

JAMES BUCHANAN

TWICE THE
Cowboy

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A novella of homoerotic romance by

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Chapter One

Mariachi music blared from the speakers. The hard brass boomed off metal rafters. It echoed through an arena reeking of days' worth of dust and animals and adrenalin. Tall and thin, with a sharp face, Manuel Santos Fuentes rode into the ring. Midday event goers, hardly enough to fill half the stands, moved the air with sweat-stained programs. Air-conditioning was a joke in the cavernous building. Large, dark eyes were shaded by a broad-brimmed, felt sombrero stitched in silver thread. Thighs sheathed in tight chamois pants gripped the sides of his saddle. Broad, low backed, with a pommel spread the size of a man's hand, it was not the type of saddle Jess was used to seeing. Then again, Manuel was not the type of cowboy Jess was used to seeing.

Last night, Jess had sat at the end of the bar in a dingy little dive near his hotel. He, and just about everyone else, was in town for the El Paso International Livestock Show and Rodeo. It was one of the oldest events on the circuit and drew competitors from both sides of the border. This would be its last year at the old Coliseum. Next year the sponsors were moving it to a new venue. Jess had competed four years running. As he mused over change, a man leaned in, grabbing the bartender's sleeve. "*Negra Modelo, por favor.*"

Negra Modelo, Jess didn't drink it often. The dark beer was malty, almost sweet like chocolate. Not many people outside Mexico drank it. It was always interesting to see who would order such a beer. Jess slid his gaze to focus on a man with café-colored skin and jet black hair. *Damn, that was a fine sight.* In a different kind of bar the cowboy wouldn't have held back his appreciation. Still, because he was the neighborly sort, Jess turned his bottle towards the man and laughed, "You have good taste." The gold label flashed in the dim light, the words *Negra Modelo* barely visible.

He was rewarded with a smile that was all bright, white teeth. "Well *amigo*, so do you." The newcomer slid in between Jess' stool and the wall. Thin and rangy in dark jeans and a plain red western shirt, he could have been any cowboy from anywhere. Jess was dressed almost the same, except his jeans were faded and his shirt green.

Bracing himself on the lip with his elbow, the man introduced himself. "Manuel Santos Fuentes. You are here for the rodeo?" His English was flavored by the rich vowels and rolled *r*'s of Mexico. When his beer came he took a swig. Then his tongue rode the edge of his upper lip, like he was savoring the flavor.

Jess stared. The man was about four inches closer to him than any American would have gotten. Jess tried not to read anything into how close he stood or how Manuel's hip touched his knee. It was a cultural thing, the personal space issue. But still, he'd almost swear by how the *charro* watched Jess before licking his lip again that he was flirting. God, Manuel had wonderful lips. He wondered what it would be like to kiss them.

Swallowing to hide his thoughts, Jess managed to choke out, "Yep, Jess Graff." He held out his palm and found it wrapped in a soft, strong grip. "I ride broncs...rough stock mostly."

"Broncos, eh, so do I." Manuel tipped the beer back, watching the contents swirl through the dark glass. "I also compete in *el floreo de reata*." He smiled again. Then he lifted the bottle for another swig. Just before the neck touched his mouth, Manuel's tongue reached out and traced the opening. *Oh, hell yes!* Manuel was flirting with him. Real careful, but he was flirting.

Jess had no idea what the *reata* was; something about rats or rope. What he did know was Manuel was talking about the *Charreada*, the Mexican rodeo. That was tomorrow, Thursday. Most of the beginning of the week was livestock and horse shows. The really popular events, like

bull riding, started Friday and went on all weekend. There were usually concerts and dances those evenings as well.

"Well, you know," Jess pushed his hat back over his brown-blond curls, "real cowboys ride bulls."

A shout from near the pool table jerked Manuel's attention. A group of men called him over. "My teammates," He waved them off for a moment and turned back to Jess. In a low, sensual purr, "*Un charro es un vaquero dos veces*." Manuel saw that Jess didn't understand. He leaned in and whispered, "A Mexican cowboy is twice the cowboy."

When Jess snorted his disbelief, Manuel slapped his back, "You come watch me tomorrow. I will show you." With a parting smile, he headed to play pool.

