

DRAGONS OF  
DESERT AND DUST

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# ONE

Facing east toward the mountains, Angel Cerillos dug his toes into the loose slats of the shed's roof. As the sun shimmered across the New Mexico desert, he lifted his arms upward, feeling the turquoise talisman warming against his chest like a piece of desert sky.

"The eagles are my brothers..." he chanted. He swept his arms downward in the eagles' curving wing thrusts, imitating how they soared over the parched mountains.

"I am greater than the eagles..."

Eyes drifting shut, his mind flew skyward.

"I am king of the skies..." The rhythmic beat, beat of his arms echoed the chant. He could hear the singing clearly now – there, just beyond the horizon. A thrumming chant that was getting louder and louder, day by day. Magic singing that no one else heard....

"Angel! *Angel!*" Treese Tanner's voice cracked through the dream. Arms still flapping, his feet skidded on the tin roof. Scrabbling with fingers and scraping with toes, he slid along the burning metal, and then down over the edge.

A cry tore from his throat. He flew now, but straight down, slamming onto the hard-packed dirt. Gasping for breath, he saw his foster mother loom like a black shadow against the sky. Treese Tanner's lips pursed and she jammed her big hands on her hips. The hot wind blew her badly-cut hair around her head like a faded halo.

"Y'okay?" she asked.

Angel tried to answer, but all that came out was a raspy grunt.

"Can you get up?" she demanded.

He wheezed again, and thrashed like a bug on a pin. She stared back, exasperation evident on her weathered face. "You deserve to have broke every bone you got," she told him. "Fourteen years old and you don't have the sense you were born with. And those sad blue eyes of

yours don't fool me. I seen the way you look at Gary when he pushes you too far. But you watch yourself around him – he can get mean.”

“I know,” Angel grunted. “I ain't gonna get in his way.”

Treese snorted. “I don't think you'd hardly know anything, the way you're always mooning around.”

“I can look after myself.” Angel stared up at the sky, wishing he could fly up there and away from his life.

“You need someone to watch out for you, kid, but I'm not the mothering kind, so you be careful. Now, get up. Put your shirt on. We got work to do.” She turned and headed toward the front of the motel. Angel stayed where he was, lying in the dust, waiting for his breathing to get back to normal.

For a moment he had thought his secret chant was going to work, thought that the haunting dreams and whispering voices would be satisfied and stop. His only friend around here, Celsa Reyna, had helped him come up with words that sounded like an old Indian chant. He had even come out here early – not sunrise exactly – but as close as he could manage without an alarm clock. Spitting out a mouthful of dust, Angel sat up and stared into the gleaming blue sky. For a minute he had felt like he could flap his arms and rise into the air just like one of the eagles that soared over the motel. Felt like he could escape.

“*Angel!*” Treese called from the front of the motel. “Get a move on!”

“Coming!” Angel yelled back, even though he stayed put, looking up at the sky, drinking in the beautiful blue. For once he felt peaceful, not all torn up by the storms of emotion that rolled over him like thunderclouds on the mountains. Up until the state moved him here to the Lone Butte Motel he had been able to pull back, not get caught up in the fights and bad stuff around him. But there was something about this clean dry air, endless horizon, and blue sky that had him stirred up. Of course, life at the motel didn't help.

Treese sounded gruff, but she was all right. Angel mostly liked her. But his foster father, Gary, was a whole different deal. He could make anyone laugh with his jokes. His voice was silky and smooth. Everyone liked Gary. Everyone but Angel...and maybe Treese too, though she never said.

With a sigh, Angel got to his feet. He shook back his straight brown

hair, tried to dust off his skin, then gave up and pulled on the loose shirt that was one of Gary's hand-me-downs. His foster father would be back from town soon with another case of beer. If the motel's rooms weren't clean and the beds changed, he'd be mad. That would mean the silky voice would get hard and if he'd already started on the beer, maybe he'd stop joking and start slapping.

For a moment Angel gripped the turquoise talisman – the only thing that he had left from his own family. His fingers traced the two-headed, horned snake, more like a dragon, with its long sinewy body looped back and forth and a fanged head on each end. Angel had had it as long as he could remember, strung on string or an old shoelace around his neck. “You keep that safe,” his ma had told him. “It's your birth gift from your father.”

