearance of Ralph Ramsey and his horses remained the topic of conversation for months afterward. Eagle went about his business. No one asked his opinion and he wouldn't have given one if anyone had. The best way to stay out of the coming fight was by keeping quiet, which was something Eagle did well.

He knew some of the cowboys thought he was a coward and weak. The opinion of others rarely mattered to Eagle. All he cared about was surviving the white man's world and if that meant turning the other cheek at times, he'd swallow his pride and do it.

Buffert and Tansford laid claim to Ramsey's land, and the fight Eagle imagined broke out. In the three months since Ralph's death, ten other men had died. No one had discovered Ralph's grave or the horses hidden in the canyon. Barking Dog and Eagle's other

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half-brothers kept an eye on them.

Cold-eyed gunfighters rode into town every day, taking sides and running roughshod over the townsfolk. Eagle took care of the men's horses, absorbed their abuse and rejoiced each time one died.

Guns for hire were like rabid dogs in Eagle's mind. Vicious and violent, they were interested in money and inflicting pain. He avoided them when he could. Yet each time a stranger arrived at the livery, he'd study him, trying to find a sign this was the man Ralph said would come for the horses. Each time he would be disappointed. Maybe the letter had gotten lost or whomever it was sent to had moved.

There were moments in the dark of night when Eagle thought about taking the horses and leaving the area. He could go up north or out to the coast. There was land to be had there and he could raise horses like he'd always dreamed of.

The light of morning would clear his head of those silly imaginings. Even if Ralph's family never showed, if he left, someone would believe Eagle had stolen them, he'd hang and the horses would go to someone else. So he stayed silent, kept his head down and went about his job.

Four months to the day Ralph died, another cold-eyed stranger rode up to the livery stable. Eagle went out to take hold of the horse's bridle. The steel dust grey threw its head in the air and danced away.

"Easy there."

Something in the man's voice caused a shiver to race down Eagle's spine. Honey drawl coated the words, telling of Deep South roots. Only one person in the area had sounded like that. His wait was over. Someone had come for Ralph Ramsey's horses.

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Squaring his shoulders, Eagle glanced up and met the coldest ice-blue eyes he'd ever seen. The man studied him for a moment before dismissing him, turning to look over his shoulder at the town. While Eagle held the stallion still, the rider swung down.

"Be careful. He doesn't like people and he'll take a chunk out of you if you're not paying attention to him."

Eagle nodded and started to lead the horse toward the stable. The rider kept pace with him, and Eagle stumbled, nerves getting the best of him. The horse jerked up its head, startled by his clumsiness.

"Maybe I should take him." The stranger's voice held a hint of amusement.

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"Be careful, you stupid Injun."

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He dodged enough for Irv's blow to glance off his shoulder instead of taking the full brunt of it. He let his anger roll away as well. Dealing with Irv was easy. Eagle ignored the insults and abuse hurled his way. The only thing he wouldn't allow was letting Irv abuse the horses. He'd taken many a beating by stepping in to save one of the animals.

"I saw the restaurant a little ways up the street. How's the food there?"

The change in subject and the thickening of the man's drawl told Eagle that his signal had been read correctly.

"Jake makes some of the best food in the territory, stranger. My name is Irv Johnson. I'm the owner here."

Peeking from under his lashes, Eagle saw Irv holding out his hand to the stranger. The man just stared at Irv until he was forced to drop his hand or continue to look like a fool.

"I've been riding for the past couple of weeks to get here. If you could direct me to either a boardinghouse or the hotel, I'll leave you two to your work."

The stranger swung around like a striking snake, and Eagle jumped, not expecting to feel those cold eyes on him again.

"Take care of him, and I'll be back later."

Eagle risked meeting those icy eyes and nodded.

"We'll treat him like he was our own," Irv boomed.

"Somehow that doesn't inspire confidence in me."

Both Irv and Eagle watched the man stroll from the barn and, when he was out of earshot, Irv spit.

"Arrogant bastard. Wonder why he's interested in Ramsey's place. Bet Buffert and Tansford would be willing to pay for this information."

Eagle said nothing, figuring his boss wasn't really talking to

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him.

Irv turned toward him. "Go through the man's saddlebags and let me know if you find out who he is."

Grunting, Eagle let his boss think he was agreeing to that. There was no way he was going to snoop around that man's stuff. He'd gotten the impression the stranger wouldn't hesitate to kill him if he thought Eagle had done something to invade his privacy.

Irv wandered off, and Eagle pulled out the currycomb to brush down the stallion. The man's warning about the horse stayed in his mind and he didn't let his mind wander.

By the time he finished grooming the horse, Irv had left to head to the saloon, where he would be selling his information to the highest bidder. Someday, those men were going to get tired of Irv and kill him. Eagle wouldn't mourn the loss.

He wandered back to his room after cleaning the rest of the stalls. It was time for dinner and deciding just how to go about contacting the stranger. Reaching out to push open his door, he stopped. It was already open a few inches. That meant either someone had been snooping around his stuff or someone was waiting for him.

Circumstances dictated caution, so he shoved the door open and ducked to the side, in case someone started shooting. Nothing happened and he straightened.

"Come in. I don't plan on killing you today."

Eagle stepped into his room, shutting the door behind him. The stranger sat at his table with Eagle's few meager possessions spread out in front of him. Resentment boiled in Eagle, but he didn't give voice to it. As much as he'd valued this man's privacy, the same courtesy hadn't been extended to him.

"Why are you here?" Eagle walked to the stove where a pot of

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stew boiled over the low, banked fire.

"I'm looking for Ralph Ramsey. Obviously, something has happened or he would never have written me. Plus I saw the way your boss's eyes lit up when I mentioned I was looking for him." The stranger pinned Eagle with his gaze. "You didn't want me asking any more questions, so I'm thinking you know more than any of the others."

"I might." Eagle scooped some stew into a bowl, grabbing a biscuit from the tin over the stove. He gestured to the pot. "You're welcome to have some if you want."

"Did you kill someone else's cow for that meat?"

Nothing showed on the man's face, and Eagle didn't know if he was joking with him or testing him.

"No. I killed a deer outside of town."

His company stood, served himself and sat back down at the table. They sat, staring at each other for a moment.

"Who are you?" Eagle decided being rude was better than allowing this man to control the conversation.

"I'm a friend of Ralph's."

He'd been right. Hell and justice had ridden into town on a steel dust stallion.

CHAPTER 3

Staring across the table, Travis studied the half-breed, trying to figure out what it was about the man that had made Ralph swear Travis could trust him. At the thought of his oldest brother, Travis closed his eyes briefly, fighting back the wave of tears and sadness threatening to break through. He wouldn't give in to those emotions. Anger made his life easier and gave him the strength to do what he had to do.

"Do you know what I'm looking for?"

The breed didn't speak, keeping his head down and eating quickly.

What had he said his name was? *Eagle, that was it.*

"Eagle the only name you got, Indian?" Pushing his plate away, he leaned back in his chair, his hand coming to rest in its familiar

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place on his belt, next to the butt of his gun.

"It's the only one that matters."

Eagle stood, took Travis's plate along with his own and set them in a bucket of water to soak. In the same quiet, efficient manner, he put away all the items Travis had pulled out.

"Why'd you stop me from asking directions to the Ramsey place?"

The Indian held up a bottle of whiskey and a glass. It had been a long, dry ride, so he nodded. After pouring him a drink, Eagle set the bottle by Travis's elbow and moved back to the other side of the table.

"None for you?" He slammed the liquor back and poured another one.

"I don't drink that poison. I didn't stop you from asking directions. I shook my head, and you assumed I was telling you to stop."

Night had fallen and Eagle lit candles instead of lanterns. Travis's gaze fell on Eagle's long, black hair and how it shimmered in the flickering light like a raven's wing in the sun. Blinking, he broke whatever spell was entangling him.

Travis jumped to his feet, reached across the table and grabbed the front of Eagle's shirt. Twisting his hand in the fabric, he jerked the other man toward him. Inches away from each other, he saw that Eagle's eyes were an odd red hazel that swirled with streaks of black as he brought his own anger under control.

"You know what I'm here for, so don't treat me like a Goddamn idiot," he snarled.

Eagle's calm visage served to fuel Travis's anger even more. He raised his free hand to deliver a blow to Eagle's face. There was no fear in the man's eyes. Eagle had no way of protecting

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himself without losing his balance, and Travis could tell he would have taken the blow.

Letting go of Eagle and dropping his hand, Travis stepped away from the table. He turned his back on the man. Giving up any advantage was something he hadn't done since he was ten. With a trembling hand, he scrubbed his face and moved to stand at the window.

He had enough presence of mind not to silhouette himself in the window. He leaned one shoulder against the wall and looked out into the night, his fury dispersing until only coldness remained.

"I know nothing about you. Only what my gut says, but it's been wrong before and too much is at stake to make a mistake."

"Instinct can only get you so far." Travis reached inside his jacket and pulled out the letter Ralph had sent him. "This should prove I'm someone you can trust."

Eagle made no move to take the letter.

"You can't read. I should've thought of that." He turned the letter over in his hands.

"That's your assumption, but not my truth."

"Damn riddles," Travis muttered, stuffing the letter away before stomping toward the door. "I'll do what I should've done and ask one of the townsfolk."

"You must believe this. Trust no one, not even me." Eagle's strange eyes glittered in the low candlelight. "You wouldn't have lived as long as you have, doing the job you do, if you didn't follow that one piece of wisdom."

"What job do I do?" Why was he pausing? What strange pull kept him talking to Eagle?

"Your kind have been riding into Bitter Creek for months now. Your gun, your hands and your horse give you away. The way

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your gaze never rests on one thing and you don't stare into the fire. You're ready for an attack from every side." Eagle gestured toward Travis's guns. "You're a hired killer, Mr. Ramsey, and you brought Death here for a visit."

Travis turned to face Eagle fully, his hands brushing the butts of his guns. Eagle hadn't moved away from the center of the room. The man's hands hung at his sides, offering no threat to Travis.

"You knew who I was?"

Eagle smiled slightly. "I'm not an idiot either, though you all treat me like one. Your saddle is custom-made and hand carved by the same person who created another saddle I've seen in the territory. Your mount? I've seen his like before in a small herd a man once owned. Those with eyes can see."

Shit. He should have left the stallion and his saddle at Michael's.

"For those who hear, your accent speaks of cotton fields and jasmine-scented air." Eagle turned away, blowing out the candles as he wandered to the back of the room.

Before blowing the last one out, Eagle turned to look him. "Just because I'm nothing to you doesn't mean I don't exist. Remember, those who are treated the worst sometimes know the most."

The last candle went out with a single puff of air. Travis was plunged into darkness. He shifted, for once unsure of himself.

"Tomorrow will be soon enough to learn the secrets haunting this town, Mr. Ramsey."

He'd been dismissed as smoothly as if he'd been back at the plantation and sent away by his mother from the drawing room. Travis opened the door and slid out. He was halfway across the livery stable yard when one of Eagle's sentences hit him. *I have seen his like before in a small herd a man once owned.* He stopped

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and turned, considering going back and shaking the truth out of the other man.

Reality sunk in. Annoying the only man who knew what happened and where Ralph was would be stupid. It was obvious by Eagle's words that Ralph was dead and waiting until tomorrow wouldn't change the fact.

Making his way back down the main street, he worked out his options in his mind. Tomorrow, he would get the Indian to tell him the truth about Ralph before sending a telegraph to the rest of the family.

Bitter Creek seemed peaceful as its citizens settled for the night, but Travis knew it was just the calm before the storm. Cut one Ramsey and they all bled. Kill one and vengeance was swift and came in the shape of a bullet.

* * *

Eagle waited until Ramsey's footsteps faded away before he slipped from his room. Making his way to the corral farthest away from the stables, he whistled softly and a small Paint eased out of the brush surrounding the dry riverbed leading from town. Eagle patted his horse on the neck before swinging up on her back. He never let Irv know he owned a horse because the man would demand Eagle make the mare available to customers and there was no way he would let anyone touch his little one.

They made their way carefully down the riverbed. It hid any silhouette they might throw and it led away from the town without passing any of the buildings. When they were farther enough, he nudged the mare into a canter and headed toward the canyon where the Ramsey horses were being held.

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Barking Dog greeted him as he brought his mount to a halt close to the entrance of the canyon.

"What brings you out tonight, little brother?"

"A man has come to Bitter Creek," he informed Barking Dog as he dismounted and led his mare to where the other ponies huddled in the dark.

"Men have been coming and going from Bitter Creek for years, Eagle. What does one more matter to us?"

"I believe he's the one we sent the letter to. At least, he had a paper he said was the letter Ralph wanted me to mail." Eagle inched up the trail meandering along the canyon wall to the top.

Barking Dog followed him as silently as the night breeze. "You didn't read it to check?"

Eagle shook his head before remembering Barking Dog probably couldn't see him. There wasn't much of a moon out and the darkness settled thick around them. "When I didn't take the letter from him, he assumed I couldn't read and I didn't want to show him any differently. The less he knows about me, the better."

"Showing your abilities is the best way to alert your enemies," Barking Dog agreed.

Upon reaching the top, he glanced down into the walled-off canyon. The herd rested comfortably without too much worry. Some of the horses were sleeping and others grazed quietly. The herd stallion snorted and threw his head when he spotted Eagle on the rim, but no alarm sounded.

"I'm not sure he is my enemy," Eagle murmured.

"All the white men are your enemies, little brother. Remember that. They don't see you as one of them, even though your father was. They see only your Comanche side."

"And most of the People only see my white side. There are no

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easy paths in my life, brother.” Eagle closed his eyes for a second. “It doesn’t matter because he is a Ramsey. He has the same saddle as Ralph and his horse is the same breed as these. Plus he speaks with the same accent.”

“Do you know what the letter says? Or were you honorable enough not to read the dead man’s paper?”

Eagle went down the trail, returning to where his pony grazed. He scratched her neck under her mane while he thought.

“Eagle?”

“Of course, I didn’t read it, Barking Dog. Everyone around me may think I’m a dirty Injun, but I won’t read someone else’s letters.”

His brother stood next to him, staring out over the land in front of them. “Have you talked to him?”

“Only long enough to piss him off.”

Barking Dog laughed and slapped Eagle’s shoulder. “You do seem to have that affect on people.”

Smiling, he shifted away from his brother’s touch. Since living on his own in the white man’s world, he’d learned to avoid contact of any kind. In a world where even the most innocent of touches could be taken the wrong way and result in a beating or death, Eagle chose to go without rather than risk his life.

“I’ll talk to him more tomorrow. I told him that there’s nothing he could do tonight and I was right. The horses are safe for now and Ralph is dead. No point in stirring up any more trouble, though I’m sure Buffert and Tansford already know he’s here and asking after Ralph.”

“If that snake-hearted person you work for was there when he rode in, then yes, they will know. He plays both sides and will find out soon enough that neither side needs him. He’ll be the first to

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die when the end comes.”

Eagle swung up on his mare and looked down at Barking Dog. “Thank you for watching the horses for me, brother, and please thank the others as well. I’ll bring venison and sugar as gifts next time.”

“They would rather you bring whiskey,” Barking Dog commented.

“I know, but it’s not good for them. Too much of the white man’s poison will ruin the braves. Tell Mother I’ll come to visit the next day off I get.”

He started to direct the mare back toward town. He stopped before going into the riverbed. “Did you send out the other letter I gave you?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

Leaving his brother behind, Eagle rode back and made it into his room without anyone spotting him. Not bothering to light a candle, he stripped and climbed under the covers. He folded his arms behind his head and stared up at the ceiling.

There was no law to speak of in Bitter Creek. The sheriff avoided confrontation like he would a mad dog, so that left the townsfolk to fend for themselves, and Buffert and Tansford took advantage of that weakness every chance they got. If Eagle received an answer to his letter, there might be a less bloody outcome to the range war. Unless Ramsey went searching for the man or men who’d killed Ralph...then things would get bad for everyone, not just the innocents.

Eagle found his mind wandering to the man who had ridden in earlier that day. Which Ramsey was he? Ralph had rambled for an hour or so before he slid into unconsciousness. Eagle figured there

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was a whole passel of Ramseys and they would all be looking for the man who killed Ralph. Things could be getting interesting soon.

CHAPTER 4

Sitting at a table in the restaurant attached to the only hotel in Bitter Creek, Travis blew on the steaming coffee to cool it enough for him to drink. He kept his gaze down at the newspaper open in front of him, but he registered every person coming into the room. Most of them gave him a wide berth, which was what he wanted. He wasn't there to make friends. He was there to find out what happened to Ralph, kill the men who ended his brother's life and gather the horses. Michael wanted them returned to the family ranch in Texas.

The mood of the room chilled as a tall, thin man stepped through the door. Travis glanced at him from the corner of his eye. *Ah, here's one of the main players in the simmering land war.* Travis pegged the man as Lucius Tansford from the descriptions he

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was given by cowboys who used to work the area around Bitter Creek.

"Tall, thin as a blade of grass, but mean as a snake and twice as cold," was the description one cowpuncher gave Travis, and he had to conclude the man was right. If he hadn't known all the things Tansford had done, Travis still wouldn't have trusted the man.

Tansford made his way across the room toward Travis, his long-fingered hands swinging easy at his sides. Travis leaned back in his chair, tipped his head slightly and eyed the man. The slight sneer on the man's face told Travis that Tansford was supremely confident in his own righteousness. Of course, some of that could have had to do with the two gunmen flanking the man.

"I hear you were asking for directions to the Ramsey place," Tansford said, his voice shrill and brittle.

"I might have been, but since you weren't the one I asked, I don't see how it's any of your business." Travis tested the coffee.

Tansford lifted his head and his nostrils flared like an angry stallion's. One of the gunmen moved forward to drop a hand on Travis's shoulder.

"I suggest you watch your tone, boy. This here is Mr. Lucius Tansford."

Travis shrugged the man's hand off and stood, stepping away from the table and putting his back against the wall. "I suggest you keep your hands to yourself, mister. Should I know who Lucius Tansford is? Besides a pompous jackass who thinks he's more important than he really is."

Silence hung over the patrons in the room, several of whom eased their way out of the line of fire. Obviously talking to Tansford like that was tantamount to poking a sleeping bear with a stick. The man's pale face turned beet red and he sputtered like a

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steam engine.

Travis remained still, keeping his gaze on the three men in front of him. If it came down to gunplay, he would be ready. Every man had a tell, whether it was narrowing his eyes, flaring his nostrils, or twitching his fingers, and Travis had trained his eyes to find them. It made his line of work a lot easier.

"None of that in here, gentlemen. Either continue your discussion polite-wise or take it outside."

Shifting, Travis spotted a small, weather-beaten man standing behind Tansford and his men. The old man held an eight-gauge shotgun in his hands as steady as the shining sun. Travis relaxed, letting his hands move away from his guns.

"Sorry, sir. I don't want to cause any trouble." He made sure to fill his voice with the respect he hadn't shown Tansford.

Tansford snarled and took a step forward. The click of two hammers being pulled back stopped him in his tracks.

"You don't own this place yet, Tansford. The rest of this silly town might be afraid of you, but I ain't. You behave or leave. Don't bother me either way, except if you don't behave, I'll have a mess to clean up off the floor."

Tansford turned around and stalked to the café door. Before exiting, he turned back and glared at Travis. "I'll be talking to you again."

"I look forward to it." Travis nodded and returned to his chair. Sipping his coffee, he grimaced.

"Nothing worse than cold coffee, huh?"

The old timer poured him another steaming cup and sat without asking. Travis didn't protest, just raised an eyebrow while waiting for his coffee to cool.

"You're a stranger in town, so I figure you don't know the lay

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of the land yet. The man you just pissed off is Lucius Tansford.”

“So I was told.”

“He’s got a lot of men just like the ones who were with him today. They’re all gathered up at his ranch, waiting for the time to be right to ride on down and destroy this town.”

“He won’t destroy this town. It would take too much of his own money to rebuild it. He simply wants to take it over, and by the looks of these folk, he won’t have any trouble doing it.” Travis nodded at the people eating their food and not making eye contact.

“Well, he ain’t the only big shot they have to worry about. There’s another guy on the other side of town. Bob Buffert owns most of the land to the east, while Tansford owns most of the land to the west. Bitter Creek is smack dab in the middle, and they’re fighting for the town and the river.”

Travis decided to trust his gut. Holding out his hand, he introduced himself. “I’m Travis Ramsey.”

“Ah, one of Ralph’s brothers, huh?” The man shook his hand. “I’m Jake.”

“Can you tell me what happened to Ralph?”

Jake looked around the room as if he was checking to make sure no one was listening. Travis didn’t think any of the townsfolk would risk eavesdropping.

“Don’t rightly know, son. Ralph disappeared about four months ago and his horses around the same time. Like they’d vanished into thin air. No one could find them, and believe me, everyone looked. Those horses of his were prime horseflesh, though I suppose, you being his brother and all, you know that.”

Travis closed his eyes. Jake’s words were just confirmation of what Travis had feared. He needed to talk to the half-breed at the livery stable. Something told him that man knew far more than he

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was willing to tell Travis the night before.

"No idea where Ralph went to?" He opened his eyes and caught a glimpse of Eagle walking past the front of the building.

Jake shrugged. "There was a trail leading into town from his place, but his horse's tracks got lost in all the others out in the street. After that, nothing. No body found at his place, just lots of blood."

The old man reached out and tapped the table next to Travis's hand. "Listen, son. Ralph and I had a few late night talks over coffee. He knew something was brewing in this town, and I wouldn't doubt that's why you're here. He told me if anything were to happen to him, whether he was killed or just disappeared, his brothers would come looking for him. Ralph said I was to help you all I could, and I'll do that. Ain't right for a man to run roughshod over decent folk like they do."

"What do you know about the 'breed working at the stable?"

"Eagle?" Jake looked surprised by the question.

He nodded, resting his hands on his thighs and not fidgeting like he wanted to. Stillness had been instilled in him by hundreds of swats from his mother's fan.

"The man's good with horses, but doesn't have much to do with the rest of us. He don't talk too often, but I think that has more to do with us white folk than it does with him. Rumor is his daddy was some big lawman before he got himself killed. Eagle's half-Comanche and his mother's folk don't live far from here."

Travis stood, digging a coin out of his pocket and handing it to Jake. "Thanks for the coffee. Best I've had since I started out here."

"Be careful, son, and remember if you need help, I'll be here."

Walking out onto the sidewalk, he waited for his eyesight to

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adjust to the bright sunshine before making his way toward the stable. If he knew his brothers, they weren't going to wait until he wired them and told them to come. They'd hand control of the ranch over to the women and head out here. He needed to find out all the facts before they got here, because once they were here, they wouldn't stop until the men who killed Ralph and stole his horses were dead. No matter who it was who did it.

Travis strolled into the yard behind the stable and glanced around before freezing as his gaze landed on Eagle. He stood by the water pump, naked from the waist up.

In the weak morning sunshine, liquid drops glistened on Eagle's dusky gold skin. Muscles flexed along his spine as he leaned over to pick up a piece of cloth and started drying off.

Something stirred low in Travis's gut and he clenched his hands, fighting it. He knew what that sparking was and he couldn't allow it life. The only time he'd ever given in to those urgings, his father had caught him and beaten him within an inch of his life. Travis's father made him promise never to go down that path of temptation again.

With no real choice, Travis promised, plus he became the one to answer any call for help from a Ramsey; even distant cousins knew to send for him. His father explained that there was a "helper" in every generation and Travis was to be the one in his lifetime.

There had been no way for him to refuse. After a while, he found he was good at his job and if he got lonely or thought about breaking his promise, he remembered the pain, the blood and the sound of fists hitting flesh.

"May I help you?"

Eagle's question broke Travis out of his spell and he re-focused

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to see Eagle walking toward him, long black hair braided and trailing down his back. He wore a buckskin shirt and a red bandana with dark blue pants tucked into knee-high moccasins.

Travis didn't allow his gaze to linger anywhere, meeting Eagle's amber eyes. The other man didn't seem to notice Travis's internal problems.

"Yeah, I want to—"

"Back so soon?" Irv bellowed as he rounded the corner of the barn. "Not leaving us already?"

Travis barely suppressed a sneer at Irv's overblown friendliness. "No, merely retrieving my horse and wondering if I might buy the services of your man there for a couple of hours." He nodded at Eagle.

Irv narrowed his dull eyes and asked, "What do you need him for?"

"I need someone to guide me out to the Ramsey place."

He saw Eagle tense slightly, but he didn't acknowledge it. Keeping his attention on Irv, he could see the indecision circling the man's mind. Taking advantage of the greed he knew burned in Irv's heart, he pulled out a couple gold coins, letting them glitter in the sun.

"I'll give you one of these, but I get to keep him for the whole day." Travis flipped the coin in his hand and hid his smile at the way Irv's eyes followed the spinning disc.

"Fine. Get a horse and show this man where the Ramsey place is, but that's all you do." Irv glared at Eagle. "No detours or anything like that. He doesn't want to see any of your redskin bullshit."

Eagle grunted and turned, heading toward the barn.

"Where are you going?" he called, tossing the coin to Irv

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before taking off after the other man.

"I'll get your horse ready," Eagle informed him as he disappeared into the stable.

"I can take care of my own horse. Go get yours and meet me out front." He reached out and grabbed Eagle's shoulder.

The man whirled around, the tail of his braid slapping Travis across the cheek. He stepped back from Eagle's burning gaze.

"You've paid for my services. That means I'll saddle your horse for you."

The man practically vibrated with anger, and Travis realized he'd insulted Eagle somehow.

"I just did that to get your boss off my ass. This way you can take me out to Ralph's place and tell me what you know while we're out there."

"What makes you think I'll tell you anything?" Eagle shrugged. "I guess I'll have to since you've already paid for the information."

"Jesus, man, I'd rather you tell me because you want to than beat the shit out of you to get you to talk to me."

"The white man has never shown restraint about torturing my people." Eagle raised a dark eyebrow and stared at Travis.

"Yeah, well, I'm not like most white men. Don't see the point of forcing people to talk. They don't give you reliable information and then I'm running around trying to gather all the facts." Travis scrubbed a hand over his mouth, wondering how he could get the 'breed to trust him enough to share all he knew. He had a feeling Eagle knew a lot more than he let on. "You promised to tell me all the secrets the town had."

"I said that tomorrow was soon enough to learn all the secrets the town had. I didn't say I would tell you any of them." Eagle leaned against a stall and folded his arms over his chest. "I have to

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live here, Mr. Ramsey, and I have no family or name to protect myself with.”

Travis took a deep breath, getting his anger under control. “So what happens now?”

“You’ll saddle your own horse and head west out of Bitter Creek. I’ll meet you just past the outskirts of town.” Eagle started out of the barn, then stopped and turned back to look at Travis. “Be careful and watch as you ride. You’ve already pissed Tansford off and if he can kill you without risking any of his men, he will. Don’t expect any help from the townsfolk either. They’re cowards.”

“Jake at the restaurant said I could count on him.” He picked up his saddle from the rack in front of his horse’s stall.

Eagle nodded. “Jake’s a good man and he’ll help you as much as he can without getting himself killed, but he’s old and can only do so much.”

Holding his saddle, Travis watched Eagle leave. He hoped his gaze didn’t linger on the man’s tight ass or the graceful way the ’breed glided over the rough dirt. Staying focused on finding Ralph’s murderer was paramount. There wasn’t any way Travis would risk anything else on a chance encounter with an Indian.

CHAPTER 5

Eagle stayed quiet as they rode out of Bitter Creek. He understood why Travis paid Irv for his time, but still his wounded pride demanded he wasn't a servant or a whore to be bought or sold by whoever wanted him. His mare snorted and shook her head, drawing his attention away from his thoughts to the road in front of them.

"You're right, little sister." He patted her neck before turning to look at Travis.

Travis was scanning the brush on either side of the road, his hand resting on his thigh close to the butt of his rifle. Like every good gunman, Travis was ready for anything.

"Ralph's dead, isn't he." It really wasn't a question.

Eagle nodded. "Yes, he died from several wounds, mostly

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gunshot, but he was also severely beaten. Unfortunately, he'd lost a great deal of blood before he got to me. I did my best to keep him comfortable in his final hours. It took him a few hours to die."

"Thank you." The other man didn't look at him.

"He came to me. I might wish to stay out of the trouble building in this town, but I refuse to let a good man die alone."

"Where are the horses?"

Eagle glanced to his left, looking out over the land toward the canyon where his brothers guarded the herd. "I moved them to a hidden canyon. My brothers are watching them."

"You trust them?"

He met Travis's gaze with a raised eyebrow. "Do you trust your brothers?"

"Point taken." Travis shot him a look. "You're rather well-spoken."

"For a savage, you mean?"

Travis shrugged, but didn't deny the thought. "You talk better than most white men I know."

"My father believed every man should be given a chance to make a better life for himself. He never saw my mother as Indian. He saw her as a woman he loved and his son saw her as his mother. I took advantage of what my father offered me, yet it hasn't given me anything except a better way of speaking." Eagle stared at his horse's ears for a second. "I'm still an Indian to you and a white man to a majority of the People."

"Who was your father?"

"Why do you want to know? It doesn't matter." He didn't want to talk about his father. Even though he'd lost him ten years ago, the pain was still fresh.

"Just talking."

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I doubt that. He stayed quiet because it didn't matter. They weren't going to be friends and Travis would leave after he dealt with whoever killed his brother. He let the faint hint of attraction trickle away.

Attraction to a man wasn't new to Eagle, but he'd always been able to bury it. He'd had a few rushed encounters, fumbling in the dark barn. Travis wouldn't be one of those, even though he'd caught the man staring at him when he was cleaning up. Something told him Travis might be like him, but the man's ironclad control over his feelings would never break.

"Why did you take the horses?"

"Ralph told me someone would be coming for them. I figured they should be here when you showed up. I didn't know how long it would take and I knew the herd would be sold before you arrived. I wasn't going to let anyone profit from Ralph's death."

Travis glanced at him for a second. "Do you know who killed him?"

He shook his head. "He never told me and for whatever reason, when I arrived at the ranch, no one was there. I'm not sure if Ralph's attack happened there or out on the range. I didn't enter the house. Barking Dog and I gathered the horses and moved them to the canyon. We had to move fast because I didn't want anyone to know Ralph came to me."

"Don't blame you. So who's claimed the ranch?"