Jess watched him just about all evening.

Now under a tin roof baked by the border sun, Jess watched some more. What a gorgeous thing there was to watch. His program explained that competitors were required to wear traditional *vaquero* clothing. For Manuel that was all caramel leather...very tight caramel leather. Silver buttons ran down the seams of his trousers, ending just above the soles of his sharp toed boots. A thick, leather belt held an unloaded, pearl-handled pistol. His muscles flexed under the short-waisted, leather jacket. More silver flashed along the elbow to wrist slit on the bolero's arms. A cinnamon shirt, with a cream silk scarf tied loosely under the collar, set off his skin and smile.

The buckskin horse high-stepped to the center of the ring. It was a dance more than a walk. Jet mane and tail had been brushed to the texture of raw silk. The gelding's hooves shone like polished ebony. Ramrod straight in the saddle, Manuel controlled his mount with his knees; reins dangled unnoticed in his left hand. His right held the coils of a rat-tail rope. The beast tossed its head, knowing how beautiful they were together. Mexican Rodeo counted style above all else.

Manuel tossed his lariat into the air. It spun, ribbon like, over his head. Flicks of his wrist and the rope undulated around his body. Flowing like water, the lasso was the only thing that moved. Even his horse was a statue. Rawhide arabesques, corollas and calyxes danced about him to the rhythm of the mariachis. Circles of rope imprisoned man and mount within waves. Falling, rising, he painted pictures with the lariat; first in the sky, then to either side and about his mount's hooves.

And then the horse began to dance.

In and out of the rope it pranced. Weaving side to side, spinning back and around, they moved in perfect tempo to the music. Man and mount utterly melded in movement. Nothing wasted. Complete joining of rhythm and soul. With a flourish Manuel swept his wide sombrero off and down. At the shift of his weight the buckskin knelt to one knee. After his intricate finish, the *charro* returned his lasso to his saddle. The crowd roared as they rose and cantered back. Another nine competitors followed, weaving more flowers with thin hard ropes.

Jess didn't see any of them.

Other events followed. Solo and team roping trials ate up the day. The point seemed to be to not look at the target. Competitors anticipated where the animal would move and shot for that. And they did it with flair; leaping in and out of their ropes before taking down the animal. As good as Manuel was, Jess wondered why he didn't compete.

The stands filled as they progressed into bulldogging. A small bull bolted out of an open chute with a *charro* in hot pursuit. The man leaned an impossible distance out of his saddle. Grabbing the bull's tail, he pulled it around his own thigh, tripping the animal. It flipped onto its back, landing between two lined lines. All of it was interesting. None of it was as interesting as thoughts of getting Manuel out of those tight pants.

Jess was down in the concession area when they announced *El Paso de la Muerte*, the pass of death. From the program he knew this was bronco busting; Manuel's event. He tore back up into the stands in time to see a guy carried out. Mexican or American, rodeo was a hazardous sport.

The horse the man had been riding was turned out and another driven into the ring. She was a thick-necked, dun mustang. There was a rope across her chest but no rig or bucking strap. *Charreadas* used wild horses, and the point was to actually break them. This was no timed event.

Three *charros* were whistling and calling, riding back and forth across the arena. Manuel tore out of the chute astride an unsaddled bay. The mare bolted. When he came alongside the mustang, Manuel drew up his knees. They paced each other, the *charros* in hot pursuit.

Manuel sprang.

Landing hard on her back, Manuel latched both hands on the rope. Her legs locked. Skidding to a stop, for heartbeats she stood and shivered. Then she reared. Braying, the mare slammed back to the ground. Manuel held tight.

Shit, Jess squirmed, *if those legs could hang on a horse like that...*

She bucked and twisted in the air. The three mounted *charros* chased them. Writhing, twisting, spinning, the mare fought Manuel. Jess' heart rose for the fight. The men drove her fury with screams. They whipped her with lariats. She kicked at them. She lunged under Manuel. She slammed him sideways into the wall.