And he did keep it safe. It never left him, no matter what. He'd figured there was some invisible magic on it because no one ever said anything about it and no matter how chaotic his foster homes were, the other kids never grabbed for it. They just looked and then their eyes slid away like they forgot they saw it. And mostly Angel forgot too. But a few months ago, around his fourteenth birthday, there had been a change. Sometimes, the carving seemed to hum like the high voltage wires that swayed high above the highway. When Angel held the dragon in his two hands, he'd felt a jolt of power. Everything he saw, heard, smelled and tasted seemed brighter, cleaner...more beautiful. His head swam and he felt himself soaring into ideas and visions that were new and frightening. And then...nothing. They just faded away. He didn't know whether to be terrified or thrilled. But those feelings had compelled him to try the Indian chant thing. Dumb.

“*Angel!*” The sharpened note in Treese's voice meant she'd spotted Gary's truck on the horizon.

“*Coming!*” Angel shoved the talisman under his shirt and sprinted towards the motel. He rounded the building's cracked adobe wall and grabbed the laundry cart he'd left by number 18. By the time Gary's truck spun gravel into a cloud out on the parking lot, Angel was head first into the room's shower stall, scrubbing. The bed was stripped and the soiled laundry in the cart. Crisp, clean sheets that Treese had ironed last night were on the bed, and the faded bedspread had been smoothed over them.

Angel felt rather than saw Gary's presence in the doorway. He scrubbed harder, not looking up, knowing that even a glance might invite some kind of punishment if Gary was in a punishing mood.

"Well, can't you say hi?" Gary demanded.

Angel sat back on his heels and wiped his arm across his brow, hoping it would impress his foster father with how hard he was working. The man was big, a football player in his high school glory days, but now most of the muscle had slid down to his gut.

"Hi, Gary. I was scrubbing so I didn't hear you come in." Angel eyed the bottle of beer in the man's hand and kept his face carefully blank.

His foster father grunted. Before he turned to go, he shoved his big knee into Angel's shoulder blades, sending the boy sprawling head first into the shower stall. The cleaner streaked across Angel's cheek, burning. Scrambling back out onto the cracked tile, he used his shirt sleeve to wipe the soap from his face.

"Watch you don't slip there, boy." Gary snickered and sauntered out. "And move your butt," he called back. "If you want any lunch, all these rooms better be clean."

Angel slowly wiped his face again. His skin stung, and the earlier spurt of anger fanned into fury. He wished, he wished with everything he had, that Gary would be on the receiving end – just once. His hand crept to the turquoise dragon. The talisman burned in his hand, hotter and hotter. Angel shut his eyes and wished and wished.

*A white convertible streaks toward the motel...a writhing shape skitters up from the dust devils that whirl across the road...the car swerves...spins into the Lone Butte parking lot...gravel shoots everywhere like dusty bullets...and Gary walks out of number 18, beer bottle tilted up. He doesn't see the spinning car...*

*The driver wrenches the wheel. The fender just side-swipes Gary, sending him sprawling in the dirt. The bottle flies from his hand, shattering on the stones, shooting shards of glass in all directions...*

Treese's cry shocked Angel from the dream. He dropped the talisman back under his shirt and tore outside to see what was going on. Gary was sprawled in the dust, his hand clapped to his cheek. A trickle of blood oozed between his fingers. Broken glass glinted in the gravel and beer steamed away in the desert heat.

A big man in a suit and cowboy hat rushed from the sports car toward Gary. Treese came pelting from number seven. Angel pressed back against the motel wall, breathing hard.

“You all right?” the man asked, squatting by Gary.

“You crazy fool,” Gary sputtered. “You coulda killed me.” He wiped his arm across his cheek, leaving a streak of blood on his sleeve.

“I really am sorry,” the man said. “I thought I saw an animal on the road, so I cranked the wheel and my car spun right out of control. That’s never happened with this car before. I don’t understand it. But are you all right? Should I take you into the hospital in Santa Fe?”

Gary struggled to his feet. The stranger rose beside him, offering a steadying hand.