"Both Buffert and Tansford. No one is staying at the ranch because when one tries to take over, the other comes and push them out. It's like two kids fighting over a toy."

"Haven't they been looking for Ralph and the horses?"

Eagle turned his mare onto the trail leading toward Ralph's ranch house.

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"Yes, they have been, but there's no way they'll be able to find either. I'll take you to where I buried him after you check the house. Will you be moving out here?"

Travis grimaced. "I doubt it or at least not until my brothers show up. There's too much space for me to guard on my own."

"How long before the rest of the Ramseys show?"

Chuckling, Travis kept his eyes moving, scanning the land around them. "I haven't sent for them yet, but I wouldn't doubt they're on their way already. Michael never had much patience."

"How many of Ramseys are there?"

"I have seven living brothers. Ralph was the eighth, but I have dozens and dozens of relatives."

"How many will show up here?"

"All seven brothers and how ever many cousins can be contacted and are close by. We Ramseys are a tight-knit bunch. When one of us is in trouble, everyone comes running. We'll deal with the problem and take care of whoever killed Ralph."

What was having that kind of family like? Eagle knew his Indian half-brothers would help him as much as they could, but would his father's other son respond to the letter Eagle had sent him? He needed someone he could trust to help him through the gathering storm.

"Must be nice." He gestured to the small cabin in front of them. "Here it is. Ralph didn't have time to work on his own home, but the barn is solid and the corrals are fine."

"That sounds like Ralph. The horses mattered more than his comfort. Thank you for taking care of them."

"Least I can do. Ralph treated me better than most." He pulled his mare to a stop and looked at Travis. "In his letter, did he tell you why he came to me when he was shot?"

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It was a question he'd been asking himself since Ralph showed up in his stable yard. Why him? What made him the one Ralph trusted enough to come to when he was injured and entrusted with the letter?

Travis looked at him and started to say something. A noise made them turn to the cabin just as a man stepped from it. Eagle relaxed when the sun revealed the man's face and a glint of light shot off the star pinned to the man's chest.

"Hello, Marshall." He nodded to the man.

"Eagle. How are you, brother?" The man smiled and held out his hand.

"Brother?" Travis asked.

"Yes, this is my brother, U.S. Marshall Josiah Burlington." Eagle shook Josiah's hand. "I wasn't sure if you'd come or not."

Josiah laughed. "When my half-brother writes me and asks for my help, I have to come. You've never asked before, Eagle."

"Never really needed your area of expertise before, Josiah." Eagle gestured to Travis. "Josiah, this is Travis Ramsey. His brother's death is what prompted me to write you."

"Mr. Ramsey." Josiah's voice was cool.

"Marshal Burlington." Travis turned to look at Eagle. "Your father was Nathaniel Burlington?"

"Yes."

"It was a great loss when he was killed."

Eagle inclined his head slightly to acknowledge Travis's comment, but didn't say anything. His father had been a legendary lawman, yet the only side of him Eagle remembered was the loving father who didn't see his wife and son as Indians, but as people. It was an unusual attitude in a world divided by so many issues.

"Have you been through the house?" Josiah kept his eyes on

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Travis, though he directed his question to Eagle.

"No. Barking Dog and I gathered the horses and drove them to a canyon that night after I buried Ralph. We didn't enter the house, but I don't think there was anyone around. At least, no one has come to hassle me over taking the horses."

"And we both know they would've if they knew you had them."

Travis pushed past Josiah to enter the house. Eagle started to follow him, but his brother grabbed his arm and stopped him. They waited until Travis disappeared inside before Josiah spoke again.

"What are you doing with him, Eagle?" Josiah nodded in the direction Travis took.

"Why? What do you know about him that has you so worked up?" Eagle pulled free and turned to face Josiah fully, his arms crossed over his chest. His older half-brother was a big man, but Eagle never allowed Josiah to intimidate him.

"He's a hired killer."

Eagle couldn't help it. He burst out laughing and Josiah frowned.

"Did you believe I didn't know that? It's so obvious even a blind dog would know what he is." He shook his head. "Even a killer has the right to know what happened to his brother, and it's not like he's going to harm me. I didn't have anything to do with it."

"He's killed people, Eagle. How do you know he won't blame you for not saving his brother?" Josiah's stubbornness made him a great lawman, but could be annoying when he dug in his heels to try and protect those he cared for.

"You've killed people. Does that make you a terrible person or an ice-cold killer? How do you know that, in his judgment, those

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people didn't deserve to die? You live in a very good and evil world, Josiah. The world I live in isn't quite so perfect." Eagle strolled toward the door. "Besides, he could've killed me at any time since he arrived in Bitter Creek. I don't think he held out any hope that his brother was still alive."

"Damn it, Eagle, you can't trust him. Men who kill for money will turn on their friends if the money's right."

"Who said I killed for money?"

Eagle looked up to see Travis standing in the middle of the room, coolly assessing them with his narrowed eyes. Shaking his head, Eagle didn't reply, figuring Travis knew it wasn't him. Josiah, once he got an idea in his head, was like a wild horse with the bit in its teeth.

"I did, and you can deny it all you want, Ramsey. I've heard all the stories about you." Josiah stood right behind Eagle, and Eagle was sure his brother gave off the impression he was protecting him.

Travis snarled and slid his hand toward the butt of his pistol. "I don't hire my gun out to anyone."

Tension built steam until it weighed on all of their shoulders. Eagle strolled around the two rooms, not really caring what was happening between Josiah and Travis.

"Where do you think you're going?" Travis moved after him first.

"I wanted to see if there were clues left. We have to find out where the attack on Ralph happened to give us some idea who went after him."

"But..." Josiah stayed near the door.

"I don't have time to watch a pissing contest between the two of you. The longer I'm away, the more Irv is going to think I told

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you something I shouldn't have, even though I don't know anything." He grinned at the two men.

"I've been all over the cabin. There's nothing here besides dust and mice. If they did beat and shoot him here, they cleaned up after themselves." Josiah waved a hand, encompassing the entire room.

"They had time to come back and clean up. I heard they trailed his horse from the ranch to the edge of town, but once there, the hoof prints mixed with all the other mounts in the area and they lost them." Eagle grimaced. "They weren't the best trackers."

"Would you have done a better job?" Travis wandered around the room, touching and moving things.

Eagle chuckled. "Of course. Barking Dog's father would have blistered my hide if I couldn't find one horse's track in a mess of others, plus my father wasn't too bad a tracker himself."

"How are we going to find where they ambushed Ralph?" Travis sounded puzzled.

"We aren't. It don't matter where they got him anyway. He's dead, and they'll reveal themselves soon enough. You're more than welcome to ride his land, though. You might find something, but I don't have time to do it."

All three men swung toward the front of the cabin when Eagle's mare snorted a warning. Hoof beats of three horses sounded on the hard dirt leading to the porch.

"Hello, the house," a deep gruff voice called out, giving Eagle the identity of one of the riders.

Josiah unpinned his badge and slid it in his front pocket. "Might as well go out and greet the man."

"It's Buffert. He'll have Tuff Burns and Welton Jones with him. They're dead cold shots and meaner than snakes, so watch them. Buffert's not much of a shot with his pistol, but I've seen him

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hit a rabbit in full flight with his rifle. Keep that in mind,” Eagle whispered before leading the way out of the cabin.

CHAPTER 6

Travis fought the urge to push Eagle out of the way and step out first. It had nothing to do with the strange protective feelings he had for him, but the fact that this was his fight and he'd managed to drag Eagle into it, kicking and screaming. If anyone was going to get shot first, it should be him. Yet he knew Eagle wouldn't appreciate the gesture.

"What are you doing here, Eagle?"

Travis stepped out on the porch and moved to Eagle's right, giving himself a clear shot at the riders. Josiah went to the left, keeping his hand close to his pistol, but not making any moves to grab it. Travis rested his hand on his hip. Burns and Jones had the reputation for being fast with a gun, but he'd seen some really fast gunmen and he didn't believe those two were in the same league.

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Eagle stood on the top step, legs spread and arms crossed over his chest. His aggressive stance told the other men that he wouldn't be intimidated by them.

"I'm showing these gentlemen around." Eagle inclined his head in Travis's direction.

"Why are you interested in this ranch, stranger?" Tuff Burns pinned Travis with his dead black eyes.

He shrugged, reaching in his pocket to pull the cigarette he'd rolled earlier. "Just looking at it. Thought this looked like a nice area to stop and put down roots. Heard this place was empty."

Welton Jones glared at Josiah. "What about you? You looking to settle down as well?"

"No." Josiah offered nothing more than that.

Jones frowned, obviously not happy with the lack of information from Josiah. Travis scratched his match over the heel of his boot to light it and dipped his head, dragging on the cigarette. He hid his smile behind the curl of smoke. Lifting his head, he caught Burns eyeing him.

It could be that Burns recognized him from somewhere. Travis had traveled all over the West and been in some of the bigger towns, so it was possible for the gunman to know who Travis was, but he wasn't going to volunteer any names until his brothers got here.

Buffert's horse shifted, and Travis ran his gaze over the big man, gauging the man's strengths and weaknesses. Where Tansford had been slender, Buffert was wide and heavyset. The man carried most of his weight in his shoulders, and Travis could tell by the smashed nose and scarred chin that Buffert had spent a lot of his youth fighting with his fists. Probably drew his power from the sheer intimidation factor of his size, but Travis had taken

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down bigger men than Buffert, so he didn't fear the rancher.

"Who are you?" He took one last drag on his cigarette before flicking it over the railing, making sure it landed in the dirt and not near the wood of the porch.

Buffert puffed up even more. "I'm Rand Buffert. I own most of the land to the west of this ranch. Actually I'm afraid you've been misinformed, mister. This ranch is part of my land now."

"Really?" Travis put surprise in his voice. "That's not what I heard from Mr. Tansford. He seemed to be under the impression he owned this land."

"Tansford's a fool." Buffert dismissed the other man with a wave of his hand. "Eagle, Irv know you're out here?"

Eagle grunted. "Of course he does. He was paid for the use of my time."

"If you'll excuse us, gentlemen, I'd like to look at the barns and corrals while it's still light outside." Travis stepped off the porch and strolled over to where Buffert sat his horse. Staring up at the big man, he asked, "I wonder what happened to the man who owned this place. I hear he disappeared. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Mr. Buffert?"

Something skittered through Buffert's eyes, but it went by too fast for Travis to figure out what it was. He had a feeling if Buffert wasn't the one who shot and killed Ralph, the man knew who did it.

"I told you, there ain't no point in looking at the place. It ain't for sale." Buffert nudged his horse closer to Travis and bending, he pushed his finger into Travis's chest. "Don't push, boy. I'm not a man you want to mess with."

Travis grabbed Buffert's finger and bent it back, causing the man to holler with pain. His hand flashed down to pull his pistol

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and he covered Burns before the man could get his own gun out. He didn't worry about Jones, figuring Josiah would take care of him, if only to protect Eagle.

"I suggest you rethink your statement, Mr. Buffert. I'm not a man you wish to tangle with and I have nothing to lose, unlike you, who has your entire ranch to lose if I were to kill you right here."

He let go of Buffert's finger and stepped back, keeping Burns covered as he eased away.

Buffert cradled his hand and scowled at Travis. "You'll regret ever doing that, boy. I'm not someone you want to piss off."

"I doubt that, and it seems like I already have." Travis holstered his pistol and let his hands drop. "I suggest you leave, Mr. Buffert. I have very little patience at the best of times, and you're annoying me. Take your lapdogs as well."

Buffert and his men rode away with the rancher swearing he would teach Travis a lesson one of these days.

Travis turned to see Josiah and Eagle watching him. The marshal wore a frown that held a hint of disgust. He ignored the man because Josiah's opinion really didn't matter to him. Most "good" men didn't like what he did for a living, yet they didn't mind his gun when it came to fighting.

Eagle's expression was harder to read. *What's the man thinking?*

"For not wanting to cause trouble yet, Travis, I believe you're going about it the wrong way. Buffert and his men will be hunting for you as well Tansford's men. You're piling up enemies on all sides and your brothers aren't here yet to keep you safe."

The Indian was right, but Travis had never needed his brothers to protect him. He would do what he'd set out to do and if they got here in time, they could join in.

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“Can’t stand getting poked in the chest. Reminds me of my youth.”

He headed to the barn, not really listening to see if either man was following. When he got to the barn door, he noticed Josiah was with him, but Eagle still stood near the porch, gazing over to the east.

“What’s he looking at?” He nodded towards Eagle.

Josiah glanced over his shoulder and shrugged. “There’s something up there. That’s why Eagle received his name. He sees things you and I would miss unless we were right on top of them.”

Travis searched the barn, looking for any clue. Josiah took one side while he took the other. Something was bothering the marshal. Tension rolled off the man, and finally Travis had had enough. Leaning back against one of the stalls, he crossed his arms and met Josiah’s gaze.

“What’s your problem with me besides the fact you hate ‘hired killers’ as you called me?”

“That’s not enough?” Josiah mirrored his poise on the other side of the aisle.

“No, I’m afraid it isn’t. You have another chip on your shoulder about me, and I want to know what it is.” He believed confrontation usually worked best in any situation. He didn’t hide from anyone.

“It’s not bad enough you hire your gun out to anyone who’ll meet your price and that you’ll kill whoever they want you to. You need to drag my brother into this stupid war.” Josiah’s eyes flared with anger.

Travis smiled, knowing it would irritate Eagle’s brother even more. “You don’t know anything about me. You’ve only heard rumors and lies told by the people I’ve gone against. You have no

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way of knowing who I am or why I do what I do. I didn't drag your brother into anything. That would've been my brother who did that since Ralph went to him when he was dying."

Straightening, he stalked across the aisle to stand a foot away from Josiah. He didn't shove the man or anything. The threat was in his voice and his eyes.

"I'll do whatever I have to and use whoever I want to get to the bottom of this. Ralph was murdered, and I won't allow the killer to live any longer than I have to. It's unfortunate Eagle got caught in the middle, but he's a big boy. I'm sure he can walk away from all of this if he wishes."

Josiah started to say something, but a cough from the barn door made them both swing around. Eagle stood in the entrance, shaking his head and looking rather annoyed.

"God, it's like having two roosters in the hen house." He gestured to them to follow him. "If you're done strutting and trying to prove who the top dog is, we need to get going. I'll take you to see the horses before I head back to town. I don't have all day to waste watching you two establish a pecking order."

Travis and Josiah looked at each other for a moment before Travis stepped back and held out his hand. Josiah stared at it, making Travis wonder if the marshal would sully his hands by shaking Travis's.

"You don't have to like him, Josiah, but this time, you're on the same side he is. You both want to know what happened to Ralph, although for different reasons," Eagle pointed out. "It doesn't make you a hired gun if you shake his hand."

Josiah gave Travis's hand a quick shake. Mumbling under his breath, the marshal stomped from the barn. Travis went to follow, but Eagle grabbed his shirt and slammed him against the tack room

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door. A surge of heat rushed through Travis, causing his skin to flush and his groin to tighten. God, he hoped Eagle would think it was rage and not lust that caused the tension in his muscles.

Eagle pushed his face inches from Travis's and snarled. "Don't ever think you know me. I have no problem walking away if this gets to the point where it's you or me. This wasn't my fight until your brother brought it to my door. I'll let you use me because it suits my own purpose at the moment."

Where had the mild-mannered Indian gone? Travis was shocked and upset. It wasn't often he underestimated any man, but it looked like he had overlooked Eagle. His black eyes flashed and sparked with anger, yet there was something else swirling in the depths that caught Travis's attention. Heat rolled off Eagle as he pressed Travis against the wood.

All thought and caution fled from Travis's brain as Eagle's hard chest brushed over his and, even through the layers of clothes, he felt Eagle's solid muscles. Reaching up, he buried his hands in Eagle's hair and crushed their lips together.

The metallic taste of blood bloomed in his mouth as Eagle's bottom lip split under the onslaught. Eagle froze, and Travis waited to feel the brunt of Eagle's fists, but after a second of pause, Eagle opened to him and the kiss deepened.

Shit. The only other encounter Travis had ever had with a man had been fumbling and hesitant. This kiss he shared with Eagle was hard, fierce, and brutal. No quarter was given and none taken as they fought for dominance. Their tongues dueled, and Eagle lured Travis's in to suck on it, drawing a growl from him. Eagle let go of his shirt and braced his hands on either side of Travis's head, allowing their bodies to press together from chest to knees.

"Damn," Travis whispered, his head falling back and hitting

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the door behind him hard enough for him to see stars.

A thrust of his hips rubbed their pricks together and his head whirled. He knew it was wrong to want that contact. Travis had promised his father he would never engage in any of that “Sodomite” activity again and he could hear his father yelling in his mind. His bottom lip split from Eagle’s kisses and the second burst of metallic flavor in his mouth caused him to stiffen and shove Eagle away.

“What the hell are you doing?” He swiped his hand over his mouth, trying to erase the evidence of their lust.

“Only what you wanted me to since you grabbed me first.” Eagle scrubbed a hand over his face before untying his hair and undoing his braid. “Don’t tell me you didn’t want it.”

Embarrassment flooded Travis as Eagle eyed his groin where his prick pressed so hard against the placket of his pants, the buttons were going to leave permanent marks. He shifted, moving away from Eagle.

“We need to go.”

Eagle finished re-braiding his hair and straightened his shirt in silence. They joined Josiah who was stepping off the porch of Ralph’s cabin as they approached. Mounting, Travis glanced quickly at Eagle’s brother. The marshal didn’t say anything about the split lips and the obvious tension between Eagle and Travis. He couldn’t guess what Josiah thought caused it, but Travis believed he wouldn’t ever imagine it was because his brother and Travis had kissed in the barn.

Taking off his hat, Travis ran his hand through his hair and settled the hat back on his head. *Shit*. Things were getting more complicated every minute and all Travis wanted to do was ride away. Letting one of his other brothers take care of Ralph’s killer

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was beginning to sound better. He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath.

“You’re going to hell, son, if you continue on this path. I won’t allow it.” His father had said that right before the first lash of leather bit into Travis’s back. He still bore the scars from that night and he didn’t plan to add more to the collection, or worse, get killed over this fucked-up hitch in his personality.

He’d stay away from Eagle and find Ralph’s killer as soon as possible, so he could get out of town before he lost all control and broke the two promises he ever made his father. Stay away from other men and help out his family, no matter what he wanted from his life.

CHAPTER 7

Eagle fingered his sore bottom lip, manfully not glaring over his shoulder at the man who'd split it. No point in getting upset about it. He brought the whole thing on himself and he was lucky Travis hadn't shot him. Hell, no, the gunfighter hadn't shot him. The man had started it all by grabbing him and planting a kiss on him. Travis would be a hypocrite if he protested.

He snorted softly to himself. Being a hypocrite came easy for some men, but Eagle would bet Travis wasn't one of them. He figured the man wouldn't mention what happened in the barn, which was fine with Eagle.

Being Indian was only one of the reasons why Eagle could find himself shot or killed. Doing anything with another man and being found out was the easiest way. He didn't plan on anyone

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discovering he liked men instead of women. Had enough worries to deal with.

Keeping his distance from Travis would be the best idea. His body protested that solution, demanding to be pressed tight against the man without any clothing between them. His prick stiffened and he shifted, trying to find a comfortable position. Shit, riding with an erection was painful.

“Where are we going?”

Eagle shot his brother a glance as he rode up beside him. “I’m taking you to the canyon where the horses are.” He nodded toward the east. “Barking Dog will be meeting up with us soon.”

“How is your mother doing, Eagle?” Josiah unhooked his canteen and took a swig before offering it to Eagle.

“She’s doing well. You should stop by and visit her since you’re in the area.” Eagle drank and handed it back.

“I’ll do that.” Josiah smiled.

Travis joined them, his cold blue eyes scanning the horizon and his own swollen lips set in a thin line. Josiah met Eagle’s gaze with a question in his eyes. Eagle shook his head. He wasn’t about to say anything to Josiah about what had happened in the barn. His older brother might have some idea about Eagle’s leanings, but he had nothing to gain by supporting his suspicions.

“How many head are in the herd?”

Eagle thought for a moment before answering Travis’s question. “There are thirty.”

“How did you manage to move thirty head of horses without anyone knowing where you put them?”

“Barking Dog’s father would have beaten us if we’d left a trail. I learned the hard way how to move without being tracked.”

They made it to the tree line. As they started to slip under the

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trees, following the trail that appeared in front of them, Barking Dog materialized from the edge of the stand of trees.

"You have brought Ramsey's brother for the horses?"

Barking Dog studied Travis, and Eagle smiled at the subtle sneer his brother wore. Barking Dog didn't have anything against Travis except that he was a white man and Eagle's brother didn't think highly of them.

"Yes, but he won't be taking them yet. He has to wait until the rest of his brothers come to help him move them. Has there been any trouble?"

"No rider has gotten close enough. When it looks like they might, we manage to spook their horses and no one has figured out it's not a mountain cat yet."

"Good."

Barking Dog grinned at Josiah. "Nice to see you again, Josiah."

"Same here, Barking Dog."

The two men clasped hands in greeting. Eagle never got over how lucky he was that his white brother and Indian brother got along. It made his life easier in many ways.

"How is White Bird doing?"

Josiah and Barking Dog rode ahead on the trail, talking about Eagle's mother and the others. Eagle was shocked when Travis dropped back to ride next to him.

"They get along pretty good," Travis commented.

Eagle kept his gaze on the spot between his mare's ears. "Yes. My mother was lucky when she married Nathaniel Burlington. Unlike most white men, he treated her with respect and she was legally his wife. He imparted his tolerance to his white son."

Travis quirked an eyebrow at him, and Eagle chuckled.

"All right, most of his tolerance. There are some things that

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Josiah seems to have formed his own opinions about, though I'm not sure if Nathaniel would've been as willing to deal with you either." Eagle hesitated before plunging on. "Why hire your gun out?"

Travis tensed, and Eagle thought he wouldn't answer, but after a moment of silence, Travis sighed. "I don't hire my gun out. The times I've been involved in range wars or cleaning up towns were when I helped out members of my family."

"You must have a big family. I've heard enough rumors about you to fill several of those ten-cent novels."

"I don't usually talk about it."

"You don't have to. It isn't any of my business."

As much as curiosity might be eating him alive, he respected another man's right to secrets. God knew he had a ton of his own. They rode quietly for a while and Eagle could tell Travis was thinking. *Probably trying to decide if he can trust me.*

"Four Ramsey brothers came over from Scotland and settled in the hills of Kentucky. We've been spreading out from there. Each brother had at least nine kids of his own. I'm the youngest male of the oldest Ramsey brother's line." Travis stared down at his hands for a second before looking up and meeting Eagle's gaze. "I'm the Helper."

"Helper?"

"Yes. It's something that started back in the Old Country when the Ramseys were a clan instead of scattered all over the country. One brother in each generation makes the choice to 'help' any of the family who might find themselves in trouble. Whenever they need me, they contact either me or one of my brothers. I go where the family member is and I help out the best I can. It doesn't matter whether it means I kill someone or whether I work herding cows.

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If it's something I can't do on my own, I circle the wagons and call in help. The rest come when called."

"Doesn't sound like a life you got to chose," Eagle observed.

"The other option wasn't one I wanted to think about too much. I took the path open to me." Travis shrugged.

Leaning over, Eagle rested his hand on Travis's arm until the man raised his gaze and met Eagle's.

"Sometimes we make a choice only to find it leads us to a different path where we can change the direction our life is headed."

He nudged his mare's sides and urged her to catch up to his brothers, leaving Travis behind to think about what he'd said.

* * *

Eagle approached the livery stable on foot from where he'd left his mare. He checked to make sure the horses in the corrals had been fed and watered. At just after four in the afternoon, he would have time to clean out the stalls before dark fell.

Josiah had stayed with Barking Dog to go and visit Eagle's mother. He would be coming into town the next morning. Travis rode beside Eagle most of the way back toward town, but they split up before they came in sight of the first buildings. No point in being spotted together any more often than necessary.

"You think this stranger is one of Ralph's kin?"

He stopped as Irv's voice drifted on the afternoon breeze from the barn. Edging closer, he crouched under the one open window. As he listened, he kept his gaze moving. It could mean his life if he got caught eavesdropping on the conversation.

"It's too much of a coincidence that he arrives and asks for

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directions to Ramsey's place."

Frowning, Eagle tried to place the other man's voice. Low and gruff, it didn't sound like Buffert, Tansford, or any of their men, but there was something familiar about it.

"What do we do?"

He cringed at Irv's whiny tone. His boss's cowardice was just one of many reasons he disliked the man.

"Sit tight for now. If he's the brother I think he is, he'll follow the clues we left for him. He'll find Ramsey's murderer and kill him, then we'll be in the clear. Neither of us killed him, so there's nothing we have to worry about."

"But what if he doesn't take the bait? What if he figures out what we're doing?"

Something hit the wall with a thud, and Eagle winced. His instincts told him it wasn't a boot slamming against the wood. A moan confirmed his belief.

"No one will ever find out as long as you don't talk. You're not getting scared, are you?"

"No. No, sir," Irv stammered.

"Good. We stand to make a great deal of money off this, but only if you can keep your nerve. The stranger will only find what we want him to find." A pause. "And keep an eye on that 'breed who works for you."

"Eagle? Why? He doesn't know anything. He's stupid as a goat."

Irv's insult didn't affect Eagle. That was the opinion he'd tried to foster among the townsfolk. No reason any of them should know he was probably better educated than most of them.

"I think he's got you all fooled. I don't trust Indians, Johnson. They're all a bunch of shiftless, sneaky savages. I wouldn't be

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surprised if he's just biding his time and one day, you'll come down here and all your horses will be gone." The stranger snorted. "Just keep an eye on him and that gunfighter. I'll be gone for a couple of weeks. By the time I get back, I'm sure this will all be settled and you'll be a rich man."

Footsteps headed toward the barn door closest to Eagle. He scurried over to the corral and ducked under the railing to mingle with the horses. When Irv stepped out into the sunlight, Eagle was running his hands over one of the riding horses, checking for sore muscles.

"I see you finally decided to come back and do some work." Irv sneered at him.

"You were paid for my time," he pointed out.

"Muck out the stalls. I'm heading down to Jake's for dinner." His boss gestured back at the inside of the barn.

Eagle grunted in affirmation. Irv didn't stick around to talk to him. He knew the interrogation would happen the next day. What would Irv say when Josiah arrived in town? If the thought of Travis scared the man, knowing Josiah was a U.S. Marshall could make the man turn tail and run. It depended on whether Irv was more afraid of his unknown partner than of Josiah.

He set to cleaning out the barn's stalls. Only four of them were in use and one was where he'd put Travis's stallion. That stall was empty, so he started there.

A hoof hitting a rock made him look up a few minutes later. He set the shovel against the side of the stall and went out to meet Travis as the man rode into the livery's yard.

Travis swung down off his mount, and Eagle stepped close, taking the horse's reins, but managing to stop the other man with a glancing brush of his fingertips.

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“We need to talk.”

“I’ll be at your place after dark tonight.” Travis pushed his hat back on his head and grinned at Eagle. In a loud voice, he said, “Take care of the bastard. He’s mean because I didn’t give him a good run today.”

“Will do.” Eagle dropped his gaze and shuffled off, leading the stallion into the barn.

His groin tightened as Travis’s grin flashed through his mind. God, he needed to be careful. Just because Travis hadn’t shot him earlier when they’d kissed didn’t mean the man would welcome a similar approach any time soon. Eagle wasn’t looking to commit suicide. He was simply looking for a little warmth during the night, a connection of some kind between him and another person.

Sure, he could go to the whores at the saloon, but it wasn’t the same thing for him. Bedding a woman was just sex, nothing deeper. Eagle had discovered that when he was younger and rode a few cattle drives up to Abilene and Dodge City. When he couldn’t take tugging on his prick with his hand anymore, he’d gone to one of the brothels and paid for one of the soiled doves there.

It was the feel of a rough, callused hand wrapped around his cock that made him sweat and drove him higher faster than anything a pro could do. Oh, he knew his preferences could get him killed. That’s why he never acted on them unless it was in the dark with a drunk looking for relief.

He’d risked everything by kissing Travis. It didn’t matter Travis had grabbed him and initiated the mouth-to-mouth contact. Eagle had been angry at Travis’s comments to Josiah and he’d let his anger overrule his usual no touching policy. A groan slipped from his throat at the memory of their fierce kiss and the strength evident in Travis’s grip on Eagle’s head while they fought for

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control.

Shouting from the street yanked his attention back to what he was doing. He couldn't afford to daydream about Travis. Eagle was a big boy and if it meant not being killed, he'd keep his hands to himself from now on, even if Travis Ramsey was temptation walking.

CHAPTER 8

Shadows held Travis in their grip as he studied the path to Eagle's room. Nothing had moved for several minutes except the horses in the corral. He was stalling, nerves getting the better of him. God, he couldn't remember the last time he was nervous like this.

He breathed deep and straightened his shoulders. He'd faced bigger and more violent men than Eagle, so there was no reason why he should be afraid of the man.

But he isn't like those other men. There's something about him that you like.

The sneering voice in his head resembled his father's, and Travis grimaced. Would there ever come a time when the ghost of his father wouldn't berate him somehow for looking? At least he

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knew better than to touch.

What the hell do you call this afternoon, Junior? That was a heck of a lot more than just touching.

"Shut up," he growled under his breath.

An outline showed for an instant in Eagle's window. He couldn't stand out there all night. He had to go talk to him and figure out what was going on in Bitter Creek before high-tailing it out of the area.

One more quick glance around and he stalked to Eagle's door, which opened before he could raise his fist to knock.

"I wondered how long you were going to stand out there." Eagle gestured for him to enter.

"Just making sure no one was around. I don't want them to see us together too much or they'll get the wrong idea."

"The wrong idea? I figured they'd start to think we're helping each other out." Eagle nodded toward the table and chairs. "I have coffee or whiskey. Which would you like?"

As much as Travis wanted to say whiskey, he knew better. Liquor at this moment and with this man wouldn't be a good idea.

"Coffee."

Eagle eyed him for a second before pouring out two mugs of coffee. Travis kept his eyes trained on Eagle's face and tried not to stare at the man's chest bared by his unbuttoned shirt as Eagle leaned across the table and set the mug in front of Travis.