Jess sucked in his breath with the pain he knew Manuel felt. *Come on, come on!* He willed Manuel to hang tight. Wild and desperate the mare bounded across the arena. Spinning, wheeling, she tried to toss her rider. Manuel clung to her back. On and on and on it went. Man and beast locked in battle.

Finally the mare was done. She stood, head dropped between splayed front legs. Manuel jumped from her back and limped out of the ring. Jess was already heading out and around to the competitors' staging area. After a few strange looks and misunderstood directions, Jess located Manuel. Maybe the *charro* could help him with his Spanish...something useful like *I'm gonna ride you hard and put you away wet*.

Jess found Manuel surrounded by four men. All were dressed in variations of the traditional costume. None looked as good as Manuel. Those leather pants were just sinful on him. Leaning against a horse-trailer, his face was tight, holding in the pain. He argued in Spanish with another, older *charro*. When he saw Jess a smile brightened his eyes.

With a wave he called the cowboy to him. "*Hola, Jess. ¿Le gusta la Charreada?*"

"That was some ride." Jess reached out and took Manuel's hand, patting his shoulder with the other. "You okay there?"

Rubbing his hip and thigh, Manuel nodded. "*Sí. Tío. Mí amigo*, Jess." A wave of his fingers made the introduction. "He wants to leave. Go back to the hotel so I can put ice on my leg."

Jess had to agree with the man. "So what's the problem with that?" He hoped it wasn't a case of overblown machismo. It would spoil the respect Jess already had for Manuel. Quiet, unassuming types were his style. Jess never could stomach the braggarts he often encountered on the circuit.

"He is in the next event."

"Oh." Logical, if his uncle left now his team would forfeit points. *Charreda* placed heavy emphasis on the team. An individual could win an event, yet his team might still lose the big prize. "You staying near that bar?" When Manuel nodded, Jess smiled. "Well hell, I can drive you back. I'm staying around there, too." After a long discussion in Spanish, where everyone seemed to have a say except Jess, the plan was deemed acceptable.

Two of his teammates helped him hobble to Jess' old Jeep Comanche pickup truck. Manuel sat stiff on the bench seat. Avoiding potholes and bumps as much as humanly possible, Jess maneuvered out of the parking lot and into the East Side. The *caballeros* were rooming at one of those chains where all the rooms opened onto the parking lot. Jess was staying at a mom-and-pop place a stone's throw down the road. He pulled in to a vacant spot near the door Manuel indicated.

"*¡Chingame!*" Manuel did a once over of his nonexistent pockets. Jess' gaze tracked Manuel's hands as they ran down his chest and thighs. Damn, he wished he was the one touching that leather clad body. "*Tío* has the key."

Something in the way he said it tipped off Jess. "Okay then." It wasn't a wholly unplanned slip. They could get a key from the manager, but, "Why don't you leave a note on the door for Tio?" He twisted, staring hard at the *vaquero*. Manuel was staring hard back. "I'm at a place just down the street. We can ice up your leg there as good as anywhere."

Black eyes smoldered. They burned their way through the cowboy's nerves. "This is okay with you?" That sensual voice was hesitant. It wasn't unsure, just cautious.

Instead of answering, Jess grabbed an envelope off the floor. Leaning over Manuel's lap, he sprang the glove box and dug for a pen. "Write the note!" God, he hoped he didn't sound as desperate as he felt.

Asking for the name of the motel but not the room number, Manuel scribbled a hurried explanation. Jess jumped from the cab and crammed the paper in the jamb. The driver's door wasn't even shut before he'd thrown the truck in reverse.

Tires squealed as Jess jammed the brakes in front of his own room. Jess clambered out of his truck and hightailed it to the passenger side. The *vaquero* was already sliding out the door.

Jess offered up a shoulder. "Let me help you there." Pathetic, but he'd use any excuse to touch Manuel. "That hip's not too bad is it?" Another smile, this time amused, flashed on that beautiful mouth in response.

"No." Manuel's arm slid across Jess' shoulder. Chills slid along behind the touch. The heady cologne of dust and horses and cowboy surrounded them. When his own arm wrapped around that lean waist and Manuel leaned against him, a wild burning flared in his hips. It took every ounce of will Jess had to keep from throwing Manuel over his shoulder and running for the door.