Gary shrugged it away. “No, I don’t need no doctors. I’m okay.” He eyed the man and his pale eyes sharpened. “Say, aren’t you John Hydemann? You own the Turquoise Hill Ranch, right?”

Angel sucked in his breath. The Turquoise Hill Ranch bounded the back of the motel. And kept on going to cover hundreds of square miles more – one of the biggest ranches in the state. Celsa and several other kids at school lived in the adobe cottages Hydemann had built for his hired hands. She called him King Hydemann because everyone jumped to do what he said.

“That’s right. I’m John Hydemann.” The rancher held out his hand.

Gary grinned, wiped his palm on his jeans, and stuck out his own hand. “And I’m Gary Tanner. Don’t know why we haven’t met before, being neighbors. I own and operate this here Lone Butte Motel.” He motioned grandly. “It ain’t much at the moment, but we’re fixing it up. I plan to turn it into a resort and conference center – I’m thinkin’ of an Anasazi kinda pueblo theme. But I’m looking for the right business partners. Men with vision. Like me and you...”

“Can I offer you some iced tea, Mr. Hydemann?” Treese interrupted. Angel could see the embarrassed flush on his foster mother’s face.

Gary stiffened, but he kept the smile going.

“No, I thank you though.” Mr. Hydemann nodded to her. “I have an appointment that I’m already late for. And if you’re sure you’re not hurt, Mr. Tanner...” He offered his hand in a farewell shake.

“Gary, call me Gary!” He shook hands. “I think I’m just fine. Been a pleasure to meet you, John.” He leaned on the back fender of the

gleaming white car like a good-natured pal.

As Hydemann turned to get into the car, he spotted Angel standing in the shadows. To Angel's amazement, the rancher smiled and included him in his wave. Angel didn't move but felt a brief surge of pleasure at being noticed.

That pleasure dulled his wits. He stayed when he should have slipped away, because as soon as the car became a white blur on the straight road, the friendly mask dropped from Gary's heavy face.

"Iced tea?" he demanded. "Treese, you stupid cow! A man like John Hydemann don't waste his time on iced tea..."

Angel knew where this was going. Gary would yell for a while, and then unless he got distracted he'd start whaling on Treese. Or Angel.

It gave him a sour feeling in his stomach, but there wasn't anything he could do. He hesitated for only a moment and then with the skill of long practice, Angel slipped sideways through the shadows and around the corner of the building. He broke into a run and cleared the sagging fence in a fear-sharpened leap

The desert spread out before him, reddish gold in the sun, mottled with tufts of grey and green shrubs. He kept on running, loping like a coyote. Behind him, in the distance, he heard Treese cry out once, making him break stride and stumble. Crouching, he clenched his fists and looked back. No sign of Gary. Just the same he sprang up and ran faster. His sharp breathing began to match the pounding of his feet. Dust rose behind him...and then he was alone and free.

# TWO

The desert peace settled Angel's nerves, blurring away his flaming emotions. He slowed to a steady, distance-covering trot.

Out of long habit, Angel kept a sharp lookout for the men who worked Hydemann's land. Once he saw a vehicle's moving dust cloud, so he dropped to a crouch and stayed motionless, watching. But the cloud rolled away toward the foothills where the cattle grazed. When he judged the truck was too far away for the men to spot him, Angel rose to his feet again and loped across the landscape.

After a mile or so more, Angel reached a big, featureless rock that reared above the dust and juniper scrub. A smaller slab leaned against it, and a jumble of rocks lying over that had created a small cool cave, just big enough to hide him and his meager cache of survival gear: eleven discarded water bottles that he'd refilled, beef jerky in a screw top jar, and two worn blankets that Gary thought had been stolen by guests. Angel had smuggled it all out here over the three months that he'd lived with Treese and Gary. He'd long since learned it was smart to have a back-up plan.

He squatted for a moment in the hot sun to catch his breath, and then unbuttoned his shirt. The sun on the talisman shone like a piece of the sky – like he, Angel Cerillos, owned the sky itself.