He caught a knowing gleam in the Indian's dark eyes and frowned while looking away. He wouldn't get allow himself to fall prey to those abnormal and abhorrent feelings. Nothing good would come of them and it could end up with him dying. He wasn't ready to die yet.

"You wanted to talk to me?"

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Travis's voice was rough and he fought the urge to clear his throat. Eagle raised an eyebrow and Travis shifted in his chair. Shit, he didn't want the other man to know how uncomfortable he made him.

Eagle gave him a reprieve. "Yes. When I arrived back at the stables today, Irv was talking to someone about you and your brother."

"What were they saying and who was he talking to?" He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table and cradling the mug in his hands.

"I don't know who it was. I didn't recognize the voice, but there was something familiar about it. Unfortunately, I didn't get a chance to see him." Eagle shrugged at Travis's groan. "Sorry, but there wasn't any way I was going to risk being seen. It might take a little while longer, but we'll find out who he is."

"You seem sure about that." Travis turned the mug in his hand, staring down into the dark brown liquid.

"Bitter Creek is a small town. A stranger stands out, and someone talking to Irv will stand out even more. No one likes Irv Johnson, not even the men he plays cards with every night. If the man is a stranger."

Eagle rocked onto his chair's back legs, balancing there while stretching his arms above his head. If he didn't know better, Travis would think the man was displaying all that golden skin to tempt him, but he did know better and thought about the singing of his father's whip through the air to cool his heated flesh.

"What were they saying about my brother and me?"

"There's something else going on here besides the range war between Buffert and Tansford. Someone is laying clues for you to follow that will lead you to the killer, but won't give away what

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they're doing."

"Whoever was talking to Irv must be the mastermind of the scheme. Irv seems the type of guy who lets other do his thinking for him."

"I'd say you're reading the man right." Eagle nodded and grinned. "Trust me, there's someone else pulling the strings in this town. Buffert and Tansford are playing into his hand perfectly. While they fight amongst themselves, this guy is off doing whatever it is he's doing. When the dust settles, he'll have the money and the land, more than likely, while you'll have killed your brother's murderer, but not taken care of the other problem."

"I'm not sure the other problem is my problem."

Eagle's chair dropped to the floor with a thud, and Travis looked up to see the other man staring at him intently.

"What? Why does that surprise you?"

The Indian stood, carrying his mug to the table next to the stove where a basin of water sat. Eagle shook his head, rinsing the cup out before turning back to look at Travis.

"I guess it doesn't really surprise me all that much. Your business is to find Ralph's killer. After that, you can ride away to save another family member from their own stupidity or the greed of other men."

Travis was on his feet and moving before he really registered the slightly sarcastic tone in Eagle's voice. Stopping inches away, he pressed his hand hard on Eagle's chest, ignoring the smooth, warm firm flesh under his fingers.

"I'm not sure I like the tone of your voice."

The corners of Eagle's mouth tilted up. "You don't like the tone of my voice? What are you going to do about it?"

Whether it was Eagle's smirk or just Travis's brain short-

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circuiting at entirely the wrong time, he'd never know. He slid his hand up over Eagle's shoulder to tangle his fingers tight in the Indian's long hair. Forcing Eagle's head forward, he ground their lips together. There was no softness, and Travis didn't think Eagle wanted that. The other man encircled Travis's waist with steely arms, dragging him closer until their groins rubbed.

Harsh groans filled the air and Travis's lungs began to burn, but he didn't want to break off the kiss. Fear that once they backed off, they would both come to their senses and separate, grew in him. His father wasn't alive anymore and doing this just once wouldn't change anything. He could go back to ignoring his attraction to the man in a few minutes.

Eagle eased back an inch or two, forcing their mouths apart. Travis swallowed the whimper of protest. No need for Eagle to know how vulnerable he could make Travis.

"Go sit down on my bunk," Eagle ordered.

Travis stood, frozen to the spot, as Eagle went to brace a chair under the knob of the door. Shit, no matter how hard he'd tried to run from it, the moment to make a decision was here. He'd never been a coward and if he chose to walk away from Eagle, Travis would always look on that decision as being the most cowardly he'd ever been. He was an adult and his father had died a long time ago. No one would know what went on in this room, so the chance of discovery was small.

His hands trembled and he stuffed them in his pockets. God, he'd faced down cold-blooded killers without a thought of the consequences, but have one good-looking and determined Indian order him around and his mind seized. His heartbeat sped up and sweat broke out on his forehead. There was no way he should be thinking of Eagle as good-looking. No normal man would be

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thinking that way.

The room plunged into darkness, and he jerked, turning to peer through the black shadows to see Eagle set the lantern down on the table. Travis waited to see what the Indian would do next, but Eagle didn't come to him. He pulled the piece of canvas hanging over the window down to block out any prying eyes that might wander by.

Fuck, Travis hoped no one took a walk through the livery yard at the moment. He jumped when Eagle's callused hand cupped his cheek. Peering up into those dark eyes, he saw a look of tenderness he'd never seen before, not even from his mother.

"You're making this more complicated than it needs to be, Travis," Eagle murmured.

"More complicated? Do you know what could happen to us if someone finds us like this?" He wanted to step away and stroll out of the room, acting as if none of this had happened.

"No one will catch us. None of the townsfolk come to visit me at night. It would stain their reputations if they were caught fooling around with an Indian."

The derision in Eagle's voice made Travis smile for a second before he sobered.

"My reputation wouldn't suffer if we were caught doing whatever you're thinking we should do?"

Eagle dropped his hand and headed toward the back of the room where Travis knew his bunk was located. "I'm not forcing you, Travis. You're more than welcome to walk out that door."

The rustle of fabric hinted at Eagle disrobing. Travis scrubbed his hand over his face, mouth dry and entire body shaking.

"Why?"

That wasn't what Travis wanted to say. He wanted to curse the

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man and deny he had any sort of feelings for men.

"I know what it's like to be different."

Well, that was a simple word encompassing a lot of meaning. "Different? I don't know what you mean."

Eagle's laugh eased out of the darkness and enveloped Travis, soothing him in some strange way.

"You can deny it out loud and to yourself, but you didn't hit me or shoot me after that kiss in the barn. I figured you probably leaned my way in who you choose for a bed partner."

"I don't take anyone to bed, especially men."

Damn, he really needed to pay attention to what slipped out of his mouth.

"Not even whores?" Disbelief colored Eagle's voice.

The dark released Travis and broke his iron control over his inclinations and wishes. He took his time making his way over to where Eagle sat on the bunk. Just this once, he'd take what he wanted and not worry about the consequences. He had to trust that Eagle wouldn't get him killed.

His knees ran into the side of the bunk and he grunted. Taking his hand, Eagle helped him sit beside him. His grip on the Indian's hand tightened briefly before he forced himself to relax.

"No, not even whores. I might lie to the world, but I refuse to lie to myself. I don't like women."

Eagle didn't speak, just slipped off the bunk so he knelt on the floor in front of Travis. Leaning back on his hands, Travis started to ask Eagle what he was doing. Eagle shook his head.

"Let me worry about what's happening right now, Travis. Just sit there and enjoy."

Travis could do that. Eagle stripped him with efficient movements; his boots set aside and his socks draped over the tops.

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The gun belt that never left his side was hung from a nail next to the bed, and Travis realized Eagle had guessed how truly naked he'd be without his weapons close enough for him to touch.

Eagle tapped his shoulder, and Travis raised his arms, allowing Eagle to slip his shirt over his head. His pants were next and Eagle got those off so fast, Travis didn't have time to get nervous. Within what seemed like seconds, he was naked and sprawling across Eagle's bed.

The man pushed Travis's legs farther apart and settled between them. Travis bit back a groan as hot breath washed over his prick, then he jumped when Eagle licked along the underside of his dick.

"Shit," he grated out between clenched teeth.

Eagle didn't say anything, using his hands to pin Travis's hips to the blankets before swallowing the entire length of Travis's rod. Travis dropped flat on the bunk and shoved his fist in his mouth to muffle his shout. His one and only encounter with another man didn't include this. Fumbling, awkward groping and one sloppy kiss before his father discovered them and beat him almost to death.

Screwing his eyes shut, Travis forced all thoughts of his father out of his head. The man wasn't alive anymore. No one knew of Travis's perversions and no one ever would. He doubted Eagle would tell anyone about it, considering it could get him killed as well.

The amazing moist warmth left his shaft and he whimpered. Glancing down, he saw Eagle looking at him with a small smile.

"You're thinking again. Let it go, Travis, because in here, no one can hurt us."

Swooping back down, Eagle sucked him in again, and Travis stopped thinking. In fact, he was pretty sure his brain stopped

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functioning altogether. It was all he could do to remember how to breathe.

Eagle teased and tasted Travis's cock, licking and sucking. He swirled his tongue around the flesh, driving Travis farther and farther along the road of ruin. Travis's world narrowed to his prick and Eagle's mouth. It was like the Indian was trying to drain every drop of Travis's essence with each bob of his head.

Travis reached out, trailing his hand over the top of Eagle's head and tangling his fingers in the man's hair. He didn't take control. He wanted to connect with Eagle, to ensure he didn't lose sight of the fact Eagle was a real man, not some faceless whore in a dirty saloon room. He had no experience with those, but he'd heard his brothers brag about those encounters.

Pressure built at the base of his spine and his balls drew closer to his body. Eagle moved faster, and Travis slid deeper into the man's mouth. He flung his arm over his face, biting down on his flesh as pleasure exploded through him and his seed flooded Eagle's throat. He thrust as much as he could with Eagle holding him down. Eagle worked him until he lay trembling and panting.

His soft prick slipped from Eagle's mouth, and the Indian stood. Travis didn't have the energy to look and see what the man was doing. He heard the splash of water in the basin and the sound of something pouring. After a minute or two, Eagle sat next to him and a damp cloth trailed over his groin. Eagle was washing him off.

Travis blushed and tried to bat Eagle's hand away. "You don't have to do that."

"Hush and let me do it. Tomorrow, you can return to being the tough gunfighter, but for tonight, I'll take care of you."

Travis's brain still wasn't functioning well enough for him to

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form an argument against Eagle's words, so he let the man do as he wished. When he was clean, Eagle tossed the cloth toward the basin before manipulating both of them into lying together on the bunk. As Eagle's arms closed around him, Travis tensed.

"I should go. I don't want anyone seeing me leave here."

Eagle smoothed his hand over Travis's chest and he relaxed slightly.

"Sleep a little. You can leave before dawn arrives."

Travis sank deeper into the mattress and slowed his breathing. He'd wait until Eagle was sleeping before slipping out and going back to his hotel.

CHAPTER 9

Eagle didn't open his eyes until after the door clicked shut. Rolling over onto his back, he stared up at the ceiling and mentally shook his head. He had known Travis wouldn't stay the night. The man wasn't going to risk being seen leaving his room like a righteous man sneaking out of a whorehouse. There was too much danger involved when two men messed around and losing their reputations was the least of their worries.

No point losing sleep over the whole thing. Hell, he'd survived without another's touch for most of his adult life. It wasn't as if he'd come to crave Travis's taste or anything like that.

Tomorrow, they would go back to being acquaintances and not a word mentioned about what went on in Eagle's room. Hopefully, they'd figure out what was going on in Bitter Creek and Travis

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would be able to leave soon. Eagle might be able to fool others, but he couldn't lie to himself. The longer Travis remained, the more likely it was something like their last encounter would happen again, and Eagle wasn't sure Travis wouldn't kill him afterward.

He let sleep take him, knowing that gnawing at the problem like a dog with a bone wouldn't solve it. He had to let the events take their own course and hope he didn't end up dead at the conclusion.

Pounding on his door woke him up as the weak morning sun peeked around the edges of the canvas square he'd put over the window. Eagle climbed out of bed, jerked on his pants and stalked to the door.

"What the hell is the ruckus?"

Jake from the café stood there, his face flushed and chest heaving like the man had run all the way from his place.

"What's wrong, Jake?"

"Ramsey's squared off with Burns and Welton just outside the general store," Jake panted.

"Damn."

Eagle tugged on a shirt, shoved his feet in his boots, and snatched up his rifle. Gesturing to Jake, he said, "Let's go. I won't step in unless I have to, but I don't trust Buffert to let this go down fair. Travis is faster than both those men, yet that doesn't mean he'll win against them."

They raced behind the buildings parallel to Main Street. Eagle didn't want anyone knowing or seeing he was ready to back Travis in any kind of fight. He had to cling to his neutrality for as long as possible. Skidding to a stop at the back door of the general store, Eagle grabbed Jake's shoulder to keep the man from entering.

"How did you know to come and get me?"

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"I figured you might be the only one who'd help me keep Ramsey from getting ambushed. You know how those Buffert gunfighters are, and Ramsey is alone here for now."

Eagle accepted that explanation, but he knew Jake wasn't telling him something. He nodded. "I'll take care of the man in the alley two buildings down, but I won't make an appearance in the street unless I have no other choice. Ramsey isn't to know I helped out."

"Got it."

Jake slipped into the back of the store, and Eagle slunk from building to building until he got to the alley where the other Buffert cowboy crouched, rifle trained on the back of the blond man in the street. A silent snarl curled Eagle's lips. He hated cheaters and shooting a man in the back was a low-down, cowardly thing to do. As quietly as a mountain lion hunting his prey, Eagle stalked the man in front of him, who was unaware of the danger he was in.

Eagle's Comanche training whispered that he needed to take out the threat permanently, but the white man's rules instilled in him by his father said to remove the cowboy without killing the man. He would probably regret it, but he hit the man on the head hard enough to knock him out. Laying the cowboy down, he took up the rifle and emptied out all the bullets, dropping them into his pocket before setting the gun against the wall next to the unconscious man.

He stepped closer to the corner and peered around, seeing Travis facing off with Burns and Welton. The two gunmen couldn't see Eagle, since he stood in the shadows. All they saw was a man holding a rifle and assumed it was their man. The grin on Burns's face showed the arrogance of the man.

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"We know who you are, Ramsey." Burns grinned.

"Good for you." Loose and easy, Travis stood with his hands hanging in the perfect position to make a grab for his guns.

"Way we figure, you're here to make trouble and none of us want that." Shaking his head, Burns conveyed concern.

"Too late for that, isn't it? Trouble wouldn't have come to Bitter Creek if my brother and his horses hadn't disappeared."

"No one knows where your brother and that herd went, Ramsey. Men disappear out here all the time." Welton's smirk ruined the lie.

Buffert must really think Travis was stupid if his men were telling whoppers like that. A man like Ralph Ramsey didn't just disappear. He had connections to family and friends. He had been putting down roots in this country to build a place for himself, and Eagle had admired Ralph for that. A man like that didn't leave everything behind on a whim.

Travis shook his head. "Someone here knows what happened to Ralph, and I aim to find out whom. When I do, justice will be delivered swiftly and with a great deal of pain."

"Right. I've heard about you Ramseys. You hunt in packs, but you're not so tough when you're on your own."

The tension in the air tightened, and Eagle knew that whatever was going to happen would be going off in a few seconds. He had no worries that Travis could handle Burns and Welton. He hoped no one else tried to shoot at the man. He couldn't risk taking a shot himself without revealing his position and aligning himself with Travis. He didn't want that yet.

Silence settled over the town like a sheet fluttering down to cover a mattress. Welton's eyes darted to where Eagle stood and the man gave a slight nod. Eagle knew that was the signal for the

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cowboy he'd knocked out to be ready. He made a gesture to make Welton think he was set.

In a flurry of movement, Travis, Welton, and Burns pulled their guns. Shots rang out, echoing through the dry air. Smoke drifted on the slow breeze, and when it cleared, Welton and Burns were down.

"You broke my arm, you bastard." Welton clutched his gun arm, trying to stem the blood running from his wound.

Burns moaned and the circle of blood at his knee told Eagle that Travis had aimed for the man's leg, taking him down without killing him. Travis's strategy seemed to be to wound the men enough for them not to be a factor in the fight anymore, but not to kill. Death was the special privilege of the man who'd killed Ralph, not these hired guns.

Travis staggered, and Eagle bit his lip, forcing himself to stay where he was. Jake left the safety of the store to go to Travis. The old man checked Travis out and glanced over the blond's shoulder to meet Eagle's gaze. Travis needed patching up, but the doc in the town was a drunk and firmly under Tansford's thumb. There was nothing Eagle could do but nod.

Turning away, he made his way back to the stable where he saddled Travis's horse and whistled for his mare, but before she appeared, Josiah rode into the yard.

"What's wrong, Eagle?" Josiah eyed Travis's stallion.

"There was a fight. Travis was injured, but the doc here won't treat him, even if we ask. He's a Tansford man. I was going to take Travis out to Mother and have the medicine man in the village take a look at him."

"Who'd he kill?" Josiah didn't dismount, though he frowned.

"No one. I wounded Burns and Welton. No point in killing

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them when they aren't the ones I want." Travis leaned heavily on Jake as they rounded the corner.

"Finally showing some restraint, Ramsey?"

"You son-of-a-bitch, I don't kill like some rabid dog, but all you see are my guns and all you listen to are rumors. You've convicted me without even knowing me." Travis groaned and his knees buckled.

Eagle shot across the dirt to catch Travis before the man could hit the ground, Jake not having the strength to hold Travis upright. Eagle glared at Josiah.

"Can you stop being a prick for a few moments at least and help me get him on his horse?"

Josiah's eyebrows shot up and he started to say something. Another narrow-eyed look from Eagle and he climbed off his horse. Together, they got Travis on his stallion and tied to the saddle. Eagle glanced around to see if his mare was close.

"No. You stay here. I'll take him to White Bird for help."

Eagle wanted to say no, but he knew his brother's suggestion was for the best. It wouldn't help him if Irv discovered he'd left with Travis.

"Okay, but come and tell me how he is when you get back."

"I will."

Josiah swung back up in the saddle and grabbed the rope Eagle had attached to the stallion's bridle. Eagle stood and watched them ride away. Jake clapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't worry. It's not a killing wound, but still needs attention. I have to get back to the café and you need to get to work before Irv shows up."

"Thank you, Jake."

The old man shrugged. "You and Ramsey are good people,

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Eagle. Neither of you deserve what this town is going to do to you. I'm just helping out with what I can."

Something in Jake's statement sounded like a prophecy, and Eagle shivered. More pain was to come and it would rain down from all sides, Eagle feared. All he could do was cling to his own strength and hope to outlast whatever trouble was coming. Glancing over at the injured man, Eagle accepted that leaving town might be the best decision he'd ever made, but he couldn't do it. Not when leaving meant abandoning Travis. In some strange way, Travis had wormed his way into Eagle's heart after such a short time and he didn't want to lose out on a chance for a deeper connection to Travis, even if it meant he got caught up in all the problems heading their way.

CHAPTER 10

Travis drifted awake to the sound of a fire crackling. All he could think was that he was somewhere safe or else he'd be far more alert than he was. Frowning, he opened his eyes to find some sort of tanned hide ceiling above him. He moved his head slightly and saw a slender, dark-haired woman kneeling by the fire, stirring something in a pot.

He shifted and pain shot from his side through him, hard enough to draw a gasp from him. The woman spun around and her striking resemblance to Eagle hit Travis in the gut. His dry throat brought forth a cough, not words, when he started to speak.

"Let me get you some water." She smiled and rose, gliding to one side of the tipi and using a wooden ladle to scoop water out of a bucket. The woman knelt beside him and slipped her arm around

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his shoulders to sit him up so he could drink. He sipped the tepid water a little at a time, not wanting to get sick. By the time he finished, he was shaking and sweating. She eased him back on the furs and blankets before she went to check the pot over the fire.

"Where am I?"

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "You do not remember the ride here?"

"Ride?" He closed his eyes, forcing himself to sift through the blurry memories to see if any of them matched what she said. "The marshal brought me here. You're Eagle's mother."

"And Josiah's. I am White Bird, and my son must count you a friend if he allows you to be brought here."

White Bird filled a shallow bowl with the stew and, picking up a spoon, came to Travis's side again.

He shrugged and accepted the first spoonful. It was steaming and spicy in a way he'd never tasted before. Either it wasn't bad or he was hungrier than he thought. After he swallowed, he said, "I'm not sure about friends, ma'am."

"Please call me White Bird, and yes, you are my son's friend. Eagle would never have allowed you to come here if he did not see you as more than an acquaintance."

There was nothing he could say to that. He wasn't sure what they were, but he'd be surprised if Eagle talked to him again after the way he'd snuck out of the man's room. Travis figured Eagle would try to save any man he found wounded. Eagle tried to save Ralph, a man he probably didn't consider a friend, and Travis hoped, deep inside, that he meant more to the man than Ralph did.

"How long have I been here?" He took another helping and chewed, savoring the food.

"Two days. Your wound is healing well, and I have stitched it.

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You should take care for another week or so, but you will not. I know your type.”

“My type?” He scrubbed a hand over his face and grimaced at the stubble on his cheeks.

“Yes. You are much like my late husband. Nathaniel never could stay still when he was injured. He always had to be doing something, especially if there was a wrong that needed to be righted.”

“That’s the truth, White Bird. I need to take care of a problem and I can’t be doing that lying here in this tipi.” He pushed up with his hands.

She shook her head in disapproval and helped prop him up so he sat straight. The position tugged on the stitches in his side, but he ignored the pain. He wasn’t bleeding and there wasn’t any danger of dying. He could deal with the discomfort.

“I know. Your brother was killed and you have come to find the man who did it.” Worry and sorrow warred for prominence in the woman’s eyes. “You have involved my only son, Mr. Ramsey, in a deadly game. I helped you because he asked, but I wish you never had come here. You bring death and violence with you.”

Travis couldn’t meet White Bird’s gaze anymore. He stared down at his hands and didn’t deny her statement. His two closest companions for most of his life were death and violence. God knows he’d never gotten love from either of his parents. His father had loathed him for what he was, and his mother never loved anyone but herself. His brothers respected him, but that wasn’t the same as loving him.

Josiah had spoken to him about Eagle, protecting his brother even though Eagle neither wanted nor needed protection. Barking Dog took on the responsibility of guarding Ralph’s horses, merely

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because Eagle had asked him to, knowing the danger involved. The bonds between the brothers weren't blood, but they ran just as deep and were just as strong as any blood tie could be.

"I have spoken out of turn. You may bring death with you, but that does not mean my son needs to rush out and greet it. I have never been able to convince Eagle not to try to help people. No matter that most of them do not want help from an Indian."

Travis lifted his head and gave her a small smile. "You're right, ma'am. For the most part, I am trouble. I'll do my best to keep your son away from the violence."

"Her son is a man and can decide for himself how far away from the violence he wishes to stay."

They both turned to see Eagle push his way into the tipi. Travis's heart jumped and he rubbed his chest. *Damn*. He needed to get well and deal with Ralph's killer soon. Too much could happen between him and Eagle to be safe for either of them.

Eagle's dark gaze trailed over him, seeming to note every tremble and weakness. Travis met the man's eyes and nodded, letting Eagle know he was ready to go. Eagle gave a slight shake of his head before going to greet his mother.

"Mother, I see you are taking good care of your patient."

They hugged, and Travis could see the love they held for each other in their smiles. Did Eagle know how lucky he was?

"I can only do my best, son, and hope that the Great Spirit sees fit to heal him." White Bird cradled Eagle's face in her hands. "He is special to you, I can tell, and that makes this man special to me."

Special? What was she talking about?

"Hush, Mother. Go and eat with your daughters-in-law. I'll sit with Travis for a while."

Eagle settled on the ground next to Travis, and they watched

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White Bird gather her things, waving as she left. The other man turned and Travis found himself pinned by Eagle's knowing look.

"I never took you for a coward, Travis."

Shit. Guess ignoring what happened the other night is out of the question.

As much as he wanted to deny he knew what Eagle was talking about, it wasn't in him to run. "What is there to say?"

"Why did you leave before sunrise? I'd have made sure you weren't seen."

He gave Eagle an inquiring look. "I don't know you. Do you seriously think I'd trust you not to get me killed?"

The Indian shook his head. "No, I'd assume you'd trust me enough not to get myself killed, which in turn would make sure you didn't die because of me. Now you seem perfectly capable of getting yourself shot, so I don't think you should worry about my intentions."

Travis looked at the dancing fire. Not much he could say to that. He wasn't the only one who stood to lose everything if the town discovered what they'd done. Yet he got the feeling Eagle was willing to risk more than he was.

Before he could move or protest, Eagle lifted his chin and kissed him. He jerked, not sure if he was trying to get away or if he was shocked the man would try something here where anyone could walk in without alerting them. All the thoughts shooting through his head disappeared when Eagle bit his bottom lip and forced a gasp from him.

Without thinking, he slid his hand up Eagle's arm to bury his fingers in the man's long hair and pressed their lips harder together. It was wrong on so many levels and for so many reasons, yet Travis couldn't fight the fact he wanted the man in his arms

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and his bed.

He shifted, wanting to feel Eagle pressed against the entire length of his body. Eagle moved and his knee bumped into Travis's side. Pain tore through him, stealing his breath and tightening his grip on Eagle's hair until the other man grunted. Somehow, he untangled his fingers, so Eagle could ease away. Travis swiped a trembling hand over his sweating face.

"Sorry. Try to breathe as deep as you can. The pain will go away soon."

Eagle went to the fire and poured some liquid into a cup. He returned to Travis's side and helped him sit up enough to sip the hot drink.

"This will help dull the edges."

Travis pulled away. He didn't want the edges dulled because it meant he wasn't in control of his senses. He needed to be aware of what was going on around him. Eagle didn't let him go and rested the lip of the cup to his mouth again.

"Nothing will happen to you here. These are my people and as much as they are unsure of my white side, they accept the Comanche in me. Plus my mother's husband is important in the tribe and he won't allow his hospitality to be violated."

Travis studied Eagle's dark eyes and decided he was too tired to argue at the moment. He sipped the drink until it was gone. Eagle laid him back down and set the cup aside. He watched through half-closed eyes, while Eagle settled next to him on the furs.

Propping his head with his hand, Eagle stared down at Travis and smiled. "I do know how to be careful, Travis, and I'd never do anything on purpose to endanger either of us. What is between us is life-threatening, merely by the fact so many believe it to be

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against the rule of God.”

Travis reached out and traced Eagle’s hawk nose, trailing his finger down over the man’s lips to his chin. “My father told me it was the path to hell.”

“If my father ever knew, he would probably have said the same thing. He was a tolerant man in many ways, but I do believe this would be something even he couldn’t accept.”

“Does your mother know where your interests lie?”

Eagle shrugged and smiled slightly. “She’s my mother. White Bird sees things I try to keep hidden. Have I ever said anything to her? No, but I often get the feeling I don’t have to and she still loves me anyway.”

“What about your brothers? Do they know?”

“I’ve never spoken to any of them about it. Keeping quiet is the best way to ensure I come to no harm because of it. I don’t go looking for company very often. It’s easier to be alone than to be dead, in my world.”

Travis chuckled softly, trying not to jostle his chest and stomach too much. The tea Eagle had given him had pushed the pain off a little bit. “Dead could be a lot more lonely than just being alone.”

“True, which is why I don’t want to try it out anytime soon.” Eagle cradled Travis’s face and his expression grew serious. “If you’re willing to take this journey with me, I promise I’ll leave you alone, but never get you dead.”

This was the moment where his entire life could change. Travis had thought it was the other night when he’d let Eagle take him in his mouth and pleasure him, but it wasn’t. It was this second, in the dark, illuminated by fire, when all of his defenses were gone, that Travis needed to make the real decision. There would be no

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walking away after this. Not if he chose to trust Eagle with more than his life, which was hard enough, but he was trusting Eagle not to hurt him and not reveal his secrets to the world.

He could excuse the other night as being without the touch of another's hand for too long and getting caught up in the moment, but Travis knew it wasn't true. He never got emotional or out of control. Too much blood spilled and too much skin scarred to ever lose control like that.

At times, lying came easy to him, but this wasn't one of those moments. Here, wrapped up the dark and warmth, he could admit to something the outside world would see as perverted and evil.

"I'll try to walk with you," he whispered, for once putting his entire being in the hands of another person.

CHAPTER 11

Eagle returned to Bitter Creek with a little spring in his step. Oh, he was neither stupid nor naïve. He knew the journey ahead was going to be rough and no matter what Travis had said in his mother's tipi, the man wasn't going to be eager to jump in bed with Eagle.

There was a lot going on in Travis's mind, and Eagle knew most of it had to do with whoever put those scars on his back. White Bird had pointed them out to Eagle while she was taking care of Travis. Did those marks explain the rigid control Travis held himself under so often?

He smiled to himself. Breaking that control was going to be fun. Yet Eagle understood he had to be careful. There was danger for men who lay with other men. At some point, most of the men

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out on the frontier had probably fumbled together in the dark, but that was when there weren't any women around to alleviate their needs. None of them would ever dream of being with another man exclusively.

Whistling softly, he started cleaning out one of the stalls. What would happen when Travis came back to town? Rumors were flying about him running away. No one knew how badly he'd been injured and who, besides Jake, had helped him.

"Where have you been?" Irv stalked down the aisle toward him.

"It was my day off. I don't have to tell you where I'm going."

Irv stopped and stared.

"Uppity 'breed," Irv muttered.

Eagle went back to forking out the dirty straw, ignoring Irv's grumbling.

"I want all these stalls cleaned by dark."

He snorted softly as Irv stomped off. Like he ever left any of the stalls dirty. Of course, Irv never knew what Eagle did exactly because the man would make an occasional appearance, but spent most of his time at one of the saloons.

The quiet of the barn was broken by the rustle of hay and soft breathing of the horses. He fell into the rhythm of cleaning when he didn't think about anything, just enjoyed the scents and company of the animals surrounding him.

After finishing two stalls, he looked up to see Josiah standing in the stall next to him, brushing his horse down. Acting like he didn't notice him, Eagle grabbed a broom and swept up the floor in front.

"How's Ramsey?"

"Good. Mother says he'll be able to return to town in two days

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or so.” He kept his head down while he spoke.

“Talk around town is he’s dead. Buffert and Tansford think they’ll have the fight between them for Ramsey’s land.”

“They’ll be surprised. We should have a tidal wave of Ramseys here before too long.”

Josiah growled. “Great. Just what we need. More family bent on vengeance and not considering the law.”

Eagle moved down the aisle. “I’m sure they considered the law and found it wouldn’t help them one bit, considering our sheriff is one of Buffert’s men.”