"*El Doctor* looked at it. He says it is just," he sought for the words with his free hand. They weren't there. Manuel gave up and finished the thought in his native tongue, "*una mala contusión. Un poco hielo, relaja y seré fino.*"

Jess assumed that *contusion* was the same word in both languages. If so, he knew how to handle those. It seemed forever before they were inside. Manuel dropped on the edge of the bed and grimaced. Damn, he really did need to get ice on that bruise. Grabbing the bucket of the bathroom counter, "Well, why don't you, ah, get those pants off?" Jess stepped back into the main room. "Lay back. Get it up," *shit, that sounded bad*, "elevate your leg, you know."

Languid, easy, Manuel shrugged out of his jacket. He moved like slow-running water. When he caught Jess staring again he laughed. "Ice," Jess reminded himself, "I'll be right back."

Manuel bent over and began struggling with his boots. Head down between his knees, "I will be here." Whatever wasn't already throbbing on Jess' body started.

Ice crashed into the bucket. Jess used the time it took to fill the container to get his hormones back under control. He knew what he wanted. He was pretty damn certain Manuel wanted it, too. But if the *charro's* leg was real bad, they both might have to just settle for something a little more low key. He needed to take it slow. He so did not want to go slow.

Jess opened the door to find Manuel half-naked and stretched out on his bed. *Good God*, Manuel looked gorgeous in nothing but his shorts and open shirt. A choker of white and red beads rested just below the hollow of his throat. Warm, smooth skin stretched taught over a ranch hand's frame. A thin line of black curls crawled up towards his navel. Two pillows propped Manuel's hip off the mattress. The position made him spread his legs and pushed everything up front and center. Jess was going to bust out of his jeans if Manuel so much as smiled.

As he walked around the bed Jess caught sight of Manuel's hip. Livid splotches of black, purple, and red already bloomed across his skin. The bruise started a few inches above the waistband of his briefs and ended half way down Manuel's thigh. "Whoa," Jess stepped into the bath and yanked a towel off the rack, "you sure got yourself one hell of a bruise." As he knelt by the bed, Jess dumped the ice in the towel and set the pack against Manuel's leg. When he looked up the *vaquero's* gaze was crawling across his body.

Jess swallowed. *Twenty minutes, it needs to ice up for a good twenty minutes.* Jess wasn't sure he could wait twenty minutes. He focused on the bed just above Manuel's shoulder. It was

the only place not driving him nuts. "So, you think you did okay?" His voice was strained with the effort of distracting himself. "I've never seen anyone handle a rope quite like that. And your horse, impressive; you train him? What's his name?"

"Sí, I trained him." Manuel licked his lips before continuing, "Mango, his name is Mango."

Startled, Jess' gaze jumped to stare at Manuel. He stammered, "Like the fruit?" *That horse needed a name like Aztec or Montezuma, something impressive and beautiful.*

A wicked smile lit up the *vaquero's* face. "Like what you call a very sexy man." Manuel's hand traced the line between his dark chest and belly. "Like, *mi amigo Jess es un mango.*"

"Shee-it," Jess hissed. There was no way in hell he was going to wait twenty minutes. He reached out, following the path of Manuel's fingers with his own. The *vaquero's* skin burned. Jess' skin burned. Water soaking into the cotton briefs turned them almost transparent. What had been just an intriguing bulge transformed into the blurred outline of a gorgeous, uncut cock. One that was getting harder with every pass of their hands across that flat, brown stomach.

Long fingers pushed the hair off Jess' face. "*Tienes ojos muy bonitos.*" The touch drifting along his jaw set Jess trembling. Propping himself up on his elbows, Manuel whispered, "*Besame, Jessé.*" His voice was thick with want. The way Manuel drew out his name, put that little lilt on the end, sent shivers down Jess' spine. "*¡Te quiero!*" Jess didn't have to know what the words meant to understand them.