“I am greater than the eagles...” he whispered. The sun washed across him, warming the cold places in his heart. He sniffed the air. The scents kept getting stronger, linking themselves to colors and emotions – making his life brighter and richer. Maybe it was the desert, not just the talisman. He sniffed again – dry juniper, dust, animal musk. Was he beginning to see and smell like the desert animals? Angel rubbed his palms across the rough earth, lifted his head and breathed deeply, allowing the desert to fill his lungs and heart. He'd rather live among the desert animals than with most of the humans he knew.



Thirsty, he knelt by his cave and breathed the cool air trickling from the crevice. It carried the scent of a small lizard but he didn't mind that, or even the desert rats or small rodents. He sure didn't want to stick his fingers into the snout of a rattlesnake though.

Reaching in, Angel gently shook the whiptail lizard from its perch on a water bottle. He watched as it skittered out of the cave and ran into a tangle of dry brush. With a long sigh, Angel slid down to sit with his back to the rock, unscrewed the cap and took a long drink. When he'd had enough, he groped to the very back of his hideout for his great treasure. He pulled out a knotted bandana, dusty, faded and a little frayed. His mom had given it to him before she became too lost in her mind to keep their little family whole.

Inside the bundle lay six sky-blue turquoise stones, each veined with slender black lines like spider webs. Valuable. Worth more than four hundred dollars. More money than he had ever had.

Not enough.

Angel rubbed each big nugget with his thumb, loving the smooth beauty. It had taken all the time he could steal away from the motel to find these six perfectly colored stones. Stones the color of the desert sky, the color of his eyes, and the color of the dragon talisman knotted around his neck.

Sitting back, rolling the stones in his hand, he remembered how he'd found one nugget on the second day after he'd come to stay with Treese and Gary. He'd thought it was pretty, but had not known how valuable it was until he met Celsa Reyna on the school bus.

School had had only seven weeks left in the year when his social worker, Mrs. Preston, brought Angel to The Lone Butte Motel. After four years of moving through seven other foster homes, he was existing in a state of stone-faced panic – terrified that he'd have to move again; tired of the way that the kids at every new school sneered at him; sick with loneliness. That first day, Treese sleepily fed him toast and peanut butter, handed him his battered back pack, and told him to wait at the edge of the motel parking lot for the bus to pick him up.

He did as he was told, standing like a fence post, staring down the highway, shivering in his thin jacket from the cool, early morning air. At long last the yellow bus pulled up and opened the door.

"Morning," the driver said as Angel climbed woodenly up the steps.

Mouth too dry to speak, he nodded at her.

“You’re first on,” she told him. “You get your pick of seats.”

The door swung shut and she pulled back onto the highway before he had even sat down. He chose a seat in the middle of the bus, sliding over to the window, clutching his backpack. After a ten minute rumbling race down the highway, the bus lurched to a stop by the Turquoise Hill Ranch, and a gaggle of children and teens crowded on. The bus seemed to explode with their shouts and laughter.

A couple of boys, bigger and obviously stronger than Angel stopped in the aisle and stared at him. “Hey, new kid!” one of the boys said. “Whatcha got in that backpack?”

“Luis, leave him alone!” A girl about Angel’s own age bundled three young ones into seats opposite him and then took her time to look him over. Her eyes were chocolate brown and serious, set in a wide square face. Her long, dark hair was thick and curling, swept back from her face and fastened with embossed silver clips. Angel couldn’t help but notice that she looked rounded, soft and full. Pretty in a way that made him feel warm.

When one of the teens poked her, she turned from her study of Angel.

“*Hoye*, Celsa, you gonna make me?” the bully was laughing now.

Celsa tossed her head, making her thick hair swing. “No, Luis, I’m going to get *chiquita* Miranda to do it. She’s in first grade, so she’s ready for someone like you!”

The boys laughed and when the driver roared at them, sauntered to seats at the back. As the bus lurched back onto the highway, Celsa slid into the seat beside Angel.

“*Hola*, I’m Celsa Reyna,” she said, her voice as rich as fudge. “Just ignore these *javelinas*. They’re only half awful but they’ll bully you if you let them. They’re learning from their *papás* and big brothers.”

Not knowing what to say, Angel stared out the window.

“So what’s your name?” She regarded him with interest. When he didn’t answer, she went on. “*Mi mamá* heard at the food mart that you’re living at the motel. I told her that makes no sense. Doesn’t that cost a lot to stay there?”