“Hmmm...there’s something else going on around here, Eagle.” Josiah leaned against the stall door, resting his arms on top of the wood and staring at his half-brother. “I’m not sure Buffert or Tansford has enough intelligence to kill Ramsey without anyone knowing about it. They tend to be very straightforward about getting rid of people, like those two gunfighters Ramsey shot the other day.”

He’d forgotten he hadn’t told Josiah about the conversation he’d overheard the night before Travis’s shooting. He explained, and Josiah stayed silent for a few minutes while he thought.

“I’ll ride to Sampson’s Trading Post and wire my office, see if anyone can find out some information for me. I’m thinking this whole thing is more than just a land grab by two ranchers.”

“I think you’re right.”

Josiah saddled his horse and rode off in the direction of the trading post. Eagle continued cleaning the barn, thinking about everything that had happened in the last five months. No other strangers had come into town aside from the gunfighters and Travis. So that meant the man behind the entire thing was local, maybe even someone he talked to every day.

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That should narrow down the list of men, he thought, considering he rarely spoke to anyone.

He took a break for lunch. After cleaning up, he headed to Jake's, figuring he'd let the old man know Travis was doing okay and find out why the man came to find him the day of the shooting.

Eagle took a seat at a table in the corner of the restaurant, keeping an eye on all the customers. With his back to the wall, no one could sneak up on him. Not that anyone ever had the urge to kill him, but now wasn't the time to get careless.

Jake brought him some coffee and a plate of stew. He joined Eagle and leaned forward. "How's Ramsey?"

"Better. He should be able to come back in a day or two."

"Maybe he should wait."

Eagle looked up and caught Jake's gaze. "Why?"

"Man I used to know over in Texas stopped by. He told me I shouldn't stick around because Bitter Creek was about to get hit by a tornado."

Frowning, Eagle took a few bites before asking, "A tornado? He can predict the weather?"

Jake chuckled hoarsely. "No. He said the Ramseys were on the move and it didn't bode well for anyone standing in their way. They're about four days behind him and moving fast."

"When did he come through?"

"Yesterday while you were gone or I'd have sent him to you."

Eagle finished eating and pushed the empty plate away from him. Rocking back on the chair, he held his coffee in his hands, resting on his stomach and stared off into space. What to do? Once Travis's brothers showed up, there was no way Eagle would be able to get close to the man. No way to find out if Travis really would be brave and try to walk the dangerous path with Eagle.

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There was no good choice. He had to ride out to the camp and tell Travis his brothers were on their way. He couldn't hide that from him. But he still had two days before they arrived. If Eagle went out there that night, maybe he could lead Travis a little way down the trail to where he wanted them to go together as lovers. It might be enough to ensure Travis would keep his promise, but if it wasn't, at least, he'd have one more memory for those chilly winter nights.

The moon was rising as Eagle rode into the camp. Barking Dog stood in front of the tipi Travis was using. Dismounting, Eagle tethered his mare close by before greeting his brother.

"I have news to share with Travis."

Barking Dog nodded. "He has been restless and not very happy that he must stay here longer."

"I doubt it's because he hates Indians."

"No, he wishes to continue searching for the men who killed his brother. I understand his need. I would feel the same if one of my brothers had been killed."

"Is he alone?" He gestured toward the opening of the tipi.

"Yes. Mother sleeps with my wife."

"Tell her I'll stop to visit in a day or two."

His brother raised a hand in good-bye and faded into the darkness. Eagle took a deep breath before pushing aside the tanned skin that hung as a door over the opening of Travis's shelter.

"Are you finished talking about me?"

He glanced around to see Travis sitting up on his pile of furs with a blanket covering him from the waist down. Eagle barely managed not to stare at the man's broad chest with a light dusting of hair from dusky nipple to dusky nipple.

Stepping farther in, he let the flap fall, blocking out the rest of

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the world. He sat down and pulled off his boots.

"Yes, we are."

Travis eyed him, obviously trying to figure out what he was doing. Eagle gave him a slight smile and stripped off his shirt. Travis tensed, but didn't move away as Eagle edged closer.

"What are you doing?" The question was harsh like Travis's throat had gone dry.

"We have some talking to do, but that can wait."

He stood, unable to straighten up completely, but enough to unbutton his pants and slide them off. Travis's eyes widened as he took in Eagle's naked body. Eagle's cock twitched as Travis's gaze trailed over it. He knew the other man wasn't immune by the tent the blanket was making over his groin.

"It's time to make good on your promise to try," he whispered as he crawled across the ground toward Travis.

Travis shivered, but he didn't offer any protest as Eagle joined him under the blanket. Eagle made sure to lie on Travis's uninjured side, not wanting to hurt his lover. Reaching out, he cradled the back of Travis's head and drew the man's mouth to his.

"Why do you kiss me?" The question seemed to escape before Travis could think about it.

Eagle grinned. He licked along the seam of Travis's lips, asking silently for entrance. Travis opened, and Eagle swiped his tongue in, tasting and learning every nook and cranny of the man's mouth. He made no move to bring Travis closer, but he didn't allow him to move away.

With each kiss, making each one a little harder and deeper than the one before, he could feel Travis relax until the man was leaning on him. Travis's hands fluttered as if he didn't know what to do with them.

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Easing away, Eagle murmured, "You can touch me."

Travis blushed, and Eagle was surprised. He had known Travis didn't have a lot of experience with men, but had the man never really done anything like this?

He flipped them, so Travis lay on his back looking up at Eagle. Pressing his finger to Travis's lips, he shook his head. "You've never kissed anyone, have you?"

Travis's gaze avoided Eagle's knowing eyes. "No."

"Not even a woman?"

Shaking his head slightly, Travis glanced at the fire. "Never could work up the nerve to try anything with a woman."

"Why not?"

He nuzzled his way down Travis's neck to scrape his teeth over the tender spot at the base of his throat.

"My father," Travis ground out, while arching his back to bring more of his body in contact with Eagle's.

Puzzled, Eagle frowned. "Your father didn't want you messing with women?"

Travis closed his eyes. "No, he didn't want me messing with men and his voice haunts me, so I'm incapable of doing anything with anyone, women included."

"He put those marks on your back?"

"Yes. He caught me with one of our farm hands."

"What happened to the other guy?" Eagle rubbed his thumb over one of Travis's nipples.

"Oh," Travis gasped, his hands landing on Eagle's shoulders.

Hiding his grin, Eagle leaned down and licked over the nub, getting it wet before pulling back and blowing a puff of air over it. Travis bit his lip to keep from crying out.

"What did your father do to the other man?"

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He knew it wasn't fair to ask these questions while he was seducing the man, but he figured Travis would never tell him otherwise. Eagle would use whatever he needed to in getting information from Travis.

"He threw him off our farm; told him never to say a word about what happened or he'd hunt him down and kill him."

"How old were you?"

"Sixteen."

"How old was the farm hand?"

"I don't know. Maybe thirty or so."

It didn't make sense to him. Why would Travis's father punish his own son, but let the other man go? The older man more than likely seduced Travis and was the one to blame in the whole encounter. Eagle sucked on Travis's flesh, teasing and tugging until Travis whimpered.

Letting that nipple go, he pushed up on his hand and stared down at Travis. "Because of your father's punishment, you have kept yourself apart from everyone. Touching no one, not even a whore."

Travis nodded, shame dancing in his eyes, making anger surge through Eagle. Old Man Ramsey must have been a real bastard, but Eagle wasn't about to speak his thoughts aloud. Of course, if Eagle's father had ever found out where his interests lie, the man would have probably beaten him, too.

"Nothing to be ashamed about, Travis." Eagle kissed him quickly before giving him a wicked leer. "It just means there's so much I can teach you before you leave."

"Do we have to wait until my wound heals?"

"My mother would say you shouldn't do anything stupid, which what I have in mind might be considered." He winked. "But

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I think we can be careful and not tear your side open.”

“What do I do?”

Travis looked at him with trust in his eyes, and Eagle knew how rare a gift that way.

“Just lie there and let me show you.”

CHAPTER 12

Travis found out that lying still was easier said than done with the things Eagle did to him. He jerked when Eagle drew the blanket off him and bared him to his sight. Never had another man's gaze excited him so much. His prick swelled and throbbed as Eagle stared at him.

Fighting the urge to turn away or cover up, Travis frowned. When had he lost his nerve? This was nothing more than another challenge to face down. Eagle wasn't going to hurt him. If that had been the Indian's plan, he could have done it at any point since they'd met. No, for some strange reason, Eagle liked him and found pleasure in being with him.

A stinging slap to his chest brought his attention back to Eagle.

"Ow. What was that for?" He rubbed the abused area.

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"You were thinking too hard, my friend. There's no need to use your brain for the rest of the night." Eagle winked and grinned.

"Really?"

"I'm not interested in your brain at the moment, Travis."

There was no reason to ask what interested Eagle from the way the man was staring at his groin.

"What are you interested in?" He couldn't resist asking.

Eagle swooped down like the bird he was named after and swallowed Travis's shaft to the root. His hips shot off the furs and he bit his lip to keep from crying out. No matter how confident Eagle was, self-preservation told Travis he couldn't make a noise. The rest of the camp couldn't find out what they were doing.

He entwined his fingers in Eagle's long hair and thrust into his mouth, enjoying the moist heat. Eagle didn't argue or protest. He relaxed his muscles, letting Travis slide farther in until the head of his cock hit the back of the man's throat. His low moan filled the tipi as Eagle gripped his balls in one firm hand and squeezed slightly.

Moving together, they drove Travis to the brink of release. Pressure built at the base of his spine and Travis tensed, unsure of the intensity of his feelings. Eagle eased off him and rocked back on his heels.

He flinched as Eagle reached out to brush his hair off his forehead. The Indian frowned, but didn't remark on his reaction.

"Stay there. I'll be right back."

Where was he going? His erection flagged as a low spike of pain shot through him. Without desire coursing through his body, his wound throbbed, reminding him of the other issues he had to deal with. He tracked Eagle's movement around the tipi.

"Here it is." Eagle held up a small earthen jar and crawled back

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over to Travis.

“What is that?”

“Something to take your mind off your injury and your real purpose for being here.”

Straddling his hips, Eagle set the jar on the ground next to the furs and dipped his fingers into it. Travis saw them glisten in the firelight when Eagle pulled them out. He leaned forward and braced himself on one hand over Travis. Eyes wide, Travis watched as Eagle reached behind himself and did something that brought a pleasurable, but pain-filled expression to his face.

“What are you doing?”

Eagle sighed and rocked back, almost like he rode something. “Check it out for yourself,” he encouraged.

Travis hesitated, but found his courage in the smile Eagle gave him. He trailed his fingers over the curve of Eagle’s hip to the man’s ass and down his crease. Shock rippled through him when he discovered Eagle had his fingers buried in his most private of spaces.

“You may touch,” Eagle informed him.

He caressed the stretched muscles around Eagle’s fingers and the man above him gasped. Eagle seemed to enjoy what he was doing, if the drips of liquid onto Travis’s stomach were any indication.

“Why are you doing this?”

Eagle froze, and Travis could tell he was trying to focus on the question.

“It feels good, plus it helps me prepare for you.”

“For me?” He wasn’t sure what Eagle meant.

“Have you seen men and women together?”

“Fucking?”

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Eagle nodded, eyes closing as he started moving again. "Yeah."

He'd seen moments like that, but they had never excited him as much as watching Eagle's sweat-covered body gleam in the flickering light of the fire.

"You'll be doing basically the same thing to me."

He jerked. "There's no way I'll fit."

"That's why I have to prepare myself, Travis." Eagle brushed a kiss over the tip of his nose. "Trust me. It'll be fine."

Travis shrugged. "If you say so."

Eagle chuckled. "I do and now it's time."

Removing his fingers, he wiped them on one of the blankets before picking up the jar and pouring more liquid onto the palm of his hand. Travis stayed quiet while Eagle grasped his cock and coated it with the oil. Eagle knelt over him, positioned Travis's prick at the entrance of his body and sat, taking him in without stopping.

Travis's eyes closed without his permission. It was like sinking into the softest, hottest vise he could think of. Not even his hand had gripped him with such strength. He raised his knees, bracing his feet against the furs under him and pushed up.

"Careful. We don't want to undo all of my mother's work," Eagle murmured, his hands outlining the bandage on Travis's side.

He groaned as Eagle tightened his inner muscles around his cock. "Eagle, I want to move."

"Then we shall."

Eagle rose, letting all but the crown of Travis's prick slide out. Travis protested silently, and Eagle grinned, slamming back down on him and driving a grunt from him. Everything fell away from Travis and he found himself swimming in the swirling waves of lust, need and pleasure. With each downward stroke, Eagle fanned

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the flames until Travis cried out into Eagle's hand, which the Indian used to muffle any noises Travis might make. The camp didn't need to know what was going on in the tipi.

Some instinct guided Travis and he wrapped his hand around Eagle's shaft, stroking and squeezing in time with his taking Eagle's ass. His release exploded through him and he flooded Eagle's channel with his seed, hot and liquid. Eagle ground onto him one last time and his own cream coated Travis's hand. The scent of sex and sweat filled the heavy air around them.

Eagle collapsed, managing to roll to Travis's uninjured side, and they sighed as his cock slipped from Eagle's ass. Travis held his sticky hand away from Eagle's skin, not wanting to get the man dirty. Eagle caught his hand and brought it to his mouth, licking his flesh clean and drawing another groan from Travis.

Pressing their lips together, Eagle opened his mouth and swiped his tongue into Travis's. For the first time, Travis tasted the seed of another man and he found the rather salty bitterness a taste he could come to enjoy.

Eagle shifted, and Travis tightened his grip, not wanting the Indian to leave him.

"Don't worry. I'm just getting a cloth to clean us both."

He flushed, angry with himself for clinging to Eagle like a needy woman. What had happened was just two men finding release and enjoying each other's body. Men didn't fall in love with each other. They could be friends, but that was all. There was no such thing as two men spending their lives together.

Shaking his head, he frowned. Silly thoughts such as those had never entered his mind before. Did fucking someone change a man? He hoped not, because if it did, he wouldn't do it again. Travis couldn't afford to be soft or to have friends. He'd leave

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after Ralph's killer faced justice. There was always somewhere else he had to go.

Travis let Eagle clean him, but didn't say anything. Eagle tossed the cloth back in the water bucket before starting to dress. Travis couldn't read the man's expression. He yanked one of the blankets over him, covering himself from Eagle's gaze.

"I have to get back to town." Eagle stomped into his boots. Flipping his hair over his shoulder, he stood by the flap of the tipi, studying Travis in silence for a second before saying, "Your brothers should be at Bitter Creek in two days. If you're feeling better tomorrow, my mother will let you leave here."

Surprise and a little touch of fear stiffened Travis's back. He didn't think his brothers would have gotten here so soon. What if they figured out what he and Eagle had done? Some of his thoughts must have crossed his face because Eagle shook his head.

"Everything that has passed between us here will never see the light of day, at least not from me anyway." Eagle pushed open the tipi flap and started to leave.

"Eagle," he called out softly.

The Indian stopped, but didn't look back, and Travis didn't say anything else. What could he say? There had never been a promise of anything more than he would try walking down the path Eagle wanted to lead him along. He'd done that and found a pleasure he never thought possible, but he couldn't risk another trip.

Too much was at stake and, though he'd never thought he was a coward, it was obvious this was something he wouldn't risk being killed over.

The flap dropped and Eagle was gone. Travis didn't know why his absence hurt. He rubbed his chest and curled up under the blanket, breathing in the faint scent in the air. Sleep dragged him

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under and he never saw a pensive White Bird peek into the tipi, making sure her patient was okay.

CHAPTER 13

Eagle looked up as several riders thundered by him down the main street and stopped in front of the saloon. Recognizing them as some of Buffert's men, their haste intrigued him. He rested his pitchfork against the stall door and wandered toward the crowd of people gathering around the horsemen.

No one paid attention to him as he pushed his way closer. One of Buffert's riders pointed back the way they came as Buffert stepped through the swinging doors.

"He's taken the ranch," the man informed his boss.

Buffert frowned. "Who has taken what ranch?"

"Ramsey's moved into his brother's house. He shot at us and ordered us off his property when we tried to approach him."

"I thought he was dead," Buffert mused, rubbing his chin and

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glaring at the cowboy.

"He's not. He rode in this morning, as bold as anything, and forced us out."

"One man against the three of you? Ramsey is good, but you could've taken him if you weren't so yellow." Buffert sneered.

"He wasn't alone, sir." One of the other riders spoke up. "He had some cowhand with him. I'd seen the guy around the saloon two days ago or so. I thought he was looking to hire on, but he said he still had some money and wasn't fixing to get killed any time soon."

Had Josiah thrown his hat into the ring with Travis? What had his brother learned on his trip to Sampson's? He'd have to ride out to Ralph's place and see how the truce was holding up.

"He must've been working with Ramsey from the beginning."

Eagle slipped back toward the stable. *No point in sneaking around now.* Buffert wouldn't take Travis's coup lightly and the rancher would rush to action. Unlike Tansford, who was cold and calculating, Buffert was brash and reckless. He'd gather his men and hit the Ramsey ranch within a day.

Once he got to his room, he grabbed his pack and stuffed food and bullets into it. He snatched up his rifle, checking the action and sliding it into its boot. He had no pistols, never having learned how to shoot them or how to like the feel of them in his hand.

He thought about stopping by the store and picking up some more bullets, but he didn't want anyone asking him what he was doing. Glancing around, he made sure no one was around as he whistled for his mare. Once Irv found him gone and he backed Travis in the fight with Buffert, any neutrality he might have had would be out the window.

As his mare raced up to him, a rock rolling across the yard

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caused him to turn. Jake stood there, holding a bag in one hand and a rifle in the other.

“What are you doing here, Jake?”

Eagle saddled his mount and attached the saddlebags. He slung his rifle boot over the horn of the saddle, making sure the butt was close to his hand.

“I brought you some food and some more ammunition. It could take you boys a while to get rid of Buffert and Tansford.”

“Do you think Tansford will hit us as well?”

Jake’s grin was cold. “When the beast is wounded or distracted, you attack from a different side.”

“True.” He mounted and reached for the items Jake had for him. “Take care and if the Ramsey boys show up, send them out to the ranch.”

“These men will never let you stay around here, Eagle, if you do this,” Jake warned, stepping back from the mare.

He smiled at the older man and winked. “I was feeling restless anyway.”

Jake chuckled and slapped the mare on the rump. “Get out of here and watch your back, boy.”

The trail he took wasn’t the most direct route to the ranch. He spent some time watching his back, seeing if anyone was following him. So far, no one had left the town heading his way.

As he crested the hill and looked down at the cabin in the middle of the valley, another rider joined him.

“What are you doing here, brother?”

Turning, he met Barking Dog’s gaze. “My white brother is down there along with a friend. I can’t leave them to fight this battle.”

Barking Dog stayed silent for a few moments. With a nod, his

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brother spoke. "I understand you wanting to help your brother."

"Thank you."

"We will keep an eye on the horses for you."

He clasped his brother's arm in gratitude. There was one less thing he had to worry about. He wouldn't ask his Indian family to fight against the white men. Too many disasters lay in that direction.

Barking Dog slipped back into the brush, and Eagle continued on his way. Finally, drawing to a halt in front of the cabin, he stayed in the saddle and called out, "Hello."

Travis stepped onto the porch, his blue eyes wide at the sight of Eagle sitting on his mare in the front yard.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Eagle shrugged. "I thought you could use some help."

"Your brother's here and mine will be arriving soon." Travis rolled a cigarette, striking a match on his boot heel to light it. "This isn't your fight."

"It isn't really Josiah's either."

"He's a marshal, sworn to uphold the law. Ralph's killing was murder, pure and simple."

He met Travis's cool gaze. Was that a flicker of worry he saw in the man's eyes? Could Travis be afraid something might happen to Eagle?

"I'm here because I don't want my brother to fight this battle alone," he stated.

Disappointment flashed over Travis's face for a second, and Eagle glanced at the barn to hide his smile. So, Travis didn't like hearing Eagle was only here because of Josiah.

"This isn't your fight," Travis insisted. "You could get into real trouble if anyone finds out you came out here."

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Eagle swung his leg over the back of his mare and dropped to the ground. Letting the reins hang, he stalked over to Travis. He leaned in close enough to breathe the smoke from the man's cigarette and poked Travis in the chest. "I'm done cowering in the background so the white people don't get nervous around me." He let his gaze linger on Travis's mouth. "If we don't stop those men here, they'll take over the town and I'll be leaving anyway. Might as well make a stand for it here instead of hiding away."

Travis licked his lips nervously, and Eagle clenched his hands to keep from grabbing his lover and planting a hard kiss on his mouth. He didn't know where Josiah was. Endangering his life in a fight for justice was one thing. Getting killed because he couldn't control himself was another thing entirely.

Stepping back, he snagged his mare's reins and headed to the stable. "Where's Josiah?"

"Out back, checking on the trails leading in here from the south."

Travis walked with him to the barn. They worked in silence as Eagle stripped the saddle off and Travis threw some hay into one of the stalls for Eagle's mare. Before they left, Travis grabbed him and shoved him against the wall.

"This is crazy," he growled out, right before taking Eagle's mouth like a cavalry charge.

Shit. It *was* crazy, but Eagle wasn't going to complain. He buried his hands in Travis's hair, knocking his hat off in the process. His gasp allowed Travis entry and he swept his tongue into Eagle's mouth. It seemed the cowboy was a fast learner. They dueled, fighting for control of their kiss, even though Eagle would willingly let Travis take the lead, if he thought that was what the man wanted.

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He kicked Travis's boot, knocking the man off-balance and forcing him to lean forward. It brought their bodies together, and he swallowed a moan at the feel of Travis's weight on him.

Eagle slid one of his hands from Travis's head, down his back toward his ass, but the click of a hoof against a rock froze them both. Another click—and this one was closer—drove them apart. Travis bent to pick up his hat, and Eagle went to grab his rifle and pack from where he'd set them before the kiss.

Josiah entered the barn and frowned when he saw Eagle standing there. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"The way you two greet people, it's a wonder anyone wants to come and help your asses," Eagle muttered as he stalked by the two men.

He got to the porch before Josiah and Travis caught up to him. His brother grabbed his arm, pulling him to a stop.

"It's not that we don't appreciate you coming here, Eagle, but you shouldn't put yourself in danger like this." Josiah waved a hand toward Travis and himself. "We know what we're doing. Fighting like this is my job and sort of Ramsey's job as well."

Eagle eyed both men suspiciously. "When did you come to an understanding? I thought you hated each other."

He pushed the door of the cabin open and stepped in, setting his rifle against the wall just inside the door and dropping his saddlebags in a corner. Turning, he crossed his arms over his chest and studied the two men in front of him.

"White Bird convinced me that he might not be as bad as I thought," Josiah admitted, jerking his hat off and running his fingers through his hair.

"Mother did, huh?" He smiled at the thought of his mother taking up Travis's cause. He glanced at Travis. "And what made

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you stop wanting to shoot Josiah on sight?"

"Your mother told me that Josiah was protective of you and I shouldn't get upset with him because he was acting just like I would've if I were in the same position." Travis hung his hat up before pacing to the back of the cabin and staring out the window.

"It does seem Mother has been busy negotiating peace between you."

"What are you doing here, Eagle? You shouldn't have thrown your hat in with us." Scowling, Josiah sat at the table, his shoulders stiff with disapproval.

"Did you really think I'd stay in town and let you two get killed?" He shook his head. "You're dumber than I thought if you believed that would happen."

"We're probably going to die anyway, and I don't see how having you here is going to make a difference," Travis commented without turning to look at him.

Eagle shrugged. "That might be true, but your brothers are close. We only have to hold them off for a day, maybe less. Buffert will come first. He's rash and arrogant, believes you can't hurt him because no one has. Plus you made his boys back down. Buffert doesn't like that. He'll be here within an hour or so."

"This isn't your fight, Eagle. Go back to town and no one will ever know you were out here." Travis still didn't look at him.

In three strides, he was across the room, gripping Travis's shoulder and whirling him around. He shoved the man against the wall and pinned him there with his hand.

"What neither of you seem to realize is that this became my fight the minute your brother chose to come to me when he was dying. I've always minded my own business and stayed out of the mess this town was heading for, but with one decision, your

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brother took my choice from me.”

Pushing away, he swung around to glare at Josiah. “I appreciate your concern, brother, but you can’t protect me from this. Hell, you can’t protect me from living my life and it’s one where I’ll always be fighting in some way or other.”

Both men stared down at their boots, and he snorted. They were like little kids who had gotten their hands slapped by the schoolmaster.

“Do you have a plan?”

“We were trying to come up with one. That’s why Josiah went to check the trail leading into the hills.” Travis pointed to a faint break in the brush a hundred feet from the back of the cabin.

Eagle nodded. Ralph had built his cabin well, clearing a space around the building so no one could sneak up on him. Anyone could get from the cabin to the barn without exposing themselves. He thought for a second.

“Okay. Buffert is a straightforward guy. He won’t try to sneak up on us from behind. He and his men will attack from the trail leading in here from the road.”

“How many men do you think he’ll bring?” Josiah relaxed. Obviously, planning for an attack was something he understood.

“At least fifteen. He has more than that at his ranch, but he doesn’t see us as a big enough threat to bring all of them. About half of his men are cowhands, not gunfighters, so they won’t be much good in a shoot-out for the most part.”

“What about Tansford?” Travis joined Josiah at the table, sitting and pulling out his guns to check them.

“He’s a cold, sneaky bastard. I wouldn’t put it past him to come up behind us while Buffert keeps us occupied, but he won’t come right away. He’ll calculate the risks and damages he can afford

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before he puts one man in the fight. By that time, your brothers might be here and it won't matter."

"We might get more. I have a lot of cousins and they know Ralph was killed. They'll come running as soon as they can."

"So if it comes to a war, we could have our own army?" Josiah was checking his own guns.

"Yes."

"Your army is a day out, cousin."

Whirling while dropping to the side, Eagle saw a tall, buckskin-clad man ease into the cabin, rifle in one hand and the other hand held out from his side. Josiah and Travis jumped to their feet, chairs crashing behind them, and their guns pointed at the man.

"Shit, Job, I nearly shot you. Give me a warning before you appear out of thin air."

Travis slid his gun back in his holster and gestured for Job to sit down.

"Josiah, Eagle, this is one of my cousins, Job Ramsey. Did Michael send you on ahead?"

Job laid his rifle over his lap and sat, his dark eyes sizing Eagle and Josiah up before he looked at Travis. "Yeah. I met up with them three days ago. I came to let you know we're on the way."

A hidden tension released in Eagle. He'd been willing to fight to the death to punish the man who'd killed Ralph, but now, with the knowledge Travis's family wasn't far away, the possibility of surviving this war loomed in his mind.

CHAPTER 14

They made their plans. The rest of the family wouldn't get here before Buffert did or that's what Eagle thought.

"Buffert's at his ranch right now, gathering his men," Eagle told them. "He'll be here shortly to see if he can't kill us or force us to run."

"There'll be neither today," Job promised.

Relief coursed through Travis's body. They could hold Buffert's men off long enough for the others to get there. He was used to fighting alone, but having people to watch his back made him far more confident than he would be if he were alone.

"Eagle, you and Josiah go out to the barn. Keep an eye out. We can't have them burning the barn down."

The two men grabbed their rifles and ammo. Josiah stepped out

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onto the porch. Eagle gave Travis a glance before following his brother. Travis squashed the odd feeling of concern pounding in his chest. Nothing would happen to Eagle. The man knew how to handle his weapons. No point in making a bigger deal about sending him out to fight than necessary.

Job stood, moving to the back door and peering out. "You trust them?"

"As much as I trust the rest of you," Travis admitted.

"Which doesn't tell me a whole helluva lot."

He looked up to see Job resting against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest and eyebrows raised.

"You're family. Why wouldn't I trust you?" Travis shifted uneasily because, for the first time in his life, someone looked at him and saw through his surface. Job seemed to know something about him that no one, not even Eagle, did.

"If your father hadn't forced you into taking on the job of helping the clan, you'd have disappeared a long time ago."

"What makes you think so? I wouldn't abandon my family." His protest sounded a little loud and he cringed inside.

Job tilted his head, studying Travis for a second. "No, you're right. You wouldn't have abandoned the family and maybe being the ungrounded member makes your life a little easier. Keeps your secrets a little safer."

"I don't have any secrets."

Starting to turn, he wanted to get away from Job's knowing gaze. Job was across the room and gripping his arm before Travis even realized his cousin was moving. He stared at the rough, scarred hand on his arm for a moment before raising his gaze to meet Job's light green eyes.

"There's something between you and that Indian out there."

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Job nodded in the direction of the barn. "I can sense it and see the connection between you."

Travis's worst fear had come to light. Someone knew about his perversions. He yanked away from Job and laughed bitterly. "Do you have the 'sight' or something, cousin?"

Job's serious expression didn't change. "Yes, I do, from my ma's side."

A shiver racked his body and he stepped back toward the front door. "So you 'see' things, huh? And what do you do with what you see?"

Shit. Was his cousin going to beat him for what Job thought he saw between Travis and Eagle? Or worse, was he going to kill him? Job could do that and claim Buffert's men had done it. Of course, Job would have to take out Eagle and Josiah as well. Something told Travis that feat might be tougher than it seemed.

Shrugging, Job spun around and went back to his position at the back of the cabin. "I don't do anything with secrets that hurt no one but the person keeping them. If your secret hurt others, I might have to educate you on the errors of your ways."

"You aren't going to tell me how wrong all of it is?"

"No point in preaching at you, cousin. You've heard that refrain once too often as far as I'm concerned. You aren't hurting him, are you?"

Travis was pinned by Job's spooky green eyes as the man threw a look over his shoulder at him.

"No," he muttered.

"And he's not forcing or hurting you, is he?"

He shook his head.

"Then I'm staying out of your business. We'll get the bastards who killed Ralph, and I'll be leaving. No one will hear anything

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from me. The 'sight' is a curse and a gift. I don't plan on using it to my advantage."

Travis didn't quite believe Job told him the truth, but he wasn't willing to push the discussion any farther. He'd just have to trust Job did have some kind of code for his "knowing."

The soft hooting of an owl caught their attention, and he raced to the window in the front. Peeking around the frame, he saw a cloud of dust as Buffert's men rode down the trail.