He crawled up beside his half-naked *vaquero* and leaned in. Manuel's lips were as wonderful to kiss as he'd imagined. Soft but strong, they tasted like the earth after a rain. Jess shivered. This was the kind of kiss he loved. Hard, passionate, driven by need, but just a kiss; he hated it when guys went straight for the tongue down the throat. His hand snaked back behind Manuel's neck, pulling him in deeper. Manuel's weight fell onto his arm as the *vaquero* slipped his palm into Jess' jeans. With his free hand, Jess crushed Manuel's fingers between denim and his rock-hard cock. "God fucking damn," Jess moaned as he ground himself into a grip honed from hanging on broncos. Manuel could crush him with that grasp.

Manuel's groan echoed his own, "*¡Aye, Jessé!*" The *charro* opened his mouth. Teasing Jess' tongue with hesitant contact, he drew him inside.

If his mouth is this hot, what is his body like?

Pulling Jess with him, Manuel relaxed back onto the mattress. He toyed with Jess. Squeeze, release, squeeze, release; it was all Jess could do to keep from losing it.

Thrusting against Manuel's palm, Jess broke the kiss and dropped his head on the *vaquero's* chest. It had been ages since he'd been this hot for anyone. His hips were bucking like mad. From just this he was going to cum. Jess could feel it building in his hips. Withdrawing his hand from beneath Manuel's neck, he searched for the hard cock he knew was there waiting and wanting.

"No, *papi*," Manuel seized his wrist, "come for me. You need to last long to give me a good ride 'cause I don't do no eight second shit."

That did it. "Godfuckingdamn!" Legs and back trembling, Jess exploded inside his jeans.

Rich laughter bubbled up and caressed Jess. Aftershocks rushed up his spine as that wonderful grip released him and withdrew. Fingers dripping with cum, Manuel's touch danced across Jess' lips. Jess' tongue snaked out to catch his own flavor. Musky and warm and flavored with Manuel, God it was so fucking sexy tasting himself this way. Shaky, he pushed himself so that he was leaning over Manuel. "I wanna taste you." His voice was as unsteady as the rest of him.

"*¡Oh, sí!*" Manuel's eyes were bright as he toyed with the tight, short ringlets now damp with sweat. "I would like that very much, Jessé."

A wicked thought danced through Jess' brain. He dug into the towel, fingers going numb with the cold. One large cube came free and Jess popped it into his mouth. Manuel watched, bemused, as Jess crunched the ice between his teeth. Then Jess bent down, kissing the thin fabric imprisoning Manuel's cock. His dick surged under his Jess' lips. He ran his tongue along the outline. Manuel tasted wonderful, even through cotton.

"Aye," The *vaquero* hissed, "Your tongue is cold."

Jess just laughed and kept licking. Hooking the waistband with his fingers, Jess pulled the fabric down and away. Manuel's cock sprang up, demanding attention. Jess sat back, drawing the shorts off Manuel's legs. The sight of Manuel dressed in nothing but that red shirt, laying open, exposing his chest, and that flat dark stomach sent Jess' pulse surging back between his legs. *Not time yet*, he chided himself.

Still, maybe it was time to make things a little more even. He tugged his T-shirt out of his pants, drew it over his head and tossed it on the floor. Somehow he managed to toe out of his boots at the same time. As Jess started on his jeans and shorts, Manuel hissed again, this time in appreciation. "*¡Amino!*" Manuel's smile smoked.

With the way Manuel ravished his body with that dark stare, he obviously liked what he saw. Jess wasn't sure he was worth that kind of look...he was built pretty square and spare. He certainly wasn't one of those V-shaped gym rats most guys seemed to go for. Then again, he didn't go for that type, either. Kicking his jeans to the floor, he picked up another ice cube and popped it between his teeth.

"Ready, baby?"

"For what?"

"This." Jess bent down and pulled Manuel into his mouth. The cube slid between his tongue and Manuel's dick.

A long drawn out, "Aye," rewarded him. The ice numbed his tongue, robbed him of some of the *vaquero's* flavor, but it was worth it to watch Manuel squirm. Teasing, he swirled the ice around Manuel's cock. He sucked down long and hard. Pulling back, he held the ice in his teeth and ran it across the slit of Manuel's cock before sucking the cube back in with a pop. His frozen tongue traced down the hard length of the *vaquero's* dick. The ice melted to nothing in his mouth as Jess sucked on Manuel's balls.