Burning with hot shame, Angel glared out at the landscape. Celsa kept her eyes on his face, but said nothing else. She did not seem to be

in the least offended that he did not speak to her. At last, the bus dropped the little ones at an elementary school, and then drove a block to the high school. All the other teens, including Celsa, got out, leaving Angel alone in his seat, clutching his backpack, hoping he didn't throw up from nerves. Then Celsa leaned back inside the door.

"The office is right across from the front entrance," she said and disappeared again.

Throwing his backpack over one shoulder, Angel left the bus and went into the echoing school.

He had long since learned to freeze his face into a mask of sullen unconcern, but every moment terrified him as he tried to find his classes and was repeatedly late. In the swirl of strangers, he twice saw Celsa and three times heard her voice and deep laugh. Even though he didn't call out to her or do anything to attract her attention, she was like a lifeline to something familiar. Luis and his friends were in his math class, but they ignored him. In the cafeteria Angel found out no one had done the paperwork for him to get free school lunches. He had no money and Treese hadn't given him any lunch, so he sat alone at a table and tried to pretend he wasn't hungry. When Celsa slid onto the bench beside him he forced out a "Hi again," and followed it up with what he hoped was a friendly smile.

She smiled in return and without speaking divided her own large lunch; she pushed a ham sandwich and a honey-drenched sopaipilla in front of him.

Angel ate the sandwich and savored the sweet pastry after it. "Thanks," he said at last.

"*Esta bien*," she told him. "You look like you could use a friend. But you still haven't told me your name."

"My name's Angel Cerillos, and I'm fine," he said.

She examined his expression, doubt obvious on her face. "So, where else have you lived? Anywhere interesting?"

Angel shook his head, pushing the crumbs into a neat pile, then onto the floor. "Albuquerque for awhile. Santa Fe for a few months. No place good."

A bell rang for the next class. Celsa rolled her eyes. "There's never enough time at lunch to have a conversation," she complained. "I want to hear about where you've lived. Anywhere has got to be more interesting

than around here.”

She rose and walked away, heading toward her classes. Angel consulted his rumpled schedule, and went in search of yet another classroom.

Later, when Celsa sat beside him on the bus, one of the boys hooted. Angel stared out the window, burning with embarrassment.

“Shut up, Georges!” Celsa called toward the offending kid, then smiled at Angel. When he didn’t acknowledge her, she poked him. “Tell me about living in Santa Fe,” she commanded.

Angel shrugged. “I was only six. My mom worked for a jewelry shop.” He remembered the shop and the artists who came in to sell their work while he had sat in a corner, coloring, watching, keeping quiet.

“What kind of jewelry?”

“Silver mostly. Some turquoise like this.” He dug the nugget from his pocket and showed it to her.

“Where’d you get that?” she asked.

“Found it a couple of days ago...in a ditch in the desert.”

“Let me see.” Celsa examined the nugget on her palm, poking it this way and that with her fingertip, a frown gathering on her face. “*Oye!* That’s high grade. Worth good money – really good money. You’d better hide that or you’ll be in more trouble than you ever want to see.”

“Why?” Angel demanded. “I just found it lying around the desert.”

“Don’t be dumb. There are already too many stupid people around here,” Celsa retorted. “All the good turquoise belongs to *señor* Hydemann because all the land belongs to him. Everywhere. Miles and miles of land. A few people, they mine little claims by hand – make stuff for the tourists – but there’s only one place and one mine in New Mexico where you can find this color of turquoise. It’s up there in the hills.” She pointed out the dusty window toward a bluish purple rise on the horizon.

“But this was just lying there!” he protested. Angel’s attention fastened on the most important thing Celsa had said – *worth a lot of money*.

“Doesn’t matter. *Señor* Hydemann owns it,” Celsa stated. “And he makes sure nobody gets it. The ranch hands ride around in trucks just looking for trespassers.” She leaned forward and tapped the girl sitting in front of them on the head. “Tania, tell Angel about what your brothers

did yesterday.”

Tania turned around so that her deep brown eyes and bushy hair rose above the back of the seat. “They got two students from the university,” Tania said. “Carlos and Ritchie chased them with the jeep, and then they tied them up and took them back to the house. Even though they were crying and all, *Señor* Hydemann called the state patrol. *Mi mamá* said he’ll probably make them go to jail.”