"Idiot." He sneered.

"Not really trying to hide the fact he's coming, is he?" Standing on the other side of the window, Job grinned at him.

"Well, Eagle did say Buffert figured he'd only have to fight two men. Josiah and I couldn't be everywhere. They'd have fired the barn first and waited to see if we'd make a move to save the horses."

"Do they think you're stupid enough to leave your mounts in the barn?"

He rolled his eyes. "Buffert thinks he's the only smart one around."

"God bless all idiots." Job chuckled.

"Hello the house," one of the riders yelled as they plunged to a stop in front of the cabin and fanned out.

"These boys really are dumber than dirt, cousin," Job commented as he swung around to check the back and make sure no one was coming up to ambush them from behind.

"What do you want?"

Travis jerked as Josiah's challenge issued forth from the barn. Half of Buffert's men swung to face that building.

"We don't want no fighting. Give up peacefully and we'll let you get on your way." The stocky bald man doing the talking

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wiped his hand nervously on his pant leg.

"You'll *let* us? That's really big of you considering your boss killed the man whose blood and sweat built this ranch."

"Why are you letting him do the talking?" Job's question was soft.

"They don't know for sure how many of us are here. There should be two of us and by not knowing where I am, they have to account for both buildings instead of focusing on just one. Josiah knows what he's doing."

"Mr. Buffert didn't have anything to do with that. He moved on this ranch fair and square after Ramsey, the other man, ran off."

"Ran off, huh? If he ran off, like you say, why was a large pool of blood on the floor of the cabin when we got here today?"

The bald man jerked and paled. "There weren't no blood. We cleaned—"

"Got 'em," Travis whispered. "Be careful. That bald man will be the first to make a move." He had picked the talker as the first man to die when the bullets started flying, not because the man was the best gunman out of Buffert's boys, but because he seemed to be the leader. Maybe with him dead, the others would scatter.

Travis eased to his left slightly, and the bald man caught glimpse of his movement. His hand flashed down and the gun practically leapt into his fingers. Several guns fired at once. Travis felt the whistle of a bullet as it sped past his head.

The bald man weaved in his saddle, unable to hold on as his horse danced around, startled by the gunplay. As his body slid to the ground, Travis counted four wounds in the man's chest, any one of which could have killed the man.

Glancing quickly over his shoulder, he saw Job stood with his back to him, guarding that side of the cabin. Where had the fourth

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shot come from if Job hadn't taken it?

The Buffert men fell back, searching for cover, but they didn't run like Travis thought they would. Either they figured they still had the right numbers to be able to take him and the others or they had re-enforcements coming.

"Get ready," he told Job.

"I was born ready. This dance ain't nothing I haven't seen before, cousin."

Job's calm presence made Travis relax. They would get through this first wave and regroup before Tansford decided to throw his hat in the ring. A rifle crack came from the barn and one of Buffert's men rose from where he'd been crouched behind one of the horse troughs, blood spraying from a wound in his chest.

"Those boys are pretty good shots," Job commented.

Travis looked to see Job standing by the other front window.

"Shouldn't you be keeping an eye out on the back?"

Job shook his head. "We've got company. They'll let us know if anyone's sneaking up on us."

"Who?" Breaking out the rest of the glass, he rested his rifle on the sill, taking aim on a poor sucker who had part of his boot sticking out from behind a pile of brush. "You see it?"

"Yep."

"Get ready." Travis slowly squeezed the trigger and the rifle kicked against his shoulder. An agonized scream filled the air as his bullet hit the target, driving the gunman back so he exposed his shoulder to Job's expert marksmanship. Another crack and the man toppled forward. "Good work."

"Learned it hunting rabbits in the hills. They only give you so long to shoot before they run. I had to be ready."

Travis ducked as a bullet thudded into the outside of the wall

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blocking him.

"Your brother knew how to build, Travis." Job patted the wood. "These walls will protect us against everything but fire."

"Ralph fought in the war. He knew how much damage thin walls could cause to those inside them." Travis settled down and studied the area where Buffert's men had taken cover.

Shots came sporadically, not causing any harm to any of the fighters, but they served to keep both groups honest. No one was going to sneak away.

"Who's keeping eye over our back?" Travis asked during a lull in the exchange of gun fire.

"Don't know who. Just spotted them as I was coming in. Figured they were here because of Eagle."

Job dipped water from the small cistern Ralph had installed in the cabin, insuring that if attacked, he wouldn't have had to leave the safety of the building for water. Travis took the dipper after Job refilled it.

"They're Indians?"

"Comanche, by the looks of things."

"I wonder if they fired that fourth shot."

Job shook his head. "No. I don't think they'll get involved unless we can't handle it without their help. They aren't interested in fighting with the white man or, at least, they don't want to fight these white men."

It made sense. Barking Dog and the rest of Eagle's tribe wouldn't enter into a white man's fight. If they did, it would be to save Eagle and for no other reason. Travis hoped it wouldn't come to that, but he did hope Eagle survived the battle.

"Something's happening, cousin. I think those boys are getting ready to rush us."

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There was movement among the gunfighters, and Travis double-checked his rifle and pistols.

"They'll rush in two groups. One to the barn and one to the house. They'll have torches, so we take those men out first. If the others reach us, we can deal with them afterward."

"It's your show, Travis."

As the two groups charged, it seemed Eagle and Josiah had the same plan as they did. The men carrying the burning torches were shot first, or if no clear shot could be made on them, the horses got taken out.

Travis and Job stayed in control of their shots, picking and choosing as the enemy came closer. The bullets flew in, hot and heavy, and Travis knew it was only a matter of time before one of them was injured.

"Shit."

He whirled to see Job drop his rifle and clamp a hand over his shoulder. His cousin waved him off as he started to go to him.

"It's okay. Just went through the flesh at the top." Job grabbed his rifle from the floor and, ignoring the blood running down his arm, reloaded as he swore.

Travis turned back in time to grab a man climbing through the window. He dragged him in and slammed his rifle butt into the back of the guy's head. If he lived, Travis would send him back to Buffert with a message. If he didn't, Travis wouldn't mourn him. There were always casualties in a war.

The fight didn't last much longer. Their charge was the last gasping breath of a group of men who knew that somehow they had been defeated by four men. When the last man died, Eagle and Josiah emerged from the barn cautiously, keeping to cover as much as they could while making their way back to the cabin.

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"Take care of Job, Eagle," Travis ordered as the two men entered. "Josiah, help me see if this guy is still alive and if he is, we'll get him awake, tie him to his horse and send him back to Buffert."

Approaching Job, Eagle slid his knife out. "You don't have a problem being treated by an Indian, do you?"

Job gritted his teeth as Eagle sliced through his shirt to reveal the wound. "Been treated by more Indians than white folk in my lifetime. I've got no problem with you."

Confident Eagle would take care of Job properly, Travis gestured for Josiah to grab the man's feet and they carried him outside to the horse trough. Travis grabbed a bucket, filled it with water and dumped it on the man's face.

When the guy was coherent enough to repeat what Travis told him, they rounded up one of the Buffert horses and heaved him up into the saddle. They secured him to his mount and encouraged the horse to head for home.

They started clearing the yard of the bodies. Eagle and Job joined them after Eagle finished bandaging Job's wound. Travis started to protest that Job needed to rest, but one look at his cousin's face told him that Job wouldn't sit by while they dug graves and took care of the dead.

The sun was beginning to set when they finished. They washed up and fed their own horses before heading in to the supper Job had cooked for them. The food eaten in silence and it was only after the dishes were scrubbed that they broke it.

"What did you tell Buffert?" Eagle sat cross-legged on the floor, his back against the wall.

"That he would need to send more men next time." Travis grinned.

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Job stood, picked up his rifle and flinched at the pull of his wound. "I'll go and guide your brothers in over the back trail. No need for anyone to know how many men are here."

"Wait. Take this." Josiah dug through his pack and tossed a shirt at Job. "It's cold out tonight and we can't have you getting chilled."

"Thanks."

Job tugged on the shirt, tucked his rifle in the crook of his arm and nodded. "We'll be back by noon tomorrow."

"Be careful." Travis stood and shook Job's hand.

"Always am."

They didn't watch as Job slipped into darkness beyond the back door.

"We should get some sleep. I don't think anyone will be coming tonight."

Travis started to unroll his blankets. Eagle did the same, while Josiah picked up his gun and headed toward the front porch.

"I'll take first watch. I assume Barking Dog and the others will give us a warning if anyone's coming from behind."

"Yes."

"Night. I'll wake one of you up when I get tired."

Josiah stepped outside, leaving silence behind. Travis didn't look at Eagle as he pulled off his gun belt and laid it next to his head. There was nothing to be said or done that night with Josiah in earshot. As much as Travis wanted to go over and wrap his arms tight around Eagle, reassuring himself that the man wasn't hurt, he couldn't risk it.

Before he drifted asleep, he felt the brush of lips over his forehead. It seemed Eagle still had more courage than Travis.

CHAPTER 15

Eagle came awake the moment Josiah's foot nudged him. He nodded and sat up, scrubbing his face with both hands before he stretched and stood. Moving quietly, he tugged on his boots and shrugged into his shirt.

Josiah held out a cup of coffee. "It's been quiet out. I haven't seen anything from Barking Dog, so I'm assuming they aren't massing over the ridge to come and attack us."

"Barking Dog would let us know if they were anywhere close."

He sipped the hot liquid and shuddered at the bitterness, having never gotten used to drinking coffee. He glanced over at Travis.

"We'll let him sleep as long as we can. He's not completely healed," Josiah said softly.

Picking up his rifle, Eagle waved his cup at Josiah and grinned

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as his brother refilled it. He headed outside and moved off the porch to wander over to the barn. He managed to climb the ladder into the hayloft without dropping either his gun or his coffee.

The way Ralph had built the barn gave Eagle a perfect view of three directions. He didn't worry about the trail at the back of the cabin. Barking Dog was keeping an eye on that, so he didn't need to waste his time.

Settling on a hay bale, he let his eyes adjust to the darkness and his ears to the natural sounds of the night creatures. The beings that foraged and were awake during the night were the best watchdogs. They would alert him long before his eyes did.

Some time had passed when he heard noises in the barn. He turned to face the opening in the hayloft, knowing who the approaching noisemaker probably was, but not taking any chances.

"It's me," Travis said before he lifted his head over the edge of the loft.

"You should be sleeping." Eagle turned back to sweep the expanse of country with his gaze, making sure nothing moved that shouldn't.

"Can't. I've been resting and sleeping for the past couple of days. I'm not used to doing nothing." Travis sat on the bale next to him, brushing his thigh against Eagle's.

"Josiah?"

The other man grinned. "He's sacked out, snoring to beat the band."

"He's been working hard on trying to figure out what's really going on around here."

"You don't think it's just a land grab? Maybe someone is manipulating Buffert and Tansford to do their dirty work for them." Travis pulled a piece of wood and a knife from his pocket.

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“With those two wiped out, this other person could swoop in and get all the land for a good price.”

Eagle shook his head. “I think they want this land for a reason and that reason has nothing to do with the water or anything like that. I think it has everything to do with where this ranch sits in the valley.”

Travis shifted, bringing their bodies in contact from shoulder to thigh, and Eagle relished the warmth emanating from Travis. Nothing could happen at the moment. Their lives depended on keeping his mind focused on the job at hand.

“Are you excited to see your brothers?”

Silence greeted his question and he wondered if he'd upset Travis. Maybe he didn't have a good relationship with his other brothers. Eagle figured Travis didn't see them very often.

“I'm glad they'll be here when Buffert comes back and when the rest of the bad guys decide to come after us.” Travis whittled on the wood he held.

“How long has it been since you saw them?”

Eagle didn't know why he needed to know, but Travis didn't have to answer if he didn't want.

Travis tilted his head like he was thinking. “God, it's been since Christmas last year, I think. I spent two days with Michael and everyone at the ranch, but I got a message from a distant cousin asking for help, so I left the day after Christmas.”

“You don't spend a lot of time with them, do you?”

How could Travis go so long between seeing his brothers and yet spend all of his time helping members of his family? What possessed this man to give up a relatively normal life to roam from place to place like the tumbleweed Eagle watched drift by at times?

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"No need to. They all have their own families. They don't need me hanging around, and settling down in one spot isn't my way. Makes life more interesting to see what's over the horizon."

He wasn't sure he believed Travis, but he wouldn't push the issue. There were other things riding his lover. Things that had everything to do with what was between them, and Eagle wasn't sure how Travis would react when his brothers got there.

"You and your brothers seem to be close," Travis commented after a brief silence.

"Josiah was young when Nathaniel married my mother. He accepted her because his father didn't treat her any differently than he did a white woman. He learned to accept me, but it was hard for him. After being an only child for so many years, suddenly to have a little brother around was difficult. We grew close and even now, I know he'll come help me if I need him."

He stood and wandered to the opened doors, staring at a shape moving along the crest of a nearby hill. The jogging gait and low tail carriage told him it was a coyote out hunting.

"Barking Dog absorbed me into his family when Mother returned to her tribe and married his father. He doesn't pay much attention to my white blood, preferring to see me, most of the time, as Comanche, and whatever he says goes with the rest of his brothers."

The people Eagle considered family were good people, supporting him in any way they could, even if they didn't always agree with him. Eagle understood how lucky he was after spending most of his life in the white world that scorned his half-breed status. Maybe it was their acceptance that made him able to deal with others in a levelheaded way. He could have gone a different way, become a drunk or a violent man, always trying to prove

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himself to others, but both his parents had taught him to have pride in himself. Not even his unnatural urges would make him lower his head.

He didn't turn when Travis stepped up behind him and wrapped his arms around his waist.

"Is this okay?" Travis whispered in his ear.

"Yes."

Leaning back, he rested against Travis while keeping his gaze outside. It was nice to have someone to hold him in the night, even if they had to be on guard against an attack. He smiled, knowing the courage it took for Travis to embrace him when the possibility of discovery was great.

As the sun crested the hills to the east, Eagle spotted movement along the trail heading from Buffert's ranch. He nudged Travis as a birdcall came from the brush. Travis awoke instantly, sitting up and rubbing his face once before rising and joining Eagle at the loft door.

"Is it Buffert?"

"Yes. I guess he figured he needed to move again before Tansford threw his guns in." Eagle inhaled deeply as his lover brushed against him, taking in the enticing scents of smoke, hay, and sweat.

"Job will have reached the others by now and they'll be coming on the run, but I'm not sure if they'll get here before that group does." Travis nodded towards the dust cloud moving closer.

"We only have to hold them off long enough for them to get here."

"I'll go make sure Josiah is ready. You'll take the barn?"

Eagle gestured the open ground all around the building. "I'll stay here as long as I can. If it looks like they're getting too close,

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I'll fall back to the cabin. With three of us in there, we should be able to hold them off without much trouble."

Travis frowned and reached out, gripping his arm tight. "Maybe we should just give up the barn and make our stand in the cabin."

Turning to meet Travis's gaze, Eagle saw fear in his blue eyes. The fear wasn't for himself, but for Eagle. He took Travis's hand and pulled him away from the door, stepping deeper into the shadows of the hayloft. He knew this really wasn't the time or the place for anything more, but the need to taste Travis's lips once more built in him.

The next several hours would be dangerous and the odds weren't in their favor unless Travis's family got there. Eagle understood they could all be dead by the time the sun set and he wasn't willing to let this one last chance pass him by.

Resting his rifle against a hay bale, he slid his hands over Travis's chest to wrap around his shoulders. Travis stared at him, eyes bright with desire and some other emotion Eagle couldn't name. Without any urging, Travis leaned forward and brought their lips together.

Bittersweet pleasure surged through Eagle and he wished they had all the time in the world to explore each other. He wanted more time to touch and lick, to find all the spots that made Travis moan or shiver. He swept his tongue inside Travis's mouth, re-learning every tooth and sucking on the man's tongue.

Shuddering, Travis embraced Eagle, dragging their bodies tight together as if he, too, felt the approaching possibilities and holding Eagle was the only way to keep them at bay for a moment or two.

Eagle bit Travis's bottom lip, then soothed it with a quick lick. Travis jerked and gasped, allowing Eagle to take the kiss even

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deeper. Time drifted and even though it was only a minute or so, he swore it was a lifetime.

Too soon, Travis broke the kiss and eased away. "I need to go."

"I know." Lifting his rifle, Eagle moved back to the door, noticing he could now see the riders amongst the dust.

"If it gets too heated, you abandon the barn. We can always rebuild it."

He acknowledged Travis's words with a wave, not wanting to watch his lover leave because he had a feeling this was their real good-bye. Once Travis's family arrived, the unsure, inexperienced lover Eagle had seduced into his bed would be gone and the cold-blooded killer would take his place.

"Be careful," Travis whispered.

"You, too," Eagle replied.

He didn't hear Travis leave, but the man's presence slid from the loft like a ghost. Not usually a religious man, Eagle said a prayer to both the Great Spirit of his mother's people and the God of his father that they all might survive the coming battle. He knew Travis would leave as soon as he avenged Ralph's death and his absence would hurt. Somehow, it didn't matter it had only be a week or so that he'd known Travis Ramsey; something about the man spoke to him.

A board creaked and he whirled, holding his rifle hip high. Job stood at the top of the ladder, his hands hanging at his sides and saddlebags slung over his shoulder.

"What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be leading the rest of the re-enforcements to us?" He turned back to face outside.

"One of your brothers offered to guide them here. I figured you'd need another rifle before too long." Job set the bags down. "I've got canteens of water, more bullets and some jerky, so we

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don't have to worry about running out of any."

"Good thinking." Eagle sent a silent thanks to Barking Dog. "You're right. Buffert's men are coming fast and they'll try to hit us hard. They'll want to break us before anyone can come to help us."

"It's what I'd do." Job rested his shoulder against one of the other open door frames, keeping his gaze focused outward. "Have to admit I expected to see Travis camped out here by himself. He's not one to accept help from others."

"Has anyone tried to offer him help before?"

Job snorted. "Don't know. I tend to stay in the far-off mountains and places where there aren't a lot of people. I don't like people much—too loud and in too big a hurry."

The man had a point. When Eagle got fed up with the white people's bustle, he'd retreat to his mother's tribe. The Comanche were just as industrious, but they appreciated a slower pace of life in many ways.

"Usually by the time I hear about any trouble, it's over with, so I don't come running every time."

"What makes this different?" Eagle checked his gun, making sure it was loaded and he had more bullets handy.

"This time they killed Ralph. He was different from the others, not so interested in cattle or building a reputation for anything other than his horses. He didn't care who a man was as long as he was honest with him." Job's voice trailed off for a moment, and Eagle assumed he was thinking about Ralph.

"I didn't have a lot of time to get to know him, but he always treated me fairly."

"That sounds like Ralph. I want you to be prepared, though. The rest of the brothers aren't nearly as fair-minded as Ralph or

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Travis for that matter. They'll deal better with the marshal than you."

Eagle shrugged. "I'm used to it, and if Josiah wants to talk for me, that's fine. I don't plan on causing any problems. Once the others are here, I just might fade away. This was never really my fight to begin with, even though Ralph brought it to my door."

"Yet, here you stand, ready to kill men for what?"

The casual tone of Job's question didn't fool Eagle. Job was digging for something.

"Could be I saw what was happening and decided someone needed to make a stand against Tansford and Buffert? Could be my father didn't raise me to walk away from something that was right, just because it was dangerous."

"That's not it."

Job's certainty made Eagle shoot a glance at him. "It's not?"

"No. There's only one reason you're standing here, and he's in that cabin over yonder with your brother."

Eagle didn't reply. Job was right, but what went on between Eagle and Travis wasn't any of the man's business.

A harsh chuckle filled the air around them.

"Don't answer me. That's fine because I know I'm prying into things that aren't any of my affair. I just wanted to let you know I understand and, for what it's worth, I have no problem with it."

"Thanks."

Knowing Job wouldn't harass Travis because of their relationship didn't ease Eagle's heart. Travis didn't deal with his cousin very often, so his opinion didn't carry much weight. It was the other Ramsey brothers who would break apart any sort of foundation they had built in the short time they'd known each other.

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Eagle accepted it and let it go. He couldn't afford to be distracted during the fight. Not paying attention could lead to death by lead poisoning, and he wasn't ready to die yet.

CHAPTER 16

A birdcall from the left drew Eagle's attention and he spotted two men crawling through the brush toward the back side of the barn. He gestured, and Job nodded. As Travis's cousin aimed at the men, both of them stiffened and laid still, arrows piercing their backs.

"Seems your brothers are dealing into this game," Job commented.

Eagle agreed. The more men they could get rid of without Buffert being aware of it worked to their advantage. He trusted Barking Dog would do his part in this whole thing, though he'd have to ask his brother why he chose to help them out. He appreciated the assistance, but he didn't want them to get in trouble with the white men.

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"I think they're getting ready to charge." Job gestured to where the riders were gathering just beyond rifle range.

"Are you ready for this?" He glanced over at the other man.

Job shrugged. "You can't ever be ready to take another man's life, but it won't stop me from making sure I don't get killed."

"True. Signal the cabin and let them know Buffert's men are coming."

Job moved over and did as Eagle asked while Eagle braced his rifle on the door latch for more stability. Peering down the barrel, he aimed at the lead rider. More than likely, the leader of this gang of men wasn't riding at the front of the pack. Courage wasn't a virtue Buffert particularly looked for in his man. The willingness to fight and kill was.

As the line of men rode closer, Eagle closed his eyes and sent up a quick prayer to the Great Spirit. He wished for all of them to make it through without anyone dying. He knew it was too much to hope for that everyone could escape uninjured.

"Here they come," Job whispered, determination in his voice.

He didn't reply, just focused on the men, and when the first ones came into range, he pulled the trigger. The man he shot threw his arms into the air and fell off his horse into the path of another rider. He chambered the next bullet and fired.

The smell of gunpowder and the crack of rifles filled the air as Eagle, Job, Josiah, and Travis picked off Buffert's men as they came closer and closer. Eagle and Job remained on the higher ground, which gave them a better sight advantage over the others.

Eagle lost track of time. All he knew was the battle continued until afternoon and the sun began its downward track to the horizon. He and Job were running low on bullets and there didn't seem to be any kind of break in the fighting.

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“Does it seem like there are more men out there than first showed up?”

He swiped a hand over his forehead and nodded his thanks to Job for the canteen. The warm, brackish water held a metallic taste, but he drank it anyway.

“I think we underestimated their determination to get this ranch. It looks like Buffert and Tansford have teamed up and are sending their men out in groups, not wanting to sacrifice all of them at one time.”

“If they did all come at once, there’s no way we could stop them. Four rifles against twenty men—or however many are left? Not much of fair fight on that.”

It wasn’t, and Eagle didn’t know why one of their opponents hadn’t figured that out yet. He looked at Job. The man’s bandage was soaked with blood and he had another graze on his left leg. Eagle’s face stung from splinters he’d caught when a bullet hit the wood of the barn next to where he stood.

“Are you doing okay?” he asked Job.

“I’ll live. I don’t plan on letting these bastards be the ones who kill me. They aren’t getting any more Ramsey blood.”

Suddenly another birdcall filled the air, only this one drifted in from the brush behind the cabin.

Eagle grinned at Job. “It would seem that our re-enforcements have arrived.”

“Just in time, too.” Job indicated the milling crowd of riders. “I think someone got smart up there and decided to send all the men down at us.”

Eagle hoped it would end soon. So far, he and Job had been lucky not to suffer more serious injuries, but the longer the fight went on, the higher the risk that one of them would die.

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He and Job whirled as someone started climbing the ladder to the loft. He didn't think any of Buffert's or Tansford's men could have reached them without their noticing.

A blond head popped up over the edge and bright blue eyes sparkled at Job. "Hey, cousin."

Job chuckled, but didn't move from his spot by the left door. "It's about damn time you lazy bastards showed up."

"Oh, come on now. We knew you all had things under control. Why run our horses into the ground?" The blond pulled himself up and reached down to help another man into the loft.

"We're glad to see you left some of the s.o.bs for us." The other man was an older version of Travis.

"Figured as bloodthirsty as you Ramseys are, you'd be really disappointed if we'd killed everyone before you got your asses here." Job waved a hand toward Eagle. "Eagle, this is Kerry and Bart Ramsey. They're two of Travis's brothers."

Eagle nodded, but aside from giving him a quick glance, they ignored him.

Bart took up a spot on the other side of the opening Job guarded. "Travis and that marshal are letting the others know what's going on. Michael sent Kerry and me out here to help you out."

Job met Eagle's gaze, and Eagle simply shrugged. He didn't care if they talked to him or not. To be honest, if he could have, he'd have left now the rest of the Ramseys were there. Maybe tonight, after dark fell, he'd slip away and join Barking Dog. Travis didn't need his help any more.

With the addition of the Ramseys on their side, the fight didn't last much longer. Tansford and Buffert didn't have the stomach to get into a protracted battle with well-armed men who could hit

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what they aimed at nine out of ten times. Their enemies abandoned the field and snuck away with their tails between their legs.

Eagle stood just inside the door of the cabin, watching in silence as the Ramseys settled on every available space to discuss what their next moves should be. None of them acknowledged him except for Travis, who had nodded and let his concern for Eagle's injuries show in his eyes.

The Ramseys greeted and accepted Josiah into their group, but Job joined Eagle by the door. As the voices got louder and more heated, Eagle glanced at Travis's cousin.

"Why aren't you joining in?" He nodded toward the large group of men.

Job shook his head. "I've got nothing to say that'd add anything to their conversation. I'll be pulling out shortly. With them here, there's no need for my rifle, and I don't like crowds. There are too many people here now."

Eagle chuckled. "You're right about that." He offered his hand to Job. "Thank you for your help and you're always welcome at my fire."

"The same goes for me." Job glanced over at Travis who watched them with a frown. "I hope everything works out okay for you."

"It's out of my hands." He wasn't going to demand anything more from Travis. The next steps would be from the other man, and with his brothers there, who knew what Travis would do.

Job's smile was slightly sad as he nodded. "Most of life is. I'll be seeing you."

All conversation stopped when Job shut the door behind him. Eagle looked up to see everyone staring at him. "It was time for Job to leave."

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"Job never could stand to be around regular folks." The oldest of the Ramsey brothers shrugged. "He'll show up at some point and we can thank him then for coming when we needed help."

Eagle didn't comment, just crouched down and accepted the mug of coffee Josiah handed him. His brother remained near him and he wondered if it was a show of support or if Josiah just wasn't all that fond of crowds either.

"You there." Michael pointed at Josiah. "What's been going on here up until Ralph was killed? Where did you bury him anyway?"

Josiah raised an eyebrow, but didn't reply to Michael. Eagle dropped his head, hiding the grin on his face. His older brother wouldn't respond to that tone of voice, and Michael would have to get over trying to order them around.

Travis shifted and drew Michael's attention to him. "Maybe I should introduce you all."

Michael didn't seem all that interested, but he let Travis have his way.

"U.S. Marshal Josiah Burlington, these are my brothers. I'll let you all sort out names later." Travis gestured to Eagle. "And this is Eagle..."

"You may use Burlington. My father didn't have a problem with letting his Indian son use his last name." Eagle didn't stand up or offer his hand. Something told him none of the other Ramseys would take it.

"U.S. Marshal, huh? You here investigating Ralph's death?" Kerry asked as he sprawled in one of the ladder-back chairs at the table.

"I'm here because Eagle asked me to come." Josiah folded his arms over his chest and met each gaze with an uncompromising stare. "My interest in this case has nothing to do with the man who

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died.”

That didn't go over well with most of the brothers by the way they all stiffened and glared at Josiah.

“You're really brothers? I didn't know Nathaniel Burlington was a squaw man.” Timothy Ramsey sneered.

Eagle was on his feet and had Timothy pinned to the wall, his knife pressed to the man's throat before anyone could think about stopping him.

“I suggest you keep a respectful tone in your voice when you speak about my father—or my mother, for that matter—or I'll cut your tongue out.” He thumped Timothy's head against the wall to make his point.

Something in his eyes must have told the man that Eagle meant what he said. Timothy nodded cautiously. Eagle stepped back, keeping his knife at the ready, and turned to face the others in the cabin. Josiah and Travis stood, facing the others with hands resting on their guns. Eagle didn't want to get either man in trouble, especially Travis, who would suffer the most by going against his family.

“Say what you want about me. Treat me like dirt or ignore me entirely. I don't really care because your opinion means nothing to me. But I will not have any of you speak ill of my parents.”

“That goes for me, too.” Josiah moved, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Eagle. “Badge or not, if I hear that tone come out of any of your mouths again, I'll show my displeasure as well.”

Travis snorted in disgust and poked Michael in the chest. “Get your head out of your ass, Michael. Eagle took care of Ralph and made him comfortable while he died. Our brother didn't die alone and no one stole Ralph's horses because of him. You owe Eagle your thanks for that, if you can't bring yourself to give him any

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respect for anything else.”

Michael's eyebrows shot up and shock showed on all of the other brothers' faces. Travis obviously didn't talk back to his older brother very often. Eagle wasn't sure he wanted Travis to stick up for him and yet he couldn't help the small thrill Travis's words caused him.

“Thanks for that. Where did you bury him?”

Eagle grinned at Michael's reluctance to look at him.

“He's buried in my tribe's sacred burial ground. I couldn't bury him in the white man's cemetery because I didn't want anyone to know for sure he was dead and I wouldn't disrespect Ralph by burying him out in the brush where animals could get at him.” Eagle waved a hand toward the east. “I'll be happy to show you where it is when this is all over.”

“Shit, our brother is buried in some savages' cemetery. Mother would roll over in her grave.” Bart shoved a hand through his hair and grimaced.

“If you have a problem with it, I'll tell my brothers to dig him up and deposit his remains here for you to deal with. We savages would prefer not to have our sacred grounds contaminated with white men either, but we aren't given the luxury of choice. You come and take all you believe is your right and leave nothing of what was once ours for us.” Eagle sheathed his knife and picked up his rifle. He paused at the door and turned to look at Josiah. “I'll be with Barking Dog. You know where to find me if you need me.”

His brother nodded, but didn't try to stop him. As he stepped from the cabin and reached back to shut the door, he heard Travis yell.

“Goddamn, can't any of you, for once in your narrow-minded lives, see beyond what a man looks like to what his actions say he

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is?"

Eagle allowed a small smile to grace his lips as he headed out to the barn. Maybe there was hope for Travis yet.