Needful and panting, Manuel breathed, "*¿Chaqueta?*"

Jess came up coughing, "Whoa, wait, what?" He swore Manuel just asked him for a jacket.

Manuel looked like he was going to slap Jess. "Condom!"

It took a moment for the demand to penetrate his lust-fogged mind. *Damn straight, condom!* Ice scattered across the carpet as Jess lurched from the mattress. Manuel laughed while Jess dug through his kit. Momentary panic set in before he discovered a pack buried beneath the toothpaste. The small tube of Glide was almost empty, but at least he had some. Glancing in the mirror, he saw the *charro* kneeling on the bed staring at him. Dark, damp hair fell across burning eyes as he stroked himself. When he saw that Jess watched, his tongue ran across his upper lip.

Jess spun, making it back to the bed and Manuel in less than two steps. Burying his hands up under the red shirt, he drove his mouth onto Manuel's. Those lips were just as wonderful the second time around. Somehow Jess knew he'd never get tired of them.

Manuel grabbed Jess' arms and damn near threw him onto the bed. As Jess stared up at him the *vaquero* plucked the condom from his fingers. Jess was already squeezing out lube. He slid his fingers between Manuel's legs, brushing his balls, searching. When Jess found that tight hole he slithered one inside. Manuel hissed, rocking his hips. Jess matched it with another digit. Manuel ground himself onto Jess' hand.

"Aye, *papi*." Forcing Jess back and down, he purred, "Time to ride." Manuel looked like he was ready to eat him alive. The *vaquero* threw his leg over Jess' hips. Then he ripped open the condom pack. Slowly Manuel rolled it down, sheathing Jess' cock. What was left in the tube slicked him down.

Kneeling, arching backward, Manuel latched one hand on Jess' thigh. The other took firm control of his cock. Manuel's body arched, legs locked on either side of Jess' hips. Slowly he slid onto Jess' shaft. Jess watched Manuel impale himself, watched as he disappeared within that warm, brown body. Overwhelming sensations of heat and pressure rampaged through him.

Manuel's own throbbing cock pulsed between his spread legs. He stared at Jess through half-lidded eyes. His tongue traced the bottom of his teeth. Red fabric slipped off his shoulders. A little trail of sweat ran from between the beads and down Manuel's chest.

Damn, Jess trembled beneath the other man, *he knows how fucking sexy he is*. When their hips met they stilled, shivering for heartbeats. Black curls merged with brown. Manuel's balls rested heavy and warm on his belly. Jess reached up. His fingers danced with the *vaquero's* tongue. He was dying and they weren't even moving yet. Manuel was just going to kill him like this.

Then Manuel reared up and rammed back down.

"Oh, Christ!" Jess writhed within the velvet heat of his lover. Manuel may have been the one being fucked, but there was no doubt that the *vaquero* was completely in charge of the ride.

Jess bucked and twisted beneath his *charro*. Manuel's thighs held him tight. Writhing as Manuel rode him, Jess' heart thundered in his chest. Manuel drove their passion with his moans of, "*¡Metete mas!*" Jess lunged under Manuel, breathing his name. The *vaquero* slammed their bodies together. Jess sucked in his breath as sparks frayed his nerves. He wrapped his hand around Manuel's cock and pumped. Stroking his skin was like stroking rock-hard silk. Wild and desperate, they drove each other.

Manuel clung to Jess. They moved in perfect rhythm. One dark hand snaked up to tangle itself into black hair. Two men locked in pleasure. Over and over he cried out, "*¡Dios mio!*" Both completely melded by their passion; mind and soul. Jess lost himself within the hot confines of Manuel's body.

Manuel screamed, "*¡Chingar mes rul!*" He bore down on Jess' cock, body jerking as cum painted both stomachs. The sight of brown skin coated with white cream set Jess off. His own orgasm thundered through him.

Exhausted, Manuel dropped panting on Jess' chest. His cum was sticky and cool between their bodies. It was an incredibly intimate feeling. It was the kind of feeling Jess liked a lot.

"*¡Te adoro!*" Manuel whispered the words against Jess' throat.