“Can he do that?” Angel wondered uneasily what the rancher would do if he discovered the foster kid from the motel had already started roaming the desert.

“He does it,” Celsa replied. “You see those signs?” She gestured out the bus window. Every few yards, weathered tires hung from fence posts with KEEP OUT painted on them in big white letters. “See! That’s all he had to do, and the law is on his side. All the men, even my own brothers, think it’s a great sport – hunting trespassers.” Celsa poked his arm. “Nobody goes anywhere on *señor* Hydemann’s land unless he says they can – not even us and we’ve lived there for ages. King Hydemann’s crazy – a crazy tyrant. What does he think hikers could hurt in the desert? Phooey.” She made a noise like she was spitting on the school bus floor.

Angel laughed. She turned her fierce eyes on him. “It’s no joke! Some of his men are real bullies, Angel. They’d push you around before they even took you to *señor* Hydemann.”

Embarrassed by his reactions, by the warmth of Celsa’s shoulder near his, Angel only nodded, but when the bus rumbled down a side road he caught sight of a yellow *Yield* sign shot full of holes. Maybe Celsa wasn’t just trying to scare him.

But did he really care? The blue stone was worth money and more stones would be worth more money. If he found enough, he could help his mom. Leaning his forehead against the dusty window, Angel stared out at the desert, rolling the stone around and around in his hand. Off in the distance, the hills lay rumpled like an old quilt, tufted and drab. There was turquoise hidden in those folds of rock, and to get it he would risk Gary’s anger and Hydemann’s bullies.

Turquoise would save his mother and set him free. And that was all that mattered.

# THREE

After his first conversation with Celsa, Angel thought constantly about turquoise. Treese had lived in the desert all her life, so a few days later, while they washed up the supper dishes, he asked her about the gemstones.

She shrugged. “Most of the old mines are up in the foothills... here, watch you don’t chip my Tweetie Bird mug...the mines all belong to John Hydemann, of course.” She reached for the pots and dunked them in the dishwater. “Everything around here, kid, belongs to Mr. Hydemann, except this motel. This bit of land has been in my family a long, long time.”

Angel stacked the cups in the cupboard. “But can’t people just find turquoise around?” he persisted.

“Oh, I don’t know. A few folks prospect in the back country away from the big ranch, but they don’t seem to find much. They say the old Indians, y’know them Anasazi that all just up and vanished...?”

Angel nodded. There’d been a unit at his last school about the ancient Pueblo Indians who had mysteriously disappeared nearly five hundred years ago.

“Well...I heard them Anasazi had turquoise mines so big and rich, there were whole secret caves of it. They mined turquoise for centuries – traded it to other tribes all up and down the countryside, even down into Mexico. But I guess those old mines are all used up or maybe just lost.”

“But I...um...heard kids talking at school – about how one of them found a turquoise nugget out in a ditch.” He glanced under his lashes at Treese.

“Yeah, I guess a person might find some – y’know, washed down by the floods in the arroyos.”

“The what?”

“Arroyos – they’re the dried up stream beds. Except after the rain in the mountains, they ain’t dried up. I half drowned in an arroyo when I was a kid. We get these storms out here – like the whole sky is broken open. Lots of crashing thunder, and the rain comes down like someone’s emptying barrels out of the sky. That water rolls on down the mountains into the arroyos – floods so quick you can hardly get out of the way. Whoosh!” She snapped her towel at Angel. He grinned.

“And what about the turquoise?”

“The flooding’s so fierce it washes big rocks and everything down from the mountains. Sometimes, chunks of turquoise come too. I found a piece once – real pretty. I sold it to a dealer in Albuquerque to help pay for my wedding dress. That was a waste of money.” She shook her head.

And after the floods, the turquoise just lies there, Angel realized as he put the last of the dishes away – just lies there – waiting for someone to find it. And Angel would. He’d find more. A lot more. And too bad about King Hydemann.