CHAPTER 17

Travis shot his brothers a disgusted look and left, wanting to catch up to Eagle before the man left. Why was he so angry at his brothers? It wasn't like they hadn't said anything he hadn't thought before, but the weary acceptance he'd seen on Eagle's face cut him deeper than another expression he'd viewed.

He'd been isolated from his family because of his role in the clan, but there had never been a feeling of being an outcast from them. His brothers had always welcomed him with open arms whenever he chose to return to the home ranch.

Eagle only felt welcomed when he went to his mother and the tribe greeted him as one of their own, but living in the white man's world forced him into being seen as savage and less human than the whites.

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It was as if Travis's eyes were slowly being opened to a situation he'd been dimly aware of existing. Yet he wasn't sure if he could do anything to change it.

Stepping into the barn, he saw Eagle sliding a hackamore over his mare's nose.

"You can't leave," he demanded.

His lover shot him a glance over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow. "When did you become my father? You have no say over what I can and can't do."

Fuck. Travis shoved his hand through his hair, dislodging his hat, as he stalked toward Eagle. "I don't want you to leave." He cringed at how vulnerable those words left him.

"Yet your brothers don't want me to stay." Eagle patted the mare's shoulder before turning to face Travis. "Are you telling me you don't care what your brothers think or want?"

There was something important about this moment. Travis could feel it, but he didn't know what it was and right then, he didn't care. Frustration shot through him and he reached out, grabbed Eagle's shoulders and slammed the man against one of the stall walls.

Pinning him there with his entire body, Travis crushed their lips together in as fierce a kiss as he'd ever shared with Eagle. He didn't know why all this anger roiled in him and all he could think of was taking Eagle, feeling the man around his cock and hearing him call out his name as he spent himself.

Eagle didn't fight him, simply drew him deeper into the kiss. They dueled with tongues and teeth. Each trying to take control and neither winning, but finding out that yielding had its own reward.

The mare shifted, bumping Travis in the back. Eagle pushed

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him away and straightened.

"We can't do this here. Up in the loft." Eagle gestured to the ladder.

Travis nodded and started to climb. Glancing back, he saw Eagle take the hackamore off the mare and settle her into an empty stall. He crawled over the edge of the loft and made his way to the middle of the hay pile. It itched and pricked his skin, but he didn't care. Need ruled him and he wanted Eagle so badly that any discomfort would be ignored.

Eagle joined him and they came together with a thud, hands wandering to open pants and shirts. There wasn't enough time to strip because even though nothing was going to stop him, his mind did hold built-in caution. At any moment, one of his brothers or Josiah could come out to the barn to see what they were doing and he didn't want to be caught in the middle of this.

"In me now." Eagle panted, his hand gripping Travis's prick roughly and stroking fast.

Travis let his head drop forward as he groaned, thrusting his cock along Eagle's palm. "Nothing to ease the way," he mumbled.

Eagle shook his head. "Don't care."

He pushed Eagle's pants down to his ankles and flipped the man around so he was propped on his hands and knees. Travis sucked on two fingers, getting them good and wet before pushing them into Eagle's ass. A full body shudder moved Eagle and he gave a strangled cry.

Travis pumped in and out twice, but Eagle's firm, tanned butt proved too much of a temptation. Spitting into the palm of his hand, Travis slicked his cock up and positioned it at Eagle's opening.

"Breathe," he said as he slammed his cock home.

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Eagle stiffened, and Travis froze, buried deep in the man's ass. He struggled for control. As much as he wanted to ride Eagle until they both spilled their seed, he didn't want to hurt him.

"Are you all right?"

Eagle dropped his head forward to rest on his folded arms, and Travis spied the tension release in Eagle's back as he relaxed from the brutal invasion. He rubbed his hands over Eagle's dark gold skin, hoping the warmth of his touch eased his lover.

A subtle push back told him that Eagle was ready for him to start moving. Gripping the lean hips in front of him, he drew back and shoved back in, letting loose of his control. Eagle was tough and Travis knew he could take everything Travis gave him.

Soon the hayloft filled with grunts and the scent of sex drifted on the air. Travis knew his hold on Eagle would bruise the man's skin, but he couldn't find it in him to worry about that. He shifted slightly, leaning in, and Eagle jumped as Travis's cock hit something inside him.

"Shit," Eagle whispered, bracing his hands on the hay and rocking back into each of Travis's thrusts.

Travis's balls drew tight to his body and a tingling built at the base of his spine. He lost the smooth rhythm he and Eagle had established, allowing his body to drive them both over the edge. His prick swelled and he jerked as he flooded Eagle's inner channel with hot, sticky seed.

Eagle moaned, and Travis realized that at some point, Eagle had begun pumping his cock to bring his pleasure to a head. Eagle's pearly liquid spilled onto the hay under them in spurts with each ram of Travis's body.

All strength left Travis's muscles when the last drops of his cum drained out of him. He fell forward, collapsing on top of

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Eagle and pressing the man into the floor beneath them. Not wanting to crush his lover, he rolled to the side and they groaned as he slipped from Eagle's ass.

"Damn," he muttered, patting Eagle's back with a weak hand.

"Staking your claim?" Eagle flopped over and sat up, his sweaty dark hair stuck to his face as he grinned at Travis.

"Maybe." He shrugged. His mind shied away from why the driving need to fuck Eagle had taken him over.

Eagle studied him in silence for a few minutes before climbing to his feet and dressing. "I'm not leaving you. I'm going to stay with my brothers out in the brush. I figure it'd make your family feel safer if I'm not anywhere near them."

He didn't think apologizing for their behavior would make any difference, so he simply nodded. Copying Eagle, he stood and rearranged his clothes, brushing the hay off, and followed the other man down the ladder.

Watching Eagle ready his mare, the oddest sense of abandonment swept over Travis. Crazy idea, of course, since Eagle was just going out into the brush and would be around if Travis needed him. Plus, Travis was a grown man who didn't need anyone to make him feel like he belonged, even if Eagle had been the first person to ever look at Travis and see the lonely person inside, not just the tough gunfighter exterior.

After cleaning up at the horse trough, Travis went back inside the cabin. Josiah met him at the door. "He all right?"

"Seems to be."

Josiah grunted, but didn't say anything else.

Michael gestured for Travis to join him, Timothy and Bart at the table. Kerry and Mal were getting dinner ready. He strolled over, not liking how arrogant his oldest brother acted. He didn't

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answer to them anymore. The moment he took on the job of being the clan "Helper," he was his own boss.

"What do you want, Michael?"

His oldest brother's expression held shock. None of his other brothers ever talked back or questioned Michael. Travis had feared his father, but the rest of his family didn't hold the power of life and death over him now.

"What's the situation here? We got your telegram, saying you were heading here to check on Ralph. We left right after we received it. Did someone kill Ralph for his land?"

Travis shrugged and leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "I don't know for sure. Something else seems to be going on here. Something bigger than just a range war. Eagle overheard two men talking and it gave him the impression there's someone behind the scenes, jerking everyone around like puppets."

Timothy snorted. "Can you trust that 'breed to tell you the truth? How do we know he wasn't the one to kill Ralph and he stole the horses for himself?"

Eagle's brother shifted where he sat by the front door, but kept his mouth shut. Travis figured the man was biting his tongue to keep from defending Eagle. No point in it when Eagle wasn't here to be upset by his brother's stupid comments.

"I've seen where Ralph's horses are being kept, guarded all day and night. No one is going to take them." He neglected to mention that Barking Dog and the other Comanche had allowed Ralph's stallion to cover some of their own mares. It was the least the Ramseys could do for the Indians watching over his brother's horses.

"Eagle has nothing to gain and everything to lose by helping

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us, so you might consider keeping a civil tongue in your mouth when you talk to him.” Travis met the eyes of every one of his brothers in the room.

A snarl of disgust lifted the corner of Bart’s mouth. “Now you’re an Indian lover, huh? Just like Job. It’s all that time spent by yourself.”

He didn’t allow his anger to show. “I spent time by myself because I’m riding from one situation to another without pause. None of you seem willing to help me out for the most part, so don’t disparage anyone I might ask for help in dealing with times like these.”

“You chose to be the ‘Helper,’ Travis. None of us forced you into it,” Michael pointed out.

“None of *you*, but Father never gave me a choice.” Travis waved his hand to stop Kerry from protesting. “I don’t want to discuss it. Just understand that I’d trust Eagle with my life. He’s proven to be a good friend since I arrived in Bitter Creek. If you want to continue the process of finding out who really caused Ralph’s death, I suggest you ignore the fact that Eagle is half-Comanche or you just deal with me and I’ll deal with Eagle.”

Michael’s jaw tightened, and Travis could tell that taking orders from him wasn’t sitting well with his oldest brother.

“If you don’t want my help, that’s fine. I have a bunch of other requests for help to get to. Ralph’s dead and nothing we do here will bring him back. I’d love to exact a little revenge on the people who did it as much as you, but I know when to cut my losses. We could wipe up both Tansford and Buffert and still never find out who really killed Ralph.”

Brittle silence hung in the air like fragile ice covering a river. The wrong move could crack it and whatever goodwill the rest of

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his family had for Travis would be broken like that ice. Travis searched his own heart, looking to see if losing his family's respect and support caused any pain in him. Strangely, there was no painful emotion or worry that his family would turn from him.

Maybe he had spent too much time on his own and he'd lost the connection with family. He shook his head. That wasn't it because he knew he would come to help each man in the cabin if they needed him. He would no longer follow them blindly. Being isolated from the clan, he'd learned to think for himself, and while his opinions might not be popular with them, they would deal or have to find someone else to clean up their messes.

The rest of his brothers looked to Michael for the final decision. Josiah stood, scooped out a plate of beans from the pot on the wood stove, and returned to his spot by the front door. Travis had the feeling Josiah would be spending the night either in the barn or out with Eagle and the other Indians.

"Don't be stupid. I've never known an honest Indian, but you trust him and you're the one who has to deal with him, so I'll take your word on it." Michael gestured toward the bean pot. "Everyone, get something to eat and we'll talk about what we'll do in the morning."

The only sounds in the cabin for the next several minutes were the scrape of spoons against plates and the rattle of mugs. Josiah finished first and dumped his plate into a bucket on the counter. Picking up his pack and his rifle, he opened the door.

"Where are you going?" Michael demanded.

Travis rolled his eyes, but didn't say anything. His brother would learn soon enough.

Josiah glanced back, pinning Michael with a cold stare. "I'm going to talk to my brothers before bedding down in the barn.

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Travis can let me in on whatever plans you all make. I just ate, and spending any more time with you might prove to be bad for my stomach.”

Travis chuckled at the gaping fish face Michael wore. “We’ll see you in the morning, Josiah. Tell Barking Dog and his men that he has our thanks and to pick two mares out of Ralph’s herd to keep.”

“Mighty generous of you, Travis, and I’m sure Barking Dog will appreciate it.” Josiah nodded to him before disappearing into the night.

Michael swung around to glare at him. “What the hell are you doing, giving away Ralph’s horses to a bunch of savages?”

Shrugging, Travis finished his beans before he replied, “Ralph would be the first to offer them to Barking Dog since he and his men kept us from being over-run until you could get here.”

Travis’s tone warned the others that he wouldn’t hear any argument about his gift to the Indians. Taking care of his plate, he settled back against the wall and studied all of his brothers.

“What plans are we going to be making?”

CHAPTER 18

Eagle watched the blaze of red burst over the horizon as the sun rose the next morning. He didn't turn when Barking Dog joined him on the hill.

"Will you continue to help them?"

"Him. I'll continue to help him. They matter little to me." He shot a glance down at the back of the Ramsey cabin. Only Josiah seemed to be awake. Eagle had seen his brother washing up at the horse trough before heading inside.

"You like him."

It wasn't a question and Eagle understood the underlying tone in his Indian brother's voice. Barking Dog knew where Eagle's preferences lay, but he had never spoken out against or for them. His brother believed each man made his own choices and lived

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with the consequences.

Nodding, Eagle still didn't meet his brother's gaze. He wasn't sure he wanted to see the pity he figured Barking Dog felt for him shining in his brother's eyes.

"It is a hard path you travel, brother." Barking Dog gripped his shoulder.

"Yes, but it's mine to walk," he murmured.

"Hopefully you won't have to travel much farther alone."

Movement down in the yard drew his gaze and he saw Travis slip from the cabin, heading toward the barn. Travis stopped before entering the barn and looked up the hill like he could feel Eagle's eyes on him.

Barking Dog chuckled. "We must get back to the village. Send for me if you need help."

"Thank you, brother."

They parted ways. Barking Dog headed back to the others at their camp and Eagle made his way down the trail, skirting the cabin, and strolled to the other building. Pausing for a moment, he thought about what Barking Dog had said. Not traveling any path alone was the wish of every human, Eagle figured. So many nights he'd stared up at the stars, wondering if someone else walked the trail he did.

Of course, he always decided no one could be so dumb as to choose the path he had. He would shake off the melancholy and go to sleep, knowing those thoughts would never help him deal with the world he lived in.

A hand snaked out from the barn door, wrapped around his wrist and jerked him into the shadows of an empty stall. All the air rushed from his lungs when he slammed against the wood and a hard body pressed full length against his.

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“What have you done to me?” Travis muttered against Eagle’s lips before kissing him with lust and anger.

Even if he wanted to, Eagle wouldn’t have been able to answer. He cupped Travis’s ass in his hands and ground their groins together, while Travis assaulted his mouth like the man was waging a war against it.

He opened to Travis’s invading tongue, sucking on it to taste the coffee his lover had drunk before he’d come outside. Travis buried his hands in the long length of Eagle’s hair, twisting the strands around his fists to anchor Eagle where he stood. Submitting to the pressure, Eagle broke their kiss and let his head fall back, giving Travis access to his neck.

Travis’s lips moved over Eagle’s skin, and he could tell his lover was speaking, but he couldn’t make out the words. Giving his head the slightest shake, he cleared his brain enough to understand what Travis was saying.

“Dreamt about you all night.”

A nip to his jugular made his hips arch off the wall.

“Smell you. Feel you beneath me. Wanted you.”

Just as Eagle’s brain registered the hint of desperation in Travis’s voice, his lover broke away from him. Eagle remained leaning against the wood, trying to catch his breath. When he got enough air back in his lungs, Eagle asked, “What happened?”

Pausing, Travis glanced at him and shrugged. “I told my brothers to go to hell.”

Eagle frowned. Why would such an event cause so much upheaval in Travis? Hell, he fought with Josiah and Barking Dog all the time. It didn’t mean he didn’t care for them or anything.

“How’d they take it?”

“How would you take it if your brother told you he’d leave if

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you didn't work with some Indian?"

He tried to hide his smile. "Not exactly the same thing, Travis."

"I know that, but still, for the first time ever, I told Michael if he wanted to find out who killed Ralph, he had to deal with you, or at least let me deal with you."

"Why would you do that?"

Travis turned his back and shoved his hands through his hair. "I don't know. All I know is I'd trust you with my life and that isn't easy for me to admit. It's a little hard to find myself relying on someone else instead of just myself."

Eagle pushed off the wall and went to Travis, sliding his arms around the man's waist. He pressed his hand to the middle of Travis's chest, taking his weight as Travis leaned back on him.

Brushing his lips over Travis's ear, he whispered, "I'll watch your back, Travis. We'll lean on each other and get through this. It doesn't make you weak to admit you need help. It makes you smart."

Travis's chest heaved as the man took a deep breath.

"Hush. I wasn't going to leave you. I might not care for your brothers, but I don't have to. I've dealt with opinions like theirs from both white men and Indians. I've learned not to let it bother me overly much. I care about what few people think of me and you're one of those few."

Eagle tightened his grip, crushing Travis to him and rocking his pelvis into Travis's ass. He licked the outside of Travis's ear and the man in his arms shuddered.

"What's going on between us is much more than two men taking some relief with each other. You can feel it, whether you wish to admit it or not. I know better, but when all this is over and you can't find it in yourself to stay, then I'll let go and savor the

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moments we've had together."

He turned Travis and caressed those thin lips with his own, but he didn't take the kiss deeper like Travis wanted. Someone was heading toward the barn. Eagle could tell it was Josiah by the rhythm of the footsteps. Reality was intruding and he couldn't fight that. He could only hope Travis's defiance would continue or Eagle just might lose his heart when Travis left.

When Josiah entered the barn, Travis and Eagle were checking on the horses. His brother slapped him on the shoulder and laughed.

"You decided to come back after all. I figured you'd be staying with Barking Dog and the others." Josiah shook his head. "Considering how his brothers treated you, I wouldn't have blamed you."

"I wouldn't abandon you or Travis, not because some white man was being an asshole to me. I want to help you find Ralph's murderer. He was a good man, honest and fair with me. Never treated me like I was dirty or stupid."

"That was why he came to you when he was injured." Travis spoke from where he stood, brushing his stallion. "He knew you'd help him or at least get his letter to someone who could. I doubt he thought you'd take care of his horses for him, though."

"Even I can recognize the quality of the horses you Ramseys breed," Josiah commented.

"I wasn't about to let the man or men who killed your brother profit from his death. I did what I could." Eagle glanced up to see Michael join them. "I can show you where my brothers are holding the herd. I assume you'd like to bring them back here for now."

Michael nodded and his lip curled slightly, but whatever insult he might have thought about spouting to Eagle, he kept to himself.

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"I'll have Kerry and Timothy go with you. Now that we're here, no one should try to take them. Travis, you and I are going into Bitter Creek. I want to see the sheriff and get an idea of the layout of the town."

"The sheriff won't help you. He's been bought by both ranchers. Paid to turn a blind eye to all the trouble those two get into. In fact, you can count on someone bracing you when you get there. He can't let what happened out here go unpunished, even when you didn't start it."

Michael didn't acknowledge that Eagle had spoken. Josiah rolled his eyes, and Eagle shrugged. Nothing he could do about how Michael treated him and he wasn't inclined to get the man to change his mind. As far as he was concerned, any man who treated Travis as Michael did, like the man was his servant instead of his brother, didn't deserve any respect from Eagle.

"Go talk to Jake. He'll know more about what's going on."

"I think I'll ride along with you to town." Josiah went to saddle his horse. "There's food in the cabin if you haven't eaten already, Eagle."

Michael opened his mouth, but again whatever he was about to say died in his throat when Travis glared at him. Eagle turned to hide his smile.

"Thanks, but I'm fine. I'll go grab my mare while your brothers saddle up, Travis. I'll meet them at the head of the trail leading from the back of the cabin," Eagle informed his lover.

He passed Timothy and Kerry walking to the barn and nodded to them. Neither man looked happy to be going with him. He whistled for his mare and she met him at the small circle of scrub brush where he'd left her hackamore and blanket. He was mounted and waiting when the Ramsey brothers rode up to him.

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"Why don't you ride like a white man?" Timothy scowled at the bit-less hackamore Eagle's mare wore.

"My little sister won't tolerate any white man's trappings. She allows me to ride her because she likes me, not because I have tamed her or broken her spirit." He looked with a pointed glance at the spurs both men wore. "How can you feel the movements of your horse with all that leather between you?"

Timothy started to say something, but Kerry interrupted, "Let's get a move on. I don't want to take all day doing this."

Eagle took the lead and silence descended over them. It seemed that Kerry and Timothy weren't inclined to talk with each other, much less with him. Eagle had become accustomed to being quiet and didn't believe in filling the air with chatter, so their unwillingness to speak to him didn't bother him one bit.

After a ten-minute ride, he took the trail up, winding his way up the hill. By the time they got to the top, one of Barking Dog's brothers waited for them.

"Racing Snake, I've come to get the white man's horses," he informed the stocky Indian.

Nodding, Racing Snake fell in beside him. "We have taken the two mares the white man's brother promised us."

"Good. I'm sure you picked correctly." He winked, and Racing Snake chuckled.

"Of course, my friend. We might be stupid savages, but we do know good horseflesh."

"I wish you two would speak English," Timothy muttered.

"Racing Snake doesn't know the white man's talk. It would be rude to speak when he could not understand." Eagle shot his friend a quick glance, and Racing Snake gave him a slight nod.

"But it's okay for you all to be talking some crazy Indian

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language we don't know?"

"Are you afraid we're plotting your deaths? Maybe we're leading you into an ambush, so we can take all the horses and run?"

Timothy glared at him. "The thought did cross my mind."

Kerry wasn't stopping his brother, but Eagle had the feeling that the younger Ramsey was getting annoyed.

"Why would I waste my time bringing you all this way just to kill you? I could've slit your throats at any time while we rode here."

Racing Snake rolled his eyes, but was careful not to let the white men see. Eagle didn't want the Ramsey men to know all of Eagle's village could speak and understand English. It was one thing his mother insisted on when she married Barking Dog's father. She had seen the inevitable course their lives were going to take and how it would intertwine with the white men stealing their land.

"Maybe you were just waiting for your friends to be closer, so you didn't have to risk getting injured yourself." Timothy's hand slid closer to the butt of his gun.

"Stop being an ass." Kerry rode his horse into Timothy's, knocking the other mount slightly off balance. "I might not trust these two any farther than I could throw them, but you know what, it's not our place to question orders. Michael said to go with the Indian and get the horses, so we'll get the damn horses and take them back to Ralph's. I don't want to spend any more time than necessary doing it. So quit your bullshit and let's get them rounded up."

Eagle might not like any of the Ramseys, except for Travis, but he couldn't help feeling a little bit of respect for Kerry. He might

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think Eagle was a dirty 'breed, no better than a piece of shit on his boots, but he would work with Eagle because Kerry had his orders. He grudgingly admired a man who wouldn't let hate stop him from doing his job.

CHAPTER 19

Eyes followed their every move as they rode down the main street of Bitter Creek. Travis shot a glance at Josiah and the marshal nodded slightly, letting Travis know he felt the same thing. Michael hadn't said a word. Did his brother know someone was watching them, or did he believe he wasn't vulnerable to an ambush?

Dismounting, Travis used the movement of his horse to hide the fact he loosened his gun in its holster. Shadows hid secrets and the possibility existed that those secrets could get him killed. As they stepped up onto the sidewalk, Josiah moved to stand at his right hand, allowing a little of Travis's tension to seep away. What did it say about his relationship with his brothers that he felt safer with a stranger backing him up than his own kin?

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"Travis, what've you been up to, son?" Jake called out as the three of them strolled through the door of his place.

"Just protecting what's mine, old man. Can we get some coffee? Bring some for yourself as well."

Jake nodded and slipped in the back while they made their way to a table in the corner. That way no one could sneak up on them. Travis sat with his back to the wall, his position giving him the best view of the entire room.

"Are we expecting trouble?" Josiah's question was low enough only Travis could hear it.

Shrugging, he rested his hand close to his gun. "I always expect trouble, but this town feels like a powder keg and it just needs a small spark to set it off."

Josiah nodded, but didn't reply. There wasn't any need. Both men had been in the middle of wars before and they knew what impending trouble felt like. Michael glanced at them, his eyes curious, yet no worry marred his older brother's face.

Travis leaned forward and tapped the table in front of Michael to make sure he was looking at him. "Remember, this isn't back home. Here, no one knows who you are and no one cares. You're just another cowboy with a murdered brother. The only one who might garner any respect is the marshal."

"They'll respect the badge, not the man." Josiah eased back in his chair, his eyes scanning the group of people gathered at the tables around them.

Three mugs dropped on the table with a thud and Jake filled them with steaming coffee. The older man sat down next to Michael and eyed the oldest Ramsey.

"Must be one of yours," Jake spoke to Travis, but kept his gaze on Michael.

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“Yeah. The oldest of us. Michael, meet Jake. He’s the only other man in town besides Eagle and Josiah who I trust.”

None of the other men missed the fact Travis put Eagle first on his list of trustworthy people.

“Thanks. Now, I heard a rumor Tansford and Buffert made a try for Ralph’s ranch and their men were shot to hell.”

“You can let everyone know Ralph’s ranch is not for sale and can’t be taken by force.” Michael’s voice rose so all of Jake’s customers could hear his statement.

“I’m sure everyone will know by the end of the day.” Jake grunted. “No injuries among you all?”

“A few scratches and grazes. My cousin took a bullet, but he’ll be fine.” Travis sipped his coffee. “You hear anything that maybe this whole thing isn’t a land grab by those two idiots, but that someone else might have a hand in it?”

Jake scrubbed his chin and thought for a moment before shaking his head. “I might have, but I can do some more checking for you.”

A commotion at the door caught their attention and they watched a man stagger in, his shirt bloody and dirty. Michael, Jake, and Josiah were on their feet and heading toward the man before he dropped to the ground. Travis hung back, his inherent caution, beaten into him over the years, telling him it could be a trap.

“Fuck, Kerry, what happened?”

Kerry? Shit, if something had happened to Kerry, Eagle could be hurt as well. Travis closed in and crouched next to his brother. It looked like a horse stomped and dragged Kerry through the dirt for several yards.

“They were waiting for us to move the horses. Once we got

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them moving..." Kerry coughed.

"Get the man some water, Jake," Travis ordered, while Josiah slowly ran his hands over Kerry's body, trying to find out where he was injured.

Travis bit his lip, forcing himself to stay quiet and not shake Kerry to get information about Eagle out of him. It would all come in due time and his brothers already knew he felt something more than contempt for the man. It wouldn't help anything if they knew just how important Eagle had become to him.

After taking a sip from the glass Jake brought him, Kerry continued, "They waited until we started the herd moving, then they attacked."

"Who? The Indians?" Michael glared at Travis like he wanted to say, I told you so.

Kerry shook his head with a soft groan as Josiah pressed on his left side. "No, they were white men. Wore kerchiefs over their faces, but they used saddles and had rifles. Stampeded the herd."

"Where's Timothy?"

"He was riding in front of the herd and went down with the first volley. I don't know if he made it or not. My horse spooked and I fell, hooking my boot in the stirrup. It drug me for a few yards until my foot got free." Kerry took another drink of water and slumped against Josiah's knee.

"How'd you get here?" Travis knew his brother wouldn't have been able to walk all this way as injured as he was.

"Eagle got me up on his horse and sent me here to find you. He said he'd go after the horses."

Fuck. Fear like he'd never known speared through Travis. Eagle was out there, searching for Ralph's horses on his own without anyone to watch his back and on foot as well. Travis's

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hands shook and he stood, pushing them in his pockets, not wanting anyone to see how scared he was. Turning away, he took a deep breath and steadied his nerves. Eagle would be fine.

"Travis, help me take Kerry to Eagle's room. I can take care of his wounds there and we can talk more privately." Josiah tilted his head at the people gathered around them.

"Right. Michael, get our horses."

Josiah lifted Kerry up, and Travis wrapped an arm around his brother's waist, helping support his weight.

"Sorry, Travis," Kerry mumbled as they shuffled along the sidewalk.

"Sorry for what?"

"I left Eagle out there without anyone to watch his back. It just happened so fast. One minute the horses were moving calmly, then shots rang out and they were off running. We didn't have any warning or time to fight back."

Josiah hushed the younger Ramsey, and Travis breathed deep.

"The horses aren't important, Kerry. We need to make sure you're okay before anything else. Eagle can take care of himself and, more than likely, he's got his Indian brothers out there with him."

He shot a look at Josiah, hoping to get a reassuring gesture from Eagle's brother, but the marshal didn't meet his eyes. Travis wasn't sure if it was because the man was worried about Kerry or if he thought something bad might happen to Eagle. There was no time to panic. He had to get a hold of himself and do what he knew had to be done.

They pushed open the door to Eagle's room at the back of the livery and carried Kerry to Eagle's bed. Josiah started undressing him while Travis went to the pump for a bucket of water.

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When he got back, Josiah was tearing some of Eagle's sheet into strips. The marshal tossed him another sheet.

"Tear this up in smaller strips. I think he's got a couple broken ribs and I want to wrap them up. I'll clean him off and make sure nothing else is broken."

"Where'd you learn all this stuff?" Travis ripped the sheet. "I didn't know marshals were doctors as well."

"I served in the war and helped out at the field hospitals when they needed extra hands."

The grim line of Josiah's lips told Travis the man wasn't going to say any more than that. He understood Josiah's reluctance to talk about the war. He'd always been glad deep in his soul that his father hadn't allowed him to enlist. In fact, Father hadn't let any of his boys join up.

Job had gone, though, and Travis figured his memories were part of the reason why Job stayed by himself a lot.

"I'm glad you know what you're doing." He finished ripping the sheet and laid the pieces out for Josiah.

Michael stepped in as Josiah started wrapping the strips around Kerry's chest. "Will he be okay?"

"Josiah said he thinks Kerry broke a rib or two. He's wrapping it before he checks for any other injuries." He gestured for his brother to sit at Eagle's table. Digging through the shelves, he found a dust-covered bottle of whiskey. He wiped the cobwebs off it and pulled out four mugs, pouring a splash of liquor in each one. "I didn't think Eagle drank liquor."

Josiah shook his head as he tied off the bandages. "He thinks it's poison to his people. Stays away from it. Must've gotten that bottle a long time ago."

Michael swallowed his shot in one gulp, grimacing. "Not bad

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stuff. Pour me another one and drink up. We have to go and get the others. Those bastards would've left a trail a child could follow. We have to get those horses back."

"We have to go help Eagle out and find Timothy. The horses will be found once we figure out who the hell did this." Travis drank his shot and slammed his mug down on the table. He ignored Michael's glare. "Can Kerry ride?"

"If we take it slow, he'll be fine." Josiah handed one of the mugs to the younger Ramsey, holding it steady so Kerry could drink without spilling it.

"Good. We'll head out to the ranch and leave Kerry with Bart. We'll head out. Josiah, do you remember where the horses were? Eagle only showed me once, and I wouldn't be able to find my way there again."

"If I can't get us there, I can get us to the village and one of the braves can show us."

Moving slowly, they helped Kerry mount and gathered in a tight circle around him. Travis didn't let his eyes rest on anything. He kept them moving and made sure to note where every man stood on the street. Things were getting even more dangerous. Whoever started this ball rolling had already proved he didn't have a problem killing. It was Travis's job to make sure no one else died unless it was the instigator.

His father had made him understand that as the Helper, his job was to keep the entire clan safe, even if that meant giving up his own life to do it. For more years than he could count, Travis had lived with that idea in the back of his mind, but for the first time, he expanded the circle of whom he would die for by one. If it meant Eagle would live, Travis would gladly lay down his life for the man.

