

TONY HILLERMAN

Bestselling author of
SACRED CLOWNS and FINDING MOON



THE BLESSING WAY

"A THRILLER ... HIGHLY RECOMMENDED."
—THE NEW YORKER

**TONY
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THE BLESSING
WAY**

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LUIS HORSEMAN LEANED the flat stone very carefully against the piñon twig, adjusted its balance exactly and then cautiously withdrew his hand. The twig bent, but held. Horseman rocked back on his heels and surveyed the deadfall. He should have put a little more blood on the twig, he thought, but it might be enough. He had placed this one just right, with the twig at the edge of the kangaroo rat's trail. The least nibble and the stone would fall. He reached into his shirt front, pulled out a leather pouch, extracted an odd-shaped lump of turquoise, and placed it on the ground in front of him. Then he started to sing:

*"The Sky it talks about it.
The Talking God One he tells about it.
The Darkness to Be One knows about it.
The Talking God is with me.
With the Talking God I kill the male game."*

There was another part of the song, but Horseman couldn't remember it. He sat very

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still, thinking. Something about the Black God, but he couldn't think how it went. The Black God didn't have anything to do with game, but his uncle had said you have to put it in about him to make the chant come out right. He stared at the turquoise bear. It said nothing. He glanced at his watch. It was almost six. By the time he got back to the rimrock it would be late enough to make a little fire, dark enough to hide the smoke. Now he must finish this.

*“The dark horn of the bica,
No matter who would do evil to me,
The evil shall not harm me.
The dark horn is a shield of beaten buck-
skin.”*

Horseman chanted in a barely audible voice, just loud enough to be heard in the minds of the animals.

*“That evil which the Ye-i turned toward me
cannot reach me through the dark horn,
through the shield the bica carries.
It brings me harmony with the male game.
It makes the male game hear my heartbeat.
From four directions they trot toward me.
They step and turn their sides toward me.*

*“So my arrow misses bone when I shoot.
The death of male game comes toward me.
The blood of male game will wash my body.
The male game will obey my thoughts.”*

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He replaced the turquoise bear in the medicine pouch and rose stiffly to his feet. He was pretty sure that wasn't the right song. It was for deer, he thought. To make the deer come out where you could shoot them. But maybe the kangaroo rats would hear it, too. He looked carefully across the plateau, searching the foreground first, then the mid-distance, finally the great green slopes of the Lukachukai Mountains, which rose to the east. Then he moved away from the shelter of the stunted juniper and walked rapidly northwestward, moving silently and keeping to the bottom of the shallow arroyos when he could. He walked gracefully and silently. Suddenly he stopped. The corner of his eye had caught motion on the floor of the Kam Bimghi Valley. Far below him and a dozen miles to the west, a puff of dust was suddenly visible against a formation of weathered red rocks. It might be a dust devil, kicked up by one of the Hard Flint Boys playing their tricks on the Wind Children. But it was windless now. The stillness of late afternoon had settled over the eroded waste below him.

Must have been a truck, Horseman thought, and the feeling of dread returned. He moved cautiously out of the wash behind a screen of piñons and stood motionless, examining the landscape below him. Far to the west, Bearer of the Sun had moved down the sky and was outlining in brilliant white the form of a thunderhead over Hoskininie Mesa. The plateau where

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Horseman stood was in its shadow but the slanting sunlight still lit the expanse of the Kam Bimghi. There was no dust by the red rocks now, and Horseman wondered if his eyes had tricked him. Then he saw it again. A puff of dust moving slowly across the valley floor. A truck, Horseman thought, or a car. It would be on that track that came across the slick rocks and branched out toward Horse Fell and Many Ruins Canyon, and now to Tall Poles Butte where the radar station was. It must be a truck, or a jeep. That track wasn't much even in good weather. Horseman watched intently. In a minute he could tell. And if it turned toward Many Ruins Canyon, he would move east across the plateau and up into the Lukachukais. And that would mean being hungry.

The dust disappeared as the vehicle dropped into one of the mazes of arroyos which cut the valley into a crazy quilt of erosion. Then he saw it again and promptly lost it where the track wound to the west of Natani Tso, the great flat-topped lava butte which dominated the north end of the valley. Almost five minutes passed before he saw the dust again.

"Ho," Horseman said, and relaxed. The truck had turned toward Tall Poles. It would be the Army people who watched the radar place. He moved away from the tree, trotting now. He was hungry and there was a porcupine to singe, clean, and roast before he would eat.

Luis Horseman had chosen this camp with care. Here the plateau was cut by one of the hun-

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dred nameless canyons which drained into the depth of Many Ruins Canyon. Along the rim, the plateau's granite cap, its sandstone support eroded away, had fractured under its own weight. Some of these great blocks of stone had crashed into the canyon bottom, leaving behind room-sized gaps in the rim rock. Others had merely tilted and slid. Behind one of these, Horseman knelt over his fire. It was a small fire, built in the extreme corner of the natural enclosure. With nothing overhead to reflect its light, it would have been visible only to one standing on the parapet, looking down. Now its flickering light gave the face of Luis Horseman a reddish cast. It was a young face, thin and sensitive, with large black eyes and a sullen mouth. The forehead was high, partly hidden by a red cloth band knotted at the back, and the nose was curved and thin. Hawklike. He sat crosslegged on the hump of sand drifted into the enclosure from the plateau floor above. The only sound was the hissing of grease cooking from the strip of porcupine flesh he held over the flame. The animal had been a yearling, and small, and he ate about two-thirds of it. He sprinkled sand on the fire and put the remainder of the meat on the embers to be eaten in the morning. Then he lay back in the darkness. The moon would rise sometime after midnight, but now there were only the stars overhead. For the first time in three days, Luis Horseman felt entirely safe. As he relaxed, he felt an aching weariness. He would sleep in a little while, but first he had to think.