After that, whenever he could, Angel slipped away from the motel to hunt for turquoise. A sense of purpose fizzed through him, letting him ignore Gary’s bad humor and the casual taunts of the kids at school. Celsa seemed to have decided they were going to be friends, and stopped any teasing that might have gone too far. Angel was grateful because it gave him the peace of mind to begin a plan.

The first week he’d found two more stones lying in the dust like someone had dropped them there just for him. Then a series of early storms broke over the mountains and the arroyos roared with muddy water. It was so bad that in the next town, water streamed though the main street and flooded the businesses. The following day, the newspaper printed a photo of people paddling a canoe to the grocery store. School was cancelled for a week.

With the arroyos flooded, Angel searched the high ground. Nothing. Except when he was out there, the anger and resentment the years had stacked up in his soul began to chip and crack. He watched lizards and small animals go about their business, gloried in the high wheeling flight of the desert birds. At first he fought the new feelings, but the peace of the tumbled landscape and the achingly blue sky entranced him. Day after day, the fever to be in the desert was growing on him, calling him. When he couldn’t wander the hills, he read about the desert.

Celsa, seemed to know all about the land around them. She laughed at him, glancing back over her shoulder to see if he was watching while she walked away. She introduced him to the school library where he sought out information about geology, plants and animals of the area.

Gradually the water dried out, leaving even the arroyos parched and dusty despite the plants that had lunged into life with the rainfall. Then they dried out too. School ended for the summer, and Angel had nowhere to go and no one to see. Celsa helped at a tourist store in town, and he had made no other friends. He wrote two letters to his mom at the state hospital, but no answers came back.

So, he did the chores set for him by Treese and Gary, looking constantly for slivers of time to escape into the desert. His dreams at night sharpened into visions of himself free in the desert, running and hunting like one of its creatures, finding huge stones and boulders of sky blue turquoise. Throwing them against the hospital walls until they crumbled and his mother escaped.

Made wary by Celsa's stories, Angel avoided the arroyos that snaked toward Hydemann's ranch house. But weeks had passed and he hadn't found any more turquoise near the motel. Desperate, one Saturday morning, Angel had decided to search all the way down the biggest arroyo – the one that curved back toward the distant ranch buildings.

The dry streambed was steep-banked and uneven from crumbled soil and weathered rock. He had been slipping and sliding over loose stones for about an hour, when on the bank right above his head, he'd heard men's voices – ranch hands from the big house.

“Hey! You! Kid! What you doin' here!”

He'd stared up the bank at them – three men, weather-beaten and muscular. They were laughing but it was a harsh sound. The youngest one, a blonde, mustached bully, smacked his fist against his hand and called “Hey there, buddy. You're trespassing on private land. Come on up here, kid!”

Angel looked around desperately – the bank behind him was too steep. If he tried to escape that way, the men would be on him before he could get up the other side. Fear roared in his ears, pounding... *pounding...drums pounding in his ears...*

The men had started sliding down the bank toward him. “Hey you!



You're in big trouble! You're gonna have to pay for it, kid!"

*Pounding...drums pounding...*

Would they catch him? Tie him up? Beat him up?

Angel tried to dodge, but the men blocked him, front and back.

"Sorry, *niño*," the leader mocked, "but you gotta face the medicine!"

Breath coming in short sharp gasps, fists clenched to try and fight back, Angel tried not to imagine how much he was about to get hurt.

"Come on then! I ain't scared of you!" He hated how his voice wavered. Hated how weak he felt. All the frustration burned in his belly, burning and searing.... His rage at the hopelessness of his life roared up through him like a hot desert wind, blinding him. All around the breeze was growing stronger, bending down thin branches, raising choking dust. A storm of desert dust devils whirled down the arroyo, surrounding the ranch hands, driving clouds of sand and dirt into their eyes and mouths.

Shocked by his luck, Angel hesitated only a moment, then squeezing his eyes nearly shut against the dust, dove through the clouds and ran. While the ranch hands coughed and cursed, Angel scrambled up the bank and wove like a jack rabbit between juniper scrub and cholla cactus until the men were out of sight.

He had kept low and kept running until, heart nearly bursting, he had crawled into the hot shade of the shed. Knowing what Gary would do to him if the rancher complained, Angel had hidden there for over an hour. After that, he spent days in gut-clenched fear.