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Fear bubbled in him again and he clenched his hands to keep from urging his stallion to a faster gait. Eagle would be fine...he had to keep telling himself that. His lover had lived in this area far longer than he had. Eagle knew the trails leading through the hills, plus he had brothers who would back him up if he needed the help.

Yet Travis wanted Eagle standing in front of him. He wanted to run his hands all over the man's body and reassure his racing heart that Eagle was all right. He wouldn't be able to calm down until he held Eagle in his arms again. He just had to make sure he didn't do anything dangerous in front of his brothers.

CHAPTER 20

Eagle hissed as he tightened the bandage around his arm. The bullet had gone straight through, missing every vital, but tearing a chunk of flesh out of his bicep. He'd taken his shirt off, torn some strips from it and used the rest as a pad to stop the bleeding. Thank the Great Spirit, following the trail on foot was easy since he'd given up his mare to Kerry and hadn't been able to catch another mount.

Pain spiraled through him and he swore softly. When he found the men who did this, he was going to torture them slowly and happily. He'd passed three horses with broken legs that would need to be shot. Several others were probably injured because of the stupidity of the men driving them. Eagle's hatred for men who would do this to animals knew no bounds. Blinking back sudden

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tears at the thought of the injured horses, he climbed to his feet.

Breaking a branch on one of the bushes growing close to the trail, he continued on his way. Travis, Josiah, and the others would be following and he planned to make this path as easy as possible for them to find.

Hoof beats came quickly from behind him. Eagle stepped off the trail and lay down among the tall grass. He couldn't be sure the riders coming up behind him were friendly. Staying as still as possible, he waited until he saw the men clearly before he stood up.

Barking Dog drew his horse to a stop in front of Eagle. His brother held the reins of another horse tight. The brave's eyes narrowed as he spotted the bloodied bandages around Eagle's arm.

"I left Spotted Eagle at the head of the trail. He will bring your brother and Ramsey to us." He held out the reins. "She is a good mount, not as experienced as your mare, but she will learn."

"Thank you." He grunted as he swung himself onto the mare's back. Glancing up at the sun, he said, "We should catch them at sundown, if they managed to round up any of the horses."

"Do you think they were really after the herd?" Barking Dog nudged his horse forward.

Eagle shrugged before looking back and nodding at the five other braves who rode with his brother. "I don't know. They didn't seem too worried about harming the horses when they started the stampede. Did you find Timothy?"

The slow nod Barking Dog gave in response to his question told Eagle everything. *Damn, another Ramsey dead.* Did nothing but bad luck haunt this family?

"Racing Snake and the others will take care of his body until his family can bury him."

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“Thank you, brother.”

Barking Dog reached over and squeezed Eagle's shoulder. “They might think we are savages, but Travis has shown himself to be honorable. We will do what we can for him.”

He led the way, not looking forward to telling Travis that another of his brothers was dead, but he couldn't let that worry bother him. He still had most of the herd to find, plus deal with the men who had rustled them.

“Did you recognize any of them?”

Eagle shook his head. “No, it happened too fast. By the time I made it back on my feet, the horses and the men were gone. I got Kerry mounted on my mare to go back to town and I started out after them.”

“It doesn't seem like those white ranchers would do this. If they had known where the herd was, they would have attacked sooner.” Barking Dog frowned. “Who else would profit from Ramsey's land?”

“That's what I don't know. Maybe Josiah can send a telegram to someone who might be able to shed some light on this. I keep thinking I'm missing something.”

“It will come. Now let us find the bastards who shot you and get those horses back.”

They continued riding, stopping once to water the horses and re-bandage Eagle's wound. He didn't fight the pain, letting it wave through him, but keeping his mind focused on their mission. There would be time to collapse later.

“We are getting closer.” Barking Dog straightened from where he crouched, checking hoof prints in the dirt.

“We should send one of your braves forward to keep an eye out for us, so we don't ride right into them.”

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“Good suggestion.” His brother waved to one of the men. “Scout ahead of us.”

The man nodded and rode off.

“How are you feeling, brother?”

“I’ll be fine.” He gritted his teeth as his horse shook its head and jerked on his arm.

Barking Dog didn’t comment, obviously not believing Eagle, but not willing to contradict him. Eagle was thankful his brother wasn’t going to suggest he stay behind. As Barking Dog mounted, Eagle’s gelding stepped to the side, jarring his arm again. He bit his lip and a wet trickle spilled down his arm. *Great, it’s bleeding again.* He should have sealed the wound when he had the chance.

They had been riding for another twenty minutes when their scout returned. He stopped next to Barking Dog.

“The white men are stopped at the little creek that cuts across the trail. There are ten of them plus most of the horses.”

The others encircled him and Barking Dog. Time to make plans. They sent the scout and one other to round up the horses and keep them from running off again when the fight started. The others would surround the group of rustlers. They tied their horses and made their way to the creek.

Eagle checked his rifle and his knife. He’d lost his pistol when he fell and hadn’t had time to go back to find it. He loaded the rifle, nodding at Barking Dog when he was ready.

Most of the men grouped around a fire, and Eagle shook his head. They wouldn’t be able to see anything in the dark when the battle started.

“If we can, we need to keep one alive. I want to find out who hired them.”

Barking Dog nodded before signaling to his braves to attack.

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Four men went down in the first wave. The others scattered as Barking Dog's braves ran into the clearing, screaming and yelling. Eagle set his rifle aside and pulled out his knife. The gun was good for long distance shooting, but he'd moved in too close for it to be effective any longer.

He let the braves do the killing. To be honest, he had no real interest in these men. He reserved his anger for their boss, the man who'd ordered this whole thing.

"Fucking savages."

Eagle whirled around to find one of the white men standing behind him, gun raised. Shit, this wasn't going to end well. There wasn't any way Eagle could throw his knife fast enough to stop the man from shooting him and there wasn't anyone around them. Barking Dog and his men had chased after the ones who had run away.

"In my opinion, you're the savages. Do you know how many horses you injured with your stupid trick earlier today?"

The gunman blinked, surprise racing across his face at Eagle's challenge. "You're that 'breed that works at the livery."

Eagle shot a glance from side to side, hoping to see some way of getting out of the situation, but nothing presented itself. He spotted the man's finger tensing in the flickering light of the fire and tried to time his leap just right.

Gunshots exploded, and Eagle dove to the right, but something slammed into his leg, deflecting his escape. As he hit the ground, he looked to see the man who'd shot him slowly topple to the dirt, a hole between his eyes.

Rolling over on his back, he cried out as pain shot through his entire body, originating in his thigh. His hands scrambled in the dirt. As much as it hurt, he knew better than to touch it.

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"Eagle." Travis dropped to his knees next to Eagle, a pistol dangling from one hand.

"About time you got here. You kill him?" He forced the question through clenched teeth.

"I shot the guy, but not before he hit you." Travis looked at Eagle's wound, and horror welled in his lover's eyes. Turning around, Travis yelled, "Josiah, get your ass over here."

"I managed to go my whole life without being shot. You show up in my town and the next thing I know, I catch two bullets," he muttered, closing his eyes to offset the heaviness of his lids.

"Don't close your eyes. You need to stay awake."

Josiah skidded to a stop and fell to his knees next to Eagle. A quick glance and he looked over to where Michael stood by the fire.

"Help me move him over closer to the fire. Barking Dog, go get Eagle's mother. Make sure she knows to bring medicines." Josiah barked out orders. "You there, build up that fire."

Everyone ran to follow the marshal's orders. Michael helped Josiah and Travis move Eagle to the fire. Eagle gripped Travis's arm, not saying everything he was thinking, but trying to convey his gratitude that his lover had saved him. Travis met his gaze with his bright blue eyes, and Eagle saw the fear roiling in their depths.

"I'll be fine," he whispered. "My mother and Josiah will fix me up."

Travis didn't speak, but something flared in his eyes, and Eagle wasn't sure if the gunfighter believed him or not. To be honest, Eagle wasn't sure his family could do anything to save him.

His blood was pumping from his leg with each beat of his heart and he had already lost plenty of the liquid because of the wound in his arm. They laid him on a pile of blankets and Josiah

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immediately started cutting away at his pants.

"Travis, get his boots off. Michael, I need water. Use canteens or whatever, but I need it to clean off this wound."

Eagle moaned as the men tried to be gentle, but they still jostled his leg and blackness was starting to overwhelm his mind. He wanted to slip under and get away from the pain. He wanted to hide from the fear he felt in the others as they looked at him. The first time he ever did a good deed and tried to help someone else and he was going to die because of it.

Well, if he was going to go, he had to tell Travis something. It might not be what the man wanted to hear and Eagle knew he would never say it if things were different, but the words needed to be said now.

"Travis," he mumbled, holding his hand toward the man.

Travis crawled up to sit next to his shoulder, took his hand in his without hesitation and leaned down to press his lips to Eagle's ear. "I'm here."

The touch of Travis's calloused hand on his and the feel of his mouth touching Eagle's skin dulled the pain slightly. Eagle looked away from that intense gaze for a second, staring at Josiah, who probed his thigh with his fingers. He drew in a deep breath when what felt like lightning shot up his leg, over his chest into his brain, making his head spin.

"Damn, this isn't good." Josiah spoke to someone standing out of Eagle's sight. "The bullet's still in there and I'm going to have to get it out."

"I trust you, Josiah."

His brother's haunted gaze tore into his. "I've never done this before, Eagle. I might do more harm than good."

"My mother won't let you kill me. Do what you can and she'll

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take care of the rest.”

Josiah nodded, holding out a bottle of amber-colored liquid to Travis. “You need to drink some of this, Eagle. It’ll help take the pain away.”

He recognized the smell and shook his head. “I don’t want any of that poison. Do what you need, and I’ll deal with it.”

Turning back to Travis, he tugged the man closer to him. Their breath mingled as he brought their lips as close together as he could without kissing him. “I love you, Travis.”

The pain swallowed the words as Josiah cleaned his wound with the liquor and Eagle no longer held back the blackness. He slid into the void, not knowing or caring what was happening around him anymore.

CHAPTER 21

The flickering light cast by the fire danced over the visage of the man lying in the bed. His face looked peaceful with no indication of the struggle fought to keep him alive.

Travis sat in the shadows, staring at Eagle and watching for any movement or sign that he was in pain or waking up. It had been two days since Eagle's shooting and the man hadn't regained consciousness for more than a moment or two. Reaching out with a trembling hand, he brushed a lock of black hair off Eagle's forehead.

"You should get some sleep."

He jerked his hand away, embarrassed Eagle's mother had caught him touching Eagle. Turning, he saw White Bird standing just inside the entrance of the tipi with a knowing smile on the

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edges of her lips.

Pushing to his feet, he weaved a little and he realized he'd lost track of how much time he'd spent sitting with Eagle. He tried not to show any more interest in the man than he would have if they were just friends, but in the dark of the night, he would find his feet leading him to Eagle's tipi where he'd sit and stare at him.

"I'm fine."

"I'm sure you are, but it has been a long two days and you have not had much rest since you brought my son here. There are other issues that need your attention." She glided across the dirt floor to kneel beside her son. "I will take care of him."

Crouching next to her, he removed his hat and shoved his hand through his hair. "I know you will, ma'am, but I feel responsible for Eagle. My family dragged him into this fight and he was trying to recover our horses when he was shot."

She pinned him with her gaze, and he tensed. How much of the truth did she see in his face and eyes?

"It is more than guilt that keeps you chained to my son's side, Travis."

He couldn't move when White Bird reached out and cupped his cheek. His dry mouth stopped him from saying anything or disputing her words.

"My son is very special to me, but there are things even a mother cannot change in hopes of making his life easier."

Knowledge arched between them, and Travis allowed his gaze to rest on Eagle without hiding how much he'd come to care for him.

"He'll be all right?" Hope and longing colored his question.

White Bird joined him in staring down at Eagle as she nodded. "Yes, I do believe he will be fine. It will take him time to recover,

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but he is not going to be joining our ancestors any time soon.”

For the first time, Travis let those words sink in and chose to believe them. Exhaustion raced through him as he rocked back on his heels.

“You must rest, Travis. Josiah is bringing your brothers tomorrow morning so you may discuss what you must do to stop all this bloodshed.” White Bird rose to her feet and made her way to the door flap. “I know you will not disturb Eagle and it will make you feel better to stay here with him. Sleep well, son.”

Travis waited until White Bird left before straightening and then arranging the bedroll between Eagle and the door. Stripping down, he slipped under the blankets and lay on his side, facing Eagle. He reached out and took Eagle’s hand in his, gripping him tightly.

I love you, Travis drifted through his mind. No one had ever said that to him, not even his parents. He remembered the shock he felt when Eagle whispered those words. How he had shot a glance at Josiah to see if the marshal had heard what Eagle said. If Josiah did, he never showed it. He probably already knew about Eagle’s preferences and if he did, Josiah didn’t strike Travis as a man who would turn his back on his brother because of it.

Eagle passed out before Travis could reply, which was good because Travis didn’t know how he would have responded.

Can men love each other like that?

He knew he liked Eagle, enjoyed his company and lusted after him like he had never wanted another man, but did that mean he loved Eagle? Unfortunately, there wasn’t anyone he could talk to about these odd feelings bursting in his chest.

His brothers would walk away from him without a backward glance. Whether Josiah knew about Eagle or not, the marshal

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wouldn't be open to talking with him. White Bird might be, but Travis couldn't bring himself to admit to her aloud what her son meant to him. Suddenly, he had the strangest wish that Job was still around. Travis's memories sparked and he had the feeling if anyone could help him through this turmoil about Eagle, his cousin would be the right one.

Travis closed his eyes and breathed deeply. All this thinking made his head ache. He'd always considered emotions and relationships women's issues. Men fought, fucked, and fixed things. They didn't worry about the softer parts of life. Shaking his head, he pushed all his worries and doubts to the back of his mind.

There wasn't any time at the moment to untangle feelings and emotions he'd never looked at before. They had to find the man who started this whole thing and he knew it wasn't either of the ranchers he'd dealt with already. There was someone else pulling the strings and it was time to flush him from his hiding spot.

"I like you, Eagle," he whispered to his sleeping lover. "I might even love you, but I don't know anything about love, so I'm shying away from saying it to you. You'd understand if you were awake."

He squeezed Eagle's hand and settled deeper in the blankets comprising his bedroll. As he let sleep overtake him, Eagle's fingers tightened around his briefly and Travis smiled.

* * *

He jerked awake when the flap to the tipi pulled back. He reached down to where his pistol lay next to him and pointed at the person entering before his mind registered that Josiah stood in front of him.

"Glad to see you're awake." Josiah moved around him, not

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looking at or commenting on the gun. "Your brothers are waiting for us at Ralph's place."

"I thought you were bringing them here." Travis pushed back his blankets and dressed while Josiah poked the fire, adding wood until flames danced merrily along the fuel.

"Your brothers are a pack of idiots. They wouldn't come to the village. Probably scared that these savages would murder them the moment they got off their horses." Josiah grinned at him before turning to look down at Eagle. "How's he doing?"

Travis shoved his feet into his boots and stamped before standing. "White Bird said he'd be fine. He just needs to rest because of all the blood he lost."

Josiah nodded and stepped aside for Travis to kneel next to Eagle. "In the war, I saw men with worse wounds survive."

Pressing the back of his hand to Eagle's forehead, Travis tested for fever like White Bird had taught him. He tucked the blankets tighter around Eagle and squeezed the man's shoulder. "We'll be back later."

Straightening, he joined Josiah at the entrance of the tipi. The marshal didn't say anything about the gentle way Travis had treated Eagle, and Travis was grateful for that.

White Bird stood by their horses, a bright smile on her face for Josiah. "It is good to see you, Josiah. You do not visit us anymore."

Josiah hugged her and brushed a kiss over her cheek. "My job doesn't give me a lot of free time, Mother. I'll try to come more often."

She patted Josiah's cheek before looking at Travis. "I will take care of Eagle while you solve this problem, Travis. I think I will try to wake him up today. He needs to eat and return to us."

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Travis fought the need to stay and be with her when Eagle woke up. He hesitated and White Bird laid her hand on his arm. "Do not worry. He'll be awake when you return tonight."

Josiah mounted and cleared his throat. His cheeks warming, Travis climbed into his saddle. *Damn*. Had it only been two weeks or so since he'd been able to hide his emotions? Meeting Eagle had unlocked something inside him or broken down walls he hadn't even known were there.

"Let's go. I don't want your brothers coming in here and causing problems because we're late." Josiah whirled his horse around and they rode out of the village.

Travis rode up beside him. "Did they find Timothy's body?"

"Yes. They buried him behind Ralph's cabin. They plan on digging up Ralph's body once this is over with and burying him there as well."

"And Michael isn't happy about that," Travis commented, knowing his eldest brother.

"He doesn't have a choice. Transporting the bodies from here to Texas would take too long. Best to bury them here." Josiah shot a glance at Travis. "You could make Ralph's place your home. That way the graves aren't forgotten and you do have friends here."

"It'd be far from my family," he pointed out, though the thought of staying tempted him more than he wanted to admit.

"You don't spend a lot of time with your family to begin with and if you had a main place you stay, it'd make finding you easier for those who need help." Josiah shrugged. "It was just a thought."

If he stayed, he could spend more time with Eagle. He shook his head. Thoughts like that could get him killed if he acted on them. Was he willing to risk everything, even his life, for stolen

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moments with the other man? Silly question since he'd already taken more chances than he ever had before.

They remained silent as they rode the rest of the way to the cabin. Michael and Bart came out to stand on the porch as they walked from the barn. Grief rode both men hard, and Travis's chest tightened. He did feel sorrow at Timothy's death. Only a soulless person wouldn't, but it was more the sorrow of a good man's death, not the overwhelming loss of a loved one.

The years Travis had spent traveling and helping the clan ensured he wasn't close to any of his brothers anymore. They were people he spent infrequent moments with. He wished he could grow closer to them, but too many years had passed and there were too many secrets among them all.

"We have breakfast ready. Come on in."

He followed the others inside and hung his hat next to the door with the rest. Kerry, Steven, Adam, and Caleb crowded around the table, while Bart gestured toward the tin pot on the stove.

"There's coffee as well."

Travis poured the hot liquid into two mugs and handed one to Josiah before turning to face his family. He studied their faces and saw grief mingling with rage. He'd made a decision on his way over to the cabin. The time had come to end it. No more people would die if he could help it.

"I forgot to mention the response I got from the telegram I sent out several days ago." Josiah pulled a piece of paper out of his back pocket. Unfolding it, he glanced over it quickly. "It seems the railroad is coming to town."

"You think someone wants this land to sell to the railroad?"

Josiah nodded. "It makes the most sense. Ralph wasn't about to sell his ranch, so the easiest way to get it was to kill him and wait.

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If none of the family came to claim it, his killer could come in and file a claim on it. Then sell it for a ton of money to the railroad.”

Travis snarled. He’d seen more deaths caused by greed than anything else in his life. “Irv, the owner of the livery stable, knows who this person is. I doubt Buffert or Tansford knows anything about this whole other land grab.”

Adam grunted. “Like as not, this mysterious killer wants their land as well. He figured he’d take Ralph out first because Ralph didn’t have anyone to watch his back. Probably thought he’d get the land and the horses before we found out Ralph was dead. Thanks to the Indian, at least we have the horses.”

Studying the brother closest to him in age, Travis wondered what Adam really thought about Eagle. Adam had always been the quietest of the brothers, staying in the background and watching things.

Travis straightened and set his mug down in the sink. The others looked at him, and Josiah gave him a small smile.

“I guess we know what we need to do.” He nodded to Adam and Caleb. “You two, go and grab Irv. Bring him back here and we’ll see what he can tell us about this mystery man. Josiah, I’d like you to ride to Sampson’s and send another telegram. See if you can find out if any land around here has been claimed and who claimed it.”

Josiah tugged his hat on tight and left. Adam and Caleb followed him out. His other brothers stared at him, but he ignored them. This was what the Helper did and he would do his job, even if his thoughts wandered to a certain man lying unconscious in a tipi.

CHAPTER 22

Hoof beats drew Travis's attention and he stepped from the cabin to watch Adam and Caleb ride in, leading another horse. The man riding the third horse sat, hands tied and mouth gagged.

"He give you any trouble?"

Travis climbed down from the porch and strolled over to where the men stopped, his thumbs hooked in his gun belt. Irv's eyes widened as Travis moved closer. Caleb dismounted and yanked Irv out of the saddle.

"No trouble. He came as quietly as a cat to a bath."

Grinning, Travis checked out the bruise on Irv's cheek. "I figured you two would be able to handle him. He talks tough, but there's not much backbone in the man. Take him to the barn, Caleb. Adam, walk with me."

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Adam fell in step with him as they made their way over to the corral. Travis leaned against the top rail and built a cigarette, offering it to his brother when he finished. Adam took it and struck a match, holding the flame to his before lighting Travis's. They puffed silently for a moment while Travis organized his thoughts.

"I'm thinking I'll stay here after this mess gets fixed."

His brother grunted, but didn't say anything.

"Ralph was trying to build something here. Something that didn't rest on our family's reputation. The cabin's solid as is the barn. I have the horses and could buy some cattle to run."

"Would Buffert and Tansford let you stay?"

Travis snorted. "They have no say in the matter. It's not like I haven't proven I can fight them off. I think once this all gets settled, they'll back down. Besides, I'll hire some tough cowboys."

"This have anything to do with that Indian?"

He stiffened, but didn't look at Adam. Studying a lizard making its way through the dirt of the yard, Travis thought about his decision to stay in Bitter Creek. "No. It's time I have a place to return to and, to be honest, I have never felt truly welcome back home."

"There's a part of Michael that resents the fact Father chose you to be the Helper."

Travis shot Adam a surprised look and found his brother staring at the end of his cigarette.

"Why would he resent that? Being the Helper was a punishment, not a prize." He tossed the butt of his own smoke out into the yard.

Adam shifted. "I know that. I remember seeing Uncle Tobias ride in after one of his trips. He was a cold man, never could warm up to anyone, and I was scared shitless of him." Adam's cigarette

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joined Travis's. "Michael sees it as Father thinking you were stronger than him. That you had whatever it took to be the Helper."

"What I had was a flaw Father didn't want around his other children," Travis muttered.

"I know."

Travis whirled around, his shocked gaze meeting Adam's calm one. "You know?"

Shrugging, Adam wiped his mouth. "I don't know what your flaw is, but I know you have one. All the Helpers are cracked in some way or another. That's why they become the Helper, to keep them away from the rest of the clan."

"What was Uncle Tobias's flaw?"

"He was a stone-cold killer. He liked to kill and never saw any reason not to shoot someone down instead of looking at him. He was good at it, too. Guess Grandfather figured he might as well put that skill and flaw to use helping out the rest of the clan before he took a life no one could give back."

"My flaw wasn't killing. I had to learn how to do that and I got good at it." Travis stuffed his hands in his pockets and raised his gaze to the hills behind the cabin.

"I'll back you." Adam gestured to the buildings and the corral when Travis turned to look at him again. "Ralph built this and I don't want to see his hard work go to waste, plus you need a place to call your own. One without the rest of the family crawling around. I'd even stay on for a little while and help you hire a crew."

"I appreciate it, Adam."

Adam slapped Travis's back. "You have your reasons for staying here, and I don't need to know what they are. If our sons wish to get out from under the clan's thumb, having a place we can

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send them is always a good thing.”

“They’ll always be welcome here.”

“You two done yakking yet?” Caleb called out to them.

He laughed. “Yes. Get the others and we’ll find out just how much Irv is willing to tell us.”

“Something tells me he’s going to be a tough nut to crack.”

Shaking his head, Travis headed toward the barn. “He’ll tell us everything he knows before the day is over with, Adam. I’ve learned a thing or two in my travels.”

He steeled himself, shutting out all thoughts except of what he was willing to do to get the information they needed. It was one of the reasons why he’d sent Josiah to Sampson’s. The marshal might have seemed willing to follow his lead, but Travis wasn’t sure his tolerance went as far as letting Travis and his brothers beat the shit out of Irv.

Irv hung in the aisle, arms held out from his sides and tied to the crossties Ralph had installed for the horses. Caleb had spread the livery owner’s feet as well and anchored him to posts in the floor. His beady gaze danced from Travis to each of the Ramsey brothers’ faces, looking for sympathy or help.

Caleb had removed Irv’s gag and the man started begging. “Please don’t hurt me. I didn’t kill your brother. I don’t know why you’d kidnap me like this.”

Travis backhanded the man, causing Irv’s lip to split and his head to rock back on his neck. “Don’t talk unless you’re answering a question. Lies spill from your mouth without any effort on your part.”

Irv cringed, but spit a gob of blood at Travis’s feet. “I’ve got nothing to say to you.” Defiance gleamed in his eyes, but a hint of fear played across his face.

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Travis stripped out of his jacket, throwing it over the top of a stall door, and stood, eyeing Irv while he rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. When he finished, he held out his hand. "Bart, you still got that knife Cousin Job gave you?"

"Yes." The hiss of steel leaving leather filled the suddenly silent barn.

He closed his fingers around the hilt as Bart slapped it into his hand. Flipping it a couple of times, Travis glanced down and grinned. "Looks like it could cut through leather nice and clean." He shot Irv a wicked wink. "Bart always keeps his blades sharp."

He moved closer and Irv started to struggle.

* * *

Travis washed his hands in the cold water of the horse trough, doing his best to ignore the moans as his brothers cut Irv free. The blood on his hands was a mixture of his own and Irv's. His knuckles had split from the amount of times he'd had to hit the man.

"Why didn't you use the knife on him?"

He glanced over to see Kerry standing near him with a puzzled expression on his face. Straightening, Travis wiped his hands dry on the shirt he'd tossed over his shoulder.

"I wanted Irv to know the knife was an option. Most men can deal with getting beaten up or having someone work him over with their fists. But for some reason, there's a deep-seated fear men have of cold steel." He shrugged and wandered over to where Caleb and Adam were hoisting Irv back into the saddle. "I find I like the hands-on method of asking questions. Steel is too impersonal for me."

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Irv spit at him, hitting him in the chest. Travis wiped it off without letting his gaze move from Irv's bloodied face.

"You've signed my death warrant. When he finds out who told you, he'll kill me."

Travis shrugged, not caring what happened to the livery stable owner. "That's what happens when you throw your hat in with thieves and murderers."

"I didn't have a choice," Irv whined.

"Cut the bullshit. You had a choice, but you were too greedy and you figured he'd protect you if anyone ever found out you were helping him." Reaching up, he grabbed Irv's shirt, twisting his fist in the fabric and pressing his knuckles against the man's throat, yanking him forward "I forgot a question. Who really killed Ralph?"

Irv gasped and shifted, trying to break Travis's grip, but unable to with his hands tied to the saddle horn.

"It's Stinson, one of Tansford's men. A couple of them came over here to try to convince your brother to sell to the rancher. He beat Ralph badly, but left without killing him. Ralph wouldn't sell."

"Not good enough. Ralph didn't die from the beating. He died from a gut shot at close range. He survived long enough to talk, but he didn't see the man who fired the shot. There were shadows, plus the man wore a hat pulled low and a kerchief over the lower part of his face."

Irv grew paler, and Travis knew it wasn't because the man couldn't breathe. He shook Irv hard enough to rattle the man's teeth.

"You might as well tell me. You're already dead."

"All right." He coughed a couple times once Travis let him go.

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"I did it."

Not even the wind had the courage to blow after Irv's pronouncement. Travis closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them, he didn't look at Irv. Travis met the gaze of each of his brothers before nodding to Bart and Kerry.

"Get him down from there and let him have a gun."

"What?" Michael grabbed his arm. "Just shoot him where he stands. Why give him a chance? He didn't give Ralph one."

"No, he didn't, but no matter what anyone thinks, I won't shoot an unarmed man." He stalked a few paces away and turned, loosening his pistols while he waited for Adam to hand Irv a gun.

"This isn't fair," Irv protested. "There's no way I can beat you."

"Who said anything about fair? This is justice, pure and simple. You'll have more of a chance than you gave Ralph."

His brothers backed away and none spoke up. He didn't expect them to either. As much as he was starting not to have the stomach for it anymore, he would do what needed to be done to mete out justice for Ralph.

"Did you track him after you shot him?"

Irv's laugh was harsh. "No. He was gut shot and beaten near to death. I didn't think he'd be moving from his place."

"You weren't worried someone would figure out Stinson didn't shoot Ralph?" Michael spoke up.

"I was going to come back later and bury him, round up the horses, and drive them to some other town to sell them. No one would think he was dead. They'd all believe he left without telling anyone. Ramsey didn't have many friends in town. How was I to know he'd drag his ass off somewhere?"

"Your boss tell you to do those things? You don't seem smart

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enough to think all of that up on your own.”

Irv snarled and jerked the pistol up. Travis drew and shot him before Irv could center the gun on Travis's chest.

“It wasn't fair,” Irv gasped, dropping his gun and clenching his hands to his chest as he fell to the ground.

“It was about as fair a fight as you gave Ralph.” Travis returned his pistol to its holster and turned his back on the dying man.

“Wait,” Irv called out.

Travis stopped, but didn't glance at the livery owner. “What?”

“How did you know Ralph was dead? And who took the horses? No one should've known what happened until after it was too late.”

“The moment you shot Ralph, it was too late for him, but he had enough courage and strength to ride to the one man he trusted most in Bitter Creek. A man no one noticed or cared about.” Travis grinned to himself. “He went to Eagle, and Eagle did what he could to help Ralph. After burying him, he made sure the letter got posted and Ralph's horses were hidden from greedy bastards like you.”

Irv moaned, and Travis understood how the knowledge of Eagle's actions bothered the man more than knowing he was dying.

“Didn't think an Indian could outsmart you or your boss? Trust me. Eagle could outsmart a fox. Just be glad he didn't bring his Indian brothers in on the whole thing with him or you wouldn't have died with a bullet hole in your chest. There are worse things than being shot.”

He peered at the setting sun. It had taken time to get Irv to admit who his boss was and Travis wasn't in any hurry to confront

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the man that night. He slid his shirt back on and tucked it in as he made his way to the barn where he'd stabled his stallion.

"Adam, take Caleb with you and return Irv to his master. Don't let him see you, but make sure he understands we know who he is. Keep an eye on him and if he tries to run, one of you come get me. I'll be at the Comanche camp."

