

Whistler's Gold

Chapter 1

There are differences of opinion in the community about who, or what, lives in the old trading post. Some say it is a witch or skinwalker, an evildoer who preys on people at night. Others deny its existence, and scoff at those who believe. But there is one thing that everyone agrees on, and that is that the old trading post, with or without Hasteen Whistler, is a bad place. Knowing that a murder occurred within its weathered walls is reason enough to believe that *chin'di*, evil spirits, now reside within, and in the remote Navajo community of Tsaya, that alone should be sufficient to insure that the old structure will remain undisturbed to crumble and decay in peace.

It was Anderson Shorty's murder in 1934 that invited the *chin'di* into the trading post. Even then, the aging structure had served the community longer than most people could remember.

In those days, the trading post was the place where people came together. It was where they traded or pawned handcrafted rugs and jewelry for food, gas, and clothing. It was where they sold their wool in the spring. It was their bank, the place where they received their mail, and the place where they could gossip with neighbors while sucking down a warm strawberry or grape Nehi soda. But all of that changed when Anderson Shorty was murdered.

After the *chin'di* entered the trading post, the people wouldn't, and Tsaya's once bustling center of commerce and social activity had to be abandoned.

Today, forty years after the murder, it is still talked about. But the circumstances surrounding the event have become fuzzy with time, and most people preface the telling of the incident with caveats such as, "my father was told the story by old so-and-so before he died," or "my uncle in the Navajo way told my mother the story and she told me, and as best I can remember, here is what happened."

The story, that of a disappearing corpse and a never seen again killer still haunts the community. After all this time, and if for no other reason than to bring closure to the tragic event, the people would like to know why Anderson Shorty was murdered, and how did the killer, Caleb Harris escape, and the most disturbing question of all, what happened to Anderson Shorty's body?

Andrew Chischilly, who has been known as Old Man Chischilly for half his eighty-nine years, was the only eyewitness to the shooting and the only person still alive that was in the trading post that morning.

In every other way, the old man has aged badly, except for his memory of the incident. These days he coughs and wheezes and has difficulty remembering to put his pants on when he goes outside, but he has never altered his account of the killing. The story has become an integral part of his reason for being, and he never fails to work it into his speaking time at the local chapter house, or at any other occasion for that matter.

In the words of Old Man Chischilly, as he has told the story a hundred times to a thousand people:

“I was forty-nine years old when I saw with my own eyes the shooting of young Anderson. He was eighteen, maybe twenty. Enoch Harris hired him to dig a root cellar. He was still digging when the old man died. That’s when his nephew, Caleb, came down from Farmington to run the store.

“Caleb was a tall, spindly *bilagaana* (white person) with no meat on his bones. He had straggly blond hair and a beard that birds could nest in. He didn’t speak Navajo much good, so he used Anderson to wait on customers in the store when he wasn’t digging. That’s how it was when I got there that day.

“I asked Anderson where Caleb was. I wanted to buy back some of my pawn, especially my woman’s necklace that I pawned without her knowing.

“He said Caleb was bagging wool and would return soon.

“Anderson was busy, so I stood by the pawn room to wait for Caleb. A little later Garland Beyale, Thomas Tsinniginnie, and Bear Begay walked in. They went in the rug room to sit and tell lies.

“I was leaning against the pawn room door when Caleb walked in. He went right to where Anderson was standing. Right away they started arguing, but they weren’t loud. It was like when you argue with your woman and you don’t want the little ones to hear. That’s why the liars in the rug room didn’t come out. Nobody thought the argument amounted to much.

“But, from where I stood, I could see them getting hot. Suddenly, Anderson grabbed something from Caleb, and then Caleb grabbed it back. Anderson took something from his pocket and threw it at Caleb. It missed, but it hit me and fell to the floor, and it went on this way and that.

“Then, whatever it was they were grabbing from each other broke in half. That’s when Caleb hit Anderson straight in the face, hard. Anderson’s knees buckled, but he stood his ground. Anderson smacked Caleb back, spinning the skinny *bilagaana* around and hard into the counter. Caleb’s legs wobbled and

he doubled up. That's when he reached under the counter, grabbed a long-barrel pistol, and bam! One shot, and Anderson fell dead to the floor.

"Caleb ran past me and out the door. His eyes were big and his mouth was open. He was running scared with the pistol in his hand. Everything happened so fast that I was stuck in place and he was past my reach before I could think.

"Garland, Thomas, and Bear came running out of the rug room. We all went to where Anderson fell. The shot went straight to the heart and his blood was making bubbles on his shirt. Then Garland saw Caleb run past the pawn room window going toward the cliffs, so we chased after him.

"When we got outside and around the building, he was already at the cliffs. We thought he got crazy in the head with the killing because his pickup was still parked in front of the trading post, and there isn't anywhere to go between the trading post and the cliffs.

"When we saw him go up the switchbacks we ran up to the cliffs and stood behind a big boulder because he had a gun. Then we watched him walk across the ledge to *Nizhoni Toh*. That was a good thing because there's not any place for him to go from the cave, but back down like he went up.

"We saw him standing at the entrance and Bear yelled for him to throw down his gun and take his medicine like a man. He just stood there with his hands on his hips. He dared us to come and get him, but we are not stupid Navajos. He would pick us off like prairie dogs. Then, while he was standing there, his white shirt bright in the morning sun, he got disappeared.