But nothing had happened – maybe the men didn't know who he was, or didn't report the incident, or maybe the rancher didn't bother. Angel didn't care why. For a week he stayed close to the motel. But the desert was calling him, seeping like dust into his skin and bones until he felt like someone new altogether. When he glanced in the mirror as he brushed his teeth or combed back his hair, his eyes seemed to have changed color, turning a clearer, more vibrant blue, but maybe that was just the desert light.

Unable to stay away from the rolling landscape, he became careful, so careful that no one ever saw him. Like the desert animals with their camouflaged colors, he learned to hold still, fade back – become invisible. In the month since school ended, he found three more nuggets. No matter how long it took, Angel had promised himself wouldn't give

up until he had enough gemstones to sell to the Albuquerque dealers for the money needed to buy better medical treatment for his mom.

Afraid of Gary somehow finding out what he was doing and preventing because of sheer meanness, Angel had even created this tiny hideout. Shifting a little, Angel leaned back against the rock slab and stared longingly at the distant blue mountains. Up there, John Hydemann's mines yielded silver, copper and the finest turquoise in the state. Out of reach.

Narrowing his eyes against the wavering heat, Angel decided that tomorrow he'd get up early, do his chores and head out once Gary went into town to hang out with his buddies.

Angel rewrapped the stones and pushed them far back into the crevice. Leaning against the boulder with his knees pulled up, he relaxed into utter stillness. His worried thoughts trickled away, letting awareness of the desert life rise up around him. A road runner rattled through the dry brush. A beetle trundled past his sneakers. A coyote trotted by not fifteen feet from where he sat.

Angel's eyes drifted shut. Unaware, his hand crept up and grasped the turquoise talisman. Over the little noises of scrabbling desert life, he heard the voice. Ancient. Commanding.

*"Come to us, Angel," it breathes.*

*"Yes, grandfather," Angel whispers.*

*He feels himself rise to his feet and run like the antelope across the desert, miles and miles. All around him he hears the voices of his brothers, but he can't see them. He runs and runs, beyond the arroyo, up into the hills, into a deep hidden canyon.*

*The sun sets and the moon shines silver across the honeycombed face of the cliff. The voice urges Angel up rough stone steps, onto the roof of the kiva. Cleansing smoke billows around the ladder that leads from the roof down into the sacred building. For a moment Angel hesitates, gazing down into the shadows, bemused by the wash of smell and sound. He coughs as he breathes in a puff of smoke from the central fire below.*

*"Come..."*

*He grasps the rounded poles and climbs down the ladder. Light flickers across the people who are waiting with whispers and low laughs for the ceremony to begin. Angel can see their shapes and movements, smell the pungency of close-packed bodies, hear excited giggles from*

children, see gleams of firelight on turquoise jewelry adorning the elders. But all the faces remain in shadow.

“Come,” the ancient voice commands.

“Yes, grandfather,” Angel whispers again. He takes his place among the shadowy people as masked dancers weave snake-like through the smoky air.

Angel’s eyes turn to the grandfather. His fine white shirt gleams with heavy turquoise jewelry. His white hair is twined with eagle feathers and blue beads. But the firelight does not reach his face, leaving it in shadow.

Then the movement of the dancers draws Angel’s eyes back to the celebration. First a man and woman whirl about, clutching and twisting. Then a dancer with a coyote mask circles them, arms beckoning. The first two dancers fall in behind him. Sun and moon dancers join the swirling, pounding rhythms. But the man and woman still follow Coyote who leads them away.

The snake dancers enter again and begin a long undulating dance around the kiva. Coyote darts in and out, looking sly and stealthy. Some of the children scream in excitement. Coyote pounces and draws off two snake dancers. The rest writhe in rage, stamping and shaking winged shoulders.

“Run, Coyote!” shrieks a child on Angel’s left. Angel turns to look at him but he has turned too and is again lost in shadow. All the people shout encouragement to Coyote, now dashing about the kiva with his two snake children. The dance becomes wild then, with more dancers and characters than Angel can follow. The drumming pounds into his heart, his breathing, his blood. Like those around him he leaps up to take part in the wild chase.

He grabs for Coyote’s tail. As his fingers brush the prickly fur, the world spins away...