Michael grabbed his arm and yanked him to a stop. "Why don't we go after him now?"

"It's getting dark and I'm tired, Michael. Don't worry. I doubt he'll be taking off. He's too confident about his place in the town. Josiah should be back by morning with the information we need. I suggest you all go and rest. Tomorrow will be a hard enough day without you questioning me."

His oldest brother glared at him as Travis jerked his arm away and continued to the barn. Kerry exited, leading Travis's stallion.

"I was careful." Kerry smiled at Travis's worried glance. A serious expression replaced his brother's grin. "Adam mentioned you might be staying around here after we take care of this problem."

Nodding, Travis double-checked the girth before swinging up into the saddle. "I'm planning on it."

"I thought I'd stick around and back you up for a while. There isn't any need for me to go back to the ranch."

Where had all this support come from? Or had it always been there, but he'd never thought to look for it? "If that's what you want to do, I won't say no."

"Be careful and ride safe." Kerry patted Travis's stallion on the shoulder and stepped back.

By the time Travis rode into the Comanche camp, true night had fallen. He hitched his stallion outside Eagle's tipi and

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unsaddled the horse, taking the time to brush him out. White Bird came out before he could enter.

"I knew you would be back tonight. I hope you have achieved what you wished."

"Yes, ma'am." He respectfully touched the brim of his hat.

"Good. Then this whole thing will be over soon and my son will be out of harm's way. Well, as much as he can be living in the white man's world." She gave him a small smile.

"Yes, ma'am." His eyes skated toward the entrance flap.

White Bird laughed. "Go in. He is awake and has been waiting for you to return."

A wave of uncertainty hit him as he slid inside and stood, staring at Eagle who lay on the other side of the fire. The gentle smile on Eagle's face warmed Travis's heart slightly, but he couldn't shake the unworthy emotions swamping him.

"I have blood on my hands," he spoke softly.

"Was it justified?"

"I believe it was, but others would think I should've allowed the law to deal with him."

Eagle moved his hand, waving away Travis's doubts. "Sometimes the punishment handed out by the injured party is more justice than anything the law could devise."

"Irv is dead."

"It was only a matter of time before he found himself on the wrong side. Did he tell you who's pulling the strings?"

He nodded, wishing they didn't have to talk about it now. It was like Eagle read his mind.

"Come, lie with me." Eagle held out his hand.

Without questioning or worrying, Travis stripped, set his pistols next to the bedroll Eagle rested in and slid in beside his

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lover. Eagle tucked the blankets around them and snuggled close to Travis. Warmth seeped into Travis's body and his eyes drifted close.

"Sleep, my love. Tomorrow is soon enough to clean up this mess," Eagle whispered.

"I'm staying," he murmured just as sleep claimed him.

CHAPTER 23

Eagle brushed a lock of hair from Travis's forehead as he blinked awake the next morning. Staring down into those sleepy blue eyes, Eagle smiled and wished waking up next to Travis every morning could become a regular occurrence.

He'd heard Travis murmur, "I'm staying" the night before as he fell asleep, but Eagle didn't know if he meant he was staying the night or forever.

"I'm glad you're awake," Travis murmured.

Helpless to stop, Eagle leaned and brushed a kiss over Travis's mouth. Hot breath teased his lips as Travis sighed. Lust shot through Eagle and he wished his body was strong enough to do what his mind really wanted. Pulling back slightly, he rubbed his thumb over Travis's bottom lip.

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"I'm glad I'm awake as well."

Travis eased away from him carefully, making sure not to poke any of Eagle's injuries. He rested back against the pile of furs he'd used as a pillow and watched his lover wash in the water someone had slid just inside the entrance flap.

"Who killed Ralph?"

Paying close attention to the buttons on his pants, Travis said, "Irv shot him in the gut, but Stinson, one of Tansford's men, beat him up before that."

"That's why you killed him," Eagle spoke, not condemning or questioning Travis. He didn't know if he would have done the same thing as Travis, but they were two different people with different experiences.

"Yes. I had one of my brothers hand him a gun even though I knew he'd never be able to beat me and I shot him."

"I'm sorry."

Travis reared his head back at Eagle's quiet apology. "Why are you sorry? You didn't do anything."

Eagle shrugged. "I can tell killing Irv bothers you for some reason. I'm sorry you felt like that was the only option open to you."

Wiping a shaking hand over his mouth, Travis stared at him. "Something needed to be done. Maybe if Josiah had been there, he might've stopped me and dragged Irv to jail, but we Ramseys weren't raised to trust the law will mete out the right kind of justice. 'An eye for an eye' and 'A life for a life' is what my father always preached."

"The Comanche believe in retribution and vengeance. Josiah has never felt that kind of anger in his life." Eagle stopped and shook his head. "No, I'm wrong. When horse thieves gunned down

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our father, Josiah went after them and killed them both. I'm not sure if he ended up feeling justice was better served that way or not. It's not my place to say one way or the other."

His lover skirted the smoldering fire and dropped to his knees next to Eagle's bed. Reaching out, Travis cupped Eagle's cheek in his trembling hand. Eagle nuzzled into the touch, letting Travis's rough fingers scrape his skin.

"What did I do to deserve you?" Travis murmured, searching Eagle's face for the answer.

"You've been alone too long. It's time to find a place to hang your hat and call home."

"I have."

The certainty shining in Travis's eyes thrilled Eagle.

"Last night, you said you were staying. What did you mean?"

Grimacing, Travis tried to pull away, but Eagle wrapped his hand around Travis's, keeping their bodies touching.

"I'm going to make Ralph's ranch my own. There's nothing to go home to anymore. I've managed to alienate Michael by ordering him around. He's like my father. Neither of them can stand to have their authority challenged." Travis frowned and dropped his gaze. "Adam and Kerry are staying behind to help me out until I get some hands hired."

"Is that the only reason why you're staying?" He held his breath, hoping Travis would find the courage to admit why he chose to stay.

"What other reason would there be?"

Travis's words were rushed, and Eagle sighed. There were still some barriers they had to work around, but Travis was staying and that would give them time to figure out where they fit.

A discreet cough from outside the tipi shot Travis to his feet

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and moved him to the other side of the fire. White Bird entered, her knowing eyes flitting over Travis to land on Eagle. He rolled his eyes slightly and his mother laughed.

"I am glad to see you looking better, but your color still is not good and I am sure you are weak." She handed a pot full of cooked oats at Travis. "Take this. I have honey in here." She held up the basket hanging from her arm.

"I should be going." Travis gave Eagle a quick glance before facing White Bird.

She placed her hand on his chest to stop him from leaving. "You have enough time to eat before you face down the man who had your brother killed."

Chuckling, Eagle waved a hand towards the spot next to him. "You might as well sit, Travis. Mother believes every day should start with a good meal."

"Hush, child."

White Bird crouched by the circle, poking and prodding the embers to life until there was a cheery blaze burning. She filled their bowls with the oats and drizzled honey over the porridge. Travis accepted his without speaking, eating quickly. It was obvious he still felt uncomfortable around Eagle's mother. Was it because she saw through his defenses so easily? Or was it because he lusted after her son and, even if Eagle had been a woman, he would be embarrassed by his needs?

Eagle had only managed a few bites of his own food when Travis set his bowl aside and stood again. Settling his hat on his head, he nodded at both Eagle and his mother. "Our brothers are waiting for me. I need to end this thing once and for all."

Nodding, Eagle held out his hand and touched Travis's booted ankle gently. "I'll be waiting to hear the outcome."

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"You will return here when this is over." White Bird's voice held conviction.

"I'll come and tell you how it went." Travis lifted the flap and started to leave.

"Wait. You never told me who did all of this."

Turning back, Travis met Eagle's gaze and there was anger burning in his eyes. "Jake did."

Eagle was stunned, and Travis slipped away before Eagle could form any sort of question.

Jake. The one man in all of Bitter Creek Eagle had believed didn't hate him because he was a half-breed. The man who claimed to be their friend was the one who killed Ralph and tried to steal the land.

* * *

When Travis rode up to Ralph's cabin, all of his brothers stood on the porch except for Caleb. Glancing at Adam, Travis waited to hear what his brother had to say.

"Caleb's keeping an eye on the old man. So far there hasn't been any attempt to leave. Not sure if that means he doesn't know we got to Irv or if he's too arrogant to care." Adam strolled down the steps to where the horses waited.

"You know most of the townspeople won't believe us when we accuse him of all this, even if Josiah shows up with the land claims," Steven pointed out.

Leaning forward, Travis rested his forearms on his saddle horn and nodded. He'd thought about the problems they could encounter while he rode home. If he returned in time, Josiah's U.S. Marshal badge might gain them some respect, but there would be disbelief

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and resentment for them denouncing a man considered popular in town.

“What’re we going to do about Stinson? He’s the one who beat Ralph before Irv shot him. Shouldn’t we go and teach him a lesson?” Bart glared at Travis.

“We’ll take care of him last. You and the rest can have your fun with him, but don’t kill him. Stinson was acting on Tansford’s orders. I wouldn’t doubt he was only supposed to rough Ralph up and scare him.”

Some of his brothers didn’t look happy with those orders, but he didn’t care. No point in killing someone who didn’t do anything except beat up a man. There had been a time when he would have killed a man for doing less. No more being only a gunman for his family. Instead of violence, he would find other ways to solve issues.

“What about Jake?” Adam asked, swinging up onto his horse.

Travis knew this decision would be even more unpopular with the others. “Jake’s an old man. We accomplish nothing by calling him out in front of the townspeople. They won’t believe us anyway. We’ll confront him privately and offer him a choice. If he leaves without causing a fuss, we won’t let everyone know that greed caused all these problems.

“If he doesn’t leave, we wait until Josiah gets back with the information he finds. When he brings us the proof, we go to church and have Josiah show it to the people while wearing his marshal badge.”

Michael snarled as he jumped to the ground and stalked toward Travis. The high-strung stallion under Travis startled nervously at the angry movements. Travis settled deep in the saddle and met his brother’s glare with a cool expression of his own. He’d always

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backed down when faced with his family's anger or disapproval. Not any longer. He'd learned he didn't need their approval to be a good human being. As long as he respected himself, it didn't matter what anyone else thought of him.

He smiled slightly at that. It wasn't true. There was one person whose opinion meant more to him than anyone else's and Eagle would see the good that could come from this solution.

"Travis is right," Adam spoke up. "No point in upsetting the rest of the town folks if we don't have to. Some of us have to live here after this is over with."

Michael stopped and turned his glare on Adam. "Staying here? Who the hell is staying? We'll bury Ralph and Timothy here, but the rest of us are going back to Texas."

Travis didn't want to have the argument right then, but he knew his oldest brother wouldn't give up until he got the truth. "I'm keeping Ralph's horses and I'll be making my home here."

Stillness fell over the yard. Travis didn't show any fear or nervousness when Michael reached up, grabbed a handful of his shirt and tried to yank him out of the saddle.

A nudge of his heel against the stallion's side and the horse shifted, forcing Michael to step away and breaking his grip on Travis's shirt. Taking advantage, Travis dismounted and grabbed two handfuls of his brother's shirt, shoving him hard against the wall of the cabin.

Michael stared at him with a fearful gaze, his skin turning white as Travis's knuckles pressed into his throat, cutting off his air. Travis studied his older brother, seeing signs of their father in him and not liking that sight.

"Don't ever touch me again. I've had my fill of being told what to do by you and everyone else. Remember, you aren't my father."

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"But I am head of this family," Michael gasped as Travis pinned him tighter to the wall.

"That might mean something to the rest of our family, but I've been on my own for too long to fear you. You can't control my life anymore."

Stepping back, he let go of Michael before turning to place his own back to the wall and stare at his other brothers. None of them moved. Adam and Kerry sat their horses and didn't seem upset about the confrontation. Bart and Steven glared at Travis, but they didn't make the mistake of taking a step toward him.

"We do this my way or I'm leaving and I won't be risking my life for any of you anymore."

"We're with you," Adam spoke, waving a hand at himself and Kerry.

"You're not giving us much choice, are you?" Michael tugged on his shirt and adjusted his gun belt, making sure to keep his hands away from the grip of his pistol.

"I wasn't given a choice when it came to becoming the Helper." Travis strolled to his horse and mounted. Gathering the reins, he settled into the saddle.

"Are you done?"

His brothers jerked, but Travis calmly turned his horse, so he could greet Josiah. "It's about time you got here."

The marshal laughed. "I rode one horse near to exhaustion and this one isn't much better to get back here first thing. Are you going to confront Jake?"

"We're taking him the evidence, which I assume you've gotten." He shot Josiah a glance. At Josiah's nod, a little tension eased in Travis's shoulders. "I don't want to make a big production out of this. We tell him we know he's behind the whole thing and

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he should leave town without making too big of a fuss. That way we don't upset any of the folk in Bitter Creek and we don't kill an old guy who doesn't have much longer to live anyway."

Josiah's eyebrows shot up and the man sounded surprised when he commented, "Good idea."

"You sound shocked. Did you think I'd just kill him?"

Travis urged his stallion forward and Josiah fell into place beside him. Adam and Kerry rode right behind them with the rest of the brothers trailing. He liked knowing there were people he could trust watching his back.

"I thought it was a possibility, but I guess you aren't the cold killer I imagined you were."

Travis shrugged and then admitted, "Before I got here, I'd have killed him. Killing might be messy, but in many ways, it's easier than talking someone out of doing something they shouldn't."

"True."

They rode in silence for a short way before Travis built the courage to ask, "What did you do to the men who shot your father?"

"I hadn't joined the marshals yet. I left the ranch I had built after the war and tracked the men down. They had split up after the shooting, so I spent some time searching for them. I faced each down in a fair fight and killed him."

"Do you think your father would've wanted you to do that?" Travis had heard stories of how honorable Nathaniel Burlington had been and he couldn't see the legendary Texas Ranger being proud of Josiah's vengeance.

Josiah shrugged. "Probably not, but he was dead and it's my cross to bear. Maybe that's why I chose to join the marshals, to atone for my sin."

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“Don’t you like what you’re doing?”

“Do you?”

Thinking about the question, he gave Josiah as honest an answer as he could at the moment. “I like helping people, especially my family, and at one time, I didn’t mind killing people.”

“What changed?”

I fell in love. There wasn’t any way he would say that out loud, even though he had a feeling Josiah would understand what he meant and who he was talking about. He had yet to admit to Eagle that there was something deeper to his feelings than satisfying his sexual urges.

He hated returning to Eagle and dirtying the man with the blood on his hands. Oh, Eagle wouldn’t mind and would never condemn Travis for shooting someone. His lover wasn’t an innocent virgin who lived in a tower like one of those fairy tale princesses. Eagle was a half-breed living in a world where his blood meant more to people than what kind of man he was. If anyone could accept what Travis had done, it would be Eagle.

“Got old, I guess.”

Josiah snorted, but let the statement stand.

CHAPTER 24

As they approached Bitter Creek, Travis gestured for Adam to take the lead. "Take us the back way to Jake's. I don't want anyone to see us if we can help it."

Adam nodded and they continued on, only the sounds of creaking leather and the soft hoof beats of their horses filling the air. Travis's thoughts drifted back to Eagle and he hoped his lover was resting. Being as severely injured as Eagle was, it would take a while to recover. Even now, several days after his own injuries, Travis still couldn't help wishing he could go to Eagle, curl up next to him and sleep for a day or two.

As they approached Jake's place, Caleb stepped from the shadows of a nearby alley and held up his hand. His brother nodded at them and they pulled their horses to a stop in front of

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him.

"He's still in there. Didn't kick up a fuss when he found Irv's body. Had one of his guys drag the body out behind the back shed. Guess he isn't afraid of anyone finding it back there."

"Jake doesn't think there's anything we can do to him. Even though Irv told us it was Jake who was behind the whole thing, he believes we don't have any proof." Travis inclined his head toward Josiah. "But we have his name on the claims he filed at the land office in Kenton."

"We were lucky. Some of my fellow U.S. Marshals went and talked to a few of the ranchers who left their land around here for another investigation they're doing. Those men say Jake was the one who threatened them. The reason they didn't say anything is because they didn't think anyone would believe them."

Adam snorted softly. "Can't say as I blame them. Seems to me Jake did a pretty good job getting the town to believe he was a harmless old man."

"There's no such thing as a harmless man, no matter his age." Travis swung off his stallion and wrapped the reins around the hitching post. "Remember how we're doing this."

"How are we doing it?" Caleb glanced at the others as Travis walked past him.

"No killing."

Caleb's eyebrows shot up. "Really? I'd think your first thought was to kill Jake."

"We already got the man who pulled the trigger. I don't see the point of wasting a bullet on an old man. We run him out of town, and if he doesn't leave quietly, we show our proof to the fine folks of Bitter Creek. Hopefully they'd accept it coming from Josiah."

"Good plan." Caleb shrugged when Travis shot him a quick

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look. "Hey, I didn't look forward to killing an old man. Maybe I don't have the balls needed to kill someone."

"Be glad you don't," Travis murmured.

He stopped by the back door and waited for the others to gather behind him before pushing it open to walk in.

Jake looked up from where he stood, rolling out some kind of dough. A bright smile lit his face. "Ramsey, what brings you here?"

The old man's smile dimmed as the rest of the Ramsey brothers and Josiah filed in. Taking the papers Josiah handed him, Travis faced Jake with a grim look on his face.

"We know what you did, not only to the ranchers you forced off their land, but you had Irv kill Ralph."

Jake's laugh quavered roughly. "Who spread lies about me? Why would I do anything like that? I have my place. I don't need anything else."

His dull brown gaze danced from one grim face to another, finding no support in any of them.

"Irv told us you ordered him to kill Ralph because you wanted his horses and his land. The ranchers told some U.S. Marshals you threatened them to the point they felt it was better for them to leave than to stay and risk you killing them." Travis slapped the papers down on the flour-covered counter. "We have the claims you filed on all those pieces of property as well."

Stiffening, Jake glared at him. "I filed on those fair and square."

"You incited a range war between Buffert and Tansford, hoping one or both of the ranchers would be killed, so you could take their land." Josiah shifted, moving closer to the door leading out into the main room. "We know there's a railroad spur coming

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through here and you'd make a lot of money selling that land to the railroad company."

Jake opened his mouth, prepared to argue some more, but the menace exuding from the men surrounding him made him change his tune. "Okay, yes. I did do all those things, but I never killed Ralph."

"You ordered Irv to do it, which is the same as pulling the trigger yourself," Josiah informed him.

"What are you going to do? Lock me up? The people here won't let that happen." A smug grin crossed Jake's face.

"They would if we told them everything." Travis gathered the papers in his hand and after folding them, stuck them in his shirt pocket.

"Are you going to tell?" Fear skated through Jake's eyes because the man knew what an angry mob of townsfolk could do to a man.

"We're offering you a deal. Leave now, taking nothing with you but what you're wearing and a horse, and we won't mention any of this to the good people of Bitter Creek. Stay, and we'll be interrupting their Sunday worship in a few minutes and Josiah will be compelled to arrest you for murder." Travis leaned forward and pinned Jake with a cold stare. "Think about what prison would do to an old man like you. You wouldn't last a month inside."

The old man ripped off his apron and growled. "That's no choice at all. Why doesn't he just arrest me now?" Jake gestured to Josiah, who stood with his back against the wall next to the door and studied them all.

"I'm not here in my official role," Josiah drawled. "I'm here helping my brother, but if I'm confronted with a murderer, I'd have to do my job and drag you in."

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Jake snarled at all of them, but didn't make a move toward the shotgun leaning in the corner. Caleb slipped in and nodded at Travis.

"There's a horse saddled and ready out back."

The old man stalked past them, and Travis grabbed his arm, dragging him to a stop. He poked his finger in Jake's chest and whispered, "If you come back here, I *will* kill you."

The utter conviction and ruthlessness in Travis's voice must have convinced Jake that he wasn't joking. Jake jerked his arm away and grimaced. "I won't be back."

They spilled into the back yard and watched as Jake climbed into the saddle and rode off. Only when Jake was out of sight did the men look at each other. Josiah made the first move. He approached Travis and held out his hand.

"It was good working with you. I'm sure I'll be seeing you again, especially if you're going to stick around here."

Travis shook Josiah's hand and smiled. "Yeah. I'm staying. Bitter Creek is a good fit for me."

"I can see that." The look in Josiah's eyes told Travis he thought there was something else that was a good fit for him as well.

He fought the urge to blush. Whether Josiah knew about Eagle and him or not, he wouldn't give anything away. He couldn't risk it.

"I'll be stopping to say good-bye to Eagle and White Bird. Do you want me to tell him you'll be visiting later?" Josiah's question was low, making sure no one but Travis heard him.

"Yeah."

Josiah nodded and mounted. He glanced at the other Ramsey brothers. "It's been good working with you all. Maybe if my work

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takes me to your neck of the woods, I'll stop by and say hi."

Michael shook Josiah's hand. "Our door is always open to you, Marshal."

Eagle's brother rode out before them. Travis and his brothers took their time getting back to Ralph's ranch. When they got there, the others dismounted and unsaddled their horses. Travis loosened the girth on his saddle, but left his mount tacked up.

"We need to move Ralph and bury him with Timothy up on the hill there." Michael pointed to the small hill behind Ralph's cabin.

"I'll ask for permission from Eagle's people to dig Ralph up and we'll bury them tomorrow." Travis went inside and dug out a clean shirt from his saddlebags.

"Good. We need to get back home. The women can deal with most problems, but the hands get restless if we're not there." Michael followed him.

"Caleb, Kerry and I are staying here for a while. Travis is going to need help getting things in order." Adam stood, leaning against the doorframe, thumbs hooked in his gun belt and legs crossed at the ankles.

Michael started to protest, but Adam shook his head. "You don't need us at the moment, Michael. We'll be back before calving season next year."

Travis left them arguing as he went to the trough and washed up before slipping on his clean shirt. Kerry and Caleb stood nearby, discussing the improvements needing to be made on the land. Changes were needed to the buildings and herd, but he would talk to Eagle and make sure his lover agreed with all of it before he did any of them. By choosing to stay in Bitter Creek, he was choosing to build something with Eagle. What and for how long, he didn't know, but he knew it would be for as long as Eagle

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wanted him.

He considered everything that had happened and grinned to himself. As much as Ralph's death hurt, it had been the beginning of a change in Travis that shook the foundations of his world. There had been a time when he never allowed anyone else to influence his decisions. Now Eagle's feelings determined his every action.

Tightening the girth again, he spoke to Caleb and Kerry. "I'll be back in the morning, and we can bury Ralph then. We're going to have to build a bigger house and the hands we hire can use the cabin as a bunk house."

"Tell Eagle we said hello." Kerry grinned at him.

"See you in the morning." He swung aboard and headed out to see the man he loved.

EPILOGUE

Eagle lay in bed, watching Travis washing up and getting ready to join him. Six months since his injuries and Eagle was just now gaining his strength back. He worked a little more every day with the horses and pushed his boundaries farther every chance he got.

Travis had gotten better about not hovering over him while he worked. Adam, Caleb and Kerry had joked about Travis “mother-henning” Eagle all the time, but Eagle couldn’t find the energy to be annoyed. In a way, it made him feel good to know that Travis cared enough about him to keep an eye on him.

In the six months since running Jake off, Travis had taken over Ralph’s ranch. He still ran the Double R brand Ralph had registered, but added the Rocking B brand as well. When Eagle asked him about it, Travis explained that the brand represented

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their partnership and Eagle realized, in some strange way, the brand was Travis's way of telling him he loved him.

He lifted the blankets to allow Travis to slide under them. His lover sighed as he wrapped his arms around him and pulled their bodies close. Sharing a room in the big house might raise some eyebrows among the hands, which was why Eagle had his own room, but he never slept in it. He spent his nights in Travis's arms, holding and loving him. The only ones who might have known about their relationship were Travis's brothers and none of them ever said a word.

Caleb and Adam had left early that morning, saying it was time for them to go home. Kerry chose to stay, and Eagle knew it made Travis happy to know one of his brothers was there to support him. Eagle liked the younger Ramsey and any prejudice Kerry might have held toward Eagle had disappeared as they worked together.

Travis brushed a kiss over Eagle's shoulder. "I'll miss Caleb and Adam."

"I know. Maybe later in the fall you can go for a visit. I'm sure they'll all be happy to see you." He trailed his fingers down Travis's back, smiling at the small shivers his touch elicited. "I can handle the ranch while you're gone. Kerry would probably like to see everyone as well by then."

"I won't go without you."

Easing back, he caught Travis's chin in his hand and lifted it so their gazes met. "They'll never accept me, even without knowing what you and I mean to each other. I'm a savage to them and I won't put you through all of that. I don't need their approval, but they are your family. Everyone needs family."

Travis swallowed hard, and Eagle could see his lover struggling to find the words. He didn't say anything, just rubbed

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his hand up and down Travis's back, trying to encourage Travis to speak whatever was in his heart.

"I need you," Travis whispered.

Eagle's heart skipped a beat at the earnest expression on Travis's face.

"You're my family now, Eagle. I made my choice and I know all the dangers involved with two men loving each other, but I can handle it and I know you can deal with it." Travis pushed up on his elbow, forcing Eagle to roll onto his back and stare up at him. "The thing is that I know, even if I didn't love you like I do, I'd still be your friend and I won't let my family treat my friend like that."

Tears welled in Eagle's eyes and he blinked quickly to get rid of them. Crying wasn't the best way to keep Travis spilling his feelings. He reached up and stroked Travis's trembling lips, trying to organize his words in a way that didn't embarrass his lover.

Travis wrapped his mouth around Eagle's fingers and sucked. The tug of his lips hit Eagle's groin like a hot poker. His cock stiffened and he groaned. His mind shut down as Travis swirled his tongue around him.

As he surged up, he yanked his fingers out and crushed their lips together. Talking about things was hard. Fucking was easy and they didn't need any words to say how they felt.

Travis's gasp allowed Eagle to plunge his tongue into his lover's mouth and stroke along his teeth, drawing a deep groan. He ran his hands down Travis's back to cup his ass and rock their groins together. Through the nights spent in each other's arms, Travis grew less hesitant and more open to showing what he liked. Travis loved taking him, and Eagle was willing to let that happen as often as his lover wanted.

After tearing his lips away, he begged, "Please, Travis, take

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me. It's been so long. I need you to take me."

He also wasn't too proud to beg. Travis had treated him like a fragile piece of glass while he recovered, but Eagle decided it was time to get back to normal. He missed the feel of Travis filling and claiming him. Spreading his legs, Eagle sighed as Travis settled between his thighs and rubbed their cocks together.

"Are you sure?" Travis's breath washed over Eagle's lips.

"I need you, love. It's been too long."

"I didn't want to hurt you again. Your wounds needed to heal."

Travis nuzzled his chin and Eagle tilted back his head, giving his lover more access. He shivered as Travis scraped his teeth over his skin.

"I'm fine. Please, take me."

Eagle reached under his pillow and pulled out the small jar of oil he'd stuck there before climbing into bed. Travis's trembling fingers wrapped around the jar and drew it closer to him. Eagle placed his hands behind his knees and spread, giving Travis access to his ass.

Travis muttered as he opened the jar and dipped his fingers in the oil. The words were so low Eagle couldn't understand what he said and Eagle didn't care. All he wanted was Travis inside him as quickly as possible. He jerked as Travis rested the jar on his stomach before settling between his thighs and trailing his slick fingers down over Eagle's balls to his puckered entrance.

A gasp escaped Eagle's throat as Travis breached his ring with two fingers. No slow stretching and preparing this time. His lover seemed as eager as he was. Travis stroked in and out twice before adding a third finger, filling Eagle a little more, but it wasn't enough for either of them.

"I want your cock, Travis, in me now." Eagle's voice was

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hoarse as he gave the order.

Rearing back on his knees, Travis snatched the jar off Eagle's stomach and poured out a handful of oil. He managed to set the container on the stand next to the bed without spilling any.

Eagle licked his lips as Travis coated his cock with the oil. Nothing looked as good as his lover's glistening shaft poised to press into his ass. Reaching above him, Eagle gripped the headboard and arched his back, lifting his hips from the bed and offering himself up to Travis.

He held his breath as Travis shoved in, not stopping until he buried himself as deep as he could go. Staring into Travis's blue eyes, Eagle found all the words Travis could never speak to him and it was enough for him.

They rocked together, rushing closer and closer to the edge. Eagle cried out as Travis's cock nailed the special spot inside him with each thrust. Pressure built throughout his body and heat washed over his skin. He pried one hand free to fist his own cock and stroke in time with Travis's movements.

Travis's grunts grew louder as he sped up, reaming Eagle's ass hard and fast.

"Soon." Eagle panted, knowing it would be seconds before he climaxed. "Now."

Eagle shouted as his seed spilled out between them, coating their chests and stomachs. One more push in before Travis froze, head thrown back, as he shouted and flooded Eagle's inner passage with hot liquid. Travis stayed braced over Eagle until their bodies stopped shuddering.

A whimper escaped from Eagle as Travis slid out of him and rolled to the side. He snuggled close to his lover and rested his cheek on Travis's sweat-covered chest. His seed caused their

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bodies to stick together. Getting up to wash off crossed his mind for a second before he decided he was just too tired to move.

Travis ran his hand up and down Eagle's back, his touch getting lighter and lighter as he drifted to sleep. Eagle let Travis's even breathing sooth him as he settled closer to his lover.

The time would come when someone would need Travis's help and he would have to let the man he loved go, but until then, Eagle would hold Travis tight and hope his love would be enough to bring Travis home each time.

T. A. CHASE

T. A. Chase lives a life without boundaries. Being fascinated by life and how different we all are, he writes about the things that make us unique. He finds beauty in all kinds of love and enjoys sharing those insights. He lives in the Midwest with his partner of twelve years. When he isn't writing, he's watching movies, reading and living life to the fullest.

* * *

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Leaving Minnesota, Timothy Gapin doesn't have any plans except getting as far away from all the memories as he can before his money runs out. His secret lover has married, breaking his heart and making him chose a life in the open rather than a relationship built on lies.

Little does Tim know that four days later he would grab dinner at a diner and find a place to stop. Somehow this diner in the middle of nowhere becomes his home and the people who work there his family. In addition to the workers at the diner, Tim meets Bernie Capley, a long-haul trucker who isn't all he seems to be.

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