"We never took our eyes off the cave but he didn't show again. Bear, who is good at eyeballing long distances, but too fat to catch anyone, climbed on the roof of the trading post to make sure he didn't sneak out of the cave and get away.

"Thomas ran to Caleb's truck to see if his rifle was inside. It was, so he brought it back. Thomas has a dead eye so he shot four times into the cave. Then we decided he would stay by the boulder with the rifle while me and Garland climbed to *Nizhoni Toh*. If Caleb came to the front of the cave, Thomas would shoot him before he shot us. That was our hope and our plan.

"I was the first to walk the ledge. When I got to the last handhold, I stretched and peeked inside the cave, but Caleb wasn't there. I called for Thomas and Garland to come and all three of us went in the cave, but there was no Caleb, so we climbed down and walked back to where Bear was sitting on the roof. He had been lookout this way and that way, but he never saw Caleb neither, so we decided to go in the trading post and cover up Anderson's body.

“When we got inside, Anderson’s body was gone. There was blood on the floor where he got shot, but his corpse was gone. That’s not a good thing for us to see, so we went back outside.

“All four of us went to Caleb’s pickup and pushed it backwards in the ditch. Then we flattened the tires. Garland sucked the gas out and Bear busted the lights. We got some water and poured it in the ditch next to the tires to slick the dirt. We knew if Caleb came back at night, he sure wasn’t going to go anywhere in that pickup.

“The next day the police searched the cave and the trading post, but they never found no trace of Anderson’s body, and to this day, Caleb has never been seen again. I can assure all of you that none of us felt good about what happened, so we heated some rocks and took a sweat bath. That’s how it was the day Anderson Shorty was killed.”

No one knows what Caleb and Anderson argued about, but there are a number of theories about the killer. One theory suggests that Caleb murdered Enoch, his uncle, in order to gain control of the store, and then murdered Anderson because he must have discovered the truth. It was no secret that the Harris Trading Post, well managed and debt free, had provided Enoch with a comfortable living. The problem with this theory is that it doesn’t explain how Caleb escaped or what happened to Anderson.

The most acceptable theory holds that Caleb wasn’t a white man at all, but a witch disguised as a white man who killed Anderson for power so he could turn invisible. Those who support this theory, point to three important factors.

First, there’s the eyewitness account of Old Man Chischilly. All four men watched Caleb run to *Nizhoni Toh* where he disappeared before their eyes, and only a witch or skinwalker could do that. The second point is that Anderson was a twin, and it’s well known that witches seek out twins, and will murder one or both for hair and body parts to strengthen their medicine. Just about everyone agrees on that!

In addition, the witch theory provides the only logical answer to the disappearance of Anderson’s body. Once Caleb made himself invisible, he could easily have backtracked across the cliff, down the switchbacks, and past the pursuers without their knowledge, thumbing his nose as he walked to the trading post and carried Anderson’s body away. The pursuers gave Caleb plenty of time as they climbed to *Nizhoni Toh* and searched the empty cave.

Old Man Chischilly also tells that in 1959, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the slaying, he returned to the trading post to retrace the steps that he and the others had taken after the shooting. As he walked past the trading post he

decided to look in one of the windows. According to Chischilly, when his eyes focused to the darkness, he saw the horrible face and dirty, straggly hair of Hasteen Whistler who was looking at him.

The encounter scared the old man so bad that he had to go home and change his clothes. Chischilly says that all interest in retracing his steps “disappeared as quickly as did Caleb Harris twenty-five years earlier,” and he never again returned to the old trading post.

If Old Man Chischilly, the long-winded patriarch of Tsaya, says he saw Hasteen Whistler inside the old trading post, then it must be true. No one has ever caught the old man in a lie.

Chapter 2

Forty years after the murder of Anderson Shorty, a thirteen-year-old girl sits atop a hard alkali perch overlooking the high desert valley where she herds sheep. Directly across the valley she can see the remnants of an old trading post. The girl’s name is Rena. It is June 1974.

Rena, wearing blue jeans and a denim jacket, is slender and well-coordinated. Her lips and nose are exquisitely formed. Her eyes, set within prominent cheekbones, are dark and piercing. They are a genetic gift from her father. Her long, coal-black hair covers her ears and hides the small turquoise earrings she is wearing. Her complexion is smooth and the not quite *diné* (*dinéh*, Navajo), but darker than *bilagaana* tone of her skin betrays a mixed heritage.

A chilly breeze blows across the perch. Rena shivers and pulls her jacket tight across her chest and turns her back to the breeze. Over the past several summers she has come to know Tsaya well. *Tsaya* (ts’ah), she learned from her grandmother, is the Navajo word for sagebrush.

The valley that lies before her, from the hard-chalky hills where she sits to the red sandstone cliffs to the west, is aptly named. Except for the stem of an old volcano that rises sharply from the center of the valley floor, and a few exposed lava flows and basalt outcroppings scattered about, there is nothing but sagebrush for miles in every direction. The only other landmarks of note are the Chaco Wash and the weather-beaten remains of the old Harris Trading Post where Hasteen Whistler is supposed to live.