Barely able to breathe himself, "What does that mean?"

"It means I like you very much, Jess Graff."

Hours later, the room still smelled warm and heavy, the perfect scent of sex. A little later they'd put more ice on Manuel's contusion. And then they'd lain side by side just exploring, everywhere. Jess wanted Manuel to stay. In his opinion, that *vaquero* needed to be wrapped up tight in his sheets all night. Manuel kept telling him he couldn't. After fighting over the phone three, maybe four times, he'd called *Tio* to come get him. That gave them another twenty minutes while the other *charros* got back to their room, showered, and changed.

Kneeling on the bed again, this time Manuel was buttoning his shirt. "I have to go. If I stay here, I won't sleep, you won't sleep." Manuel's finger traced his jaw, "I am right, yes?" When Jess rolled his eyes, the *charro* laughed. Jess could listen to that laugh for a thousand years and never tire of it. "*Tio* and I are staying all weekend. I am doing *la reata* during the rodeo, for show. You have broncos to ride tomorrow."

He laced his legs through Manuel's, pulling him hard against his body. "Fuck the horses." Their cocks slid against each other. Both were still half hard. "This is the kind of riding I want to be doing all weekend."

"Tomorrow night." Manuel leaned in, his hand landing behind Jess' ear, his shirt brushing the cowboy's stomach. Wicked and dark, Manuel's stare devoured him. "After the rodeo. And remember, Jessé..." Manuel licked his cheek. Right here, up close, he smelled like sex times twenty.

"What?"

"Buy more lube."

Chapter Two

Kissing good-bye ate up the remainder of their time together. Everyone was cool, macho, and dressed by the time *Tio* blared his horn. Jess helped Manuel limp to their truck, and then threw himself into bed. Jess hardly slept. Even without Manuel physically there, his scent on the sheets, the memory of his touch, were distracting. Jess just couldn't quit thinking about that hot fucking ride. No one had ever gotten him that worked up that quick. Hell, no one had ever gotten him that worked up period. A quick stroke off in the shower got him through breakfast. Another watching some talk show got him past lunch.

After that he pushed everything out of his head. There were too many things to get done. A good, clean pair of dark jeans went over his hips before he stamped into well worn boots. He dug out an incredibly loud cowboy shirt; bright yellow with red piping. Shirt buttoned, belt bucked, finally Jess tipped the battered black, flat-top Stetson over his eyes. You had to be in full gear before you even set foot in front of registration. At best they'd hit you with a fine. If you really rubbed someone wrong it could mean disqualification.

He spent the early afternoon with forms and waivers and lot draws. He inspected his gear. The judges inspected his gear. The owner of the bronco he was to ride inspected his gear. Then they all did it again just to make sure. Eventually, with a number pinned to his back, the waiting started. That was the hardest part; hurry up then stand pat. Watch the parking lot fill. See the barrel racers work their horses in temporary rings. Stretch, flex, but try not to think about what was coming. He wandered.

It's what he did to keep the fear at bay.

His heart fell through his boots when he caught sight of Manuel. Oh shit, he had it bad. Jess jogged up to the temporary stalls erected for the rodeo. Hung along the front of the stall was all the regular cowboy junk: leads, halters, bridles. Tied with red ribbon, a small horseshoe, painted red, hung upside down...or at least what Jess thought of as upside down. All the luck would run out that way. It was used as a frame for a printed card. A man, obviously a saint by his halo, was astride a horse. Beside him stood a beggar. The horseman was handing over his red cloak. Red ribbons tied it to the cross piece of the stall. The streamers snapped in the slight wind.

Manuel was cleaning his horse's hooves with a steel pick. Bent over, with Mango's foreleg against his thigh, Jess had a perfect view of a tight, sexy butt hugged by caramel leather. His pulse went from zero to sixty in four seconds flat.

"Hey, Manuel." He draped his arms over the gate and stared. Messing with the pick, Manuel wouldn't look at him. Jess stroked Mango's nose. The horse whickered and butted his shoulder demanding more. "How's that leg?" *How's that damn fine ass?*

The *vaquero* shrugged, dropping Mango's leg as he stood and tossed the tool aside. The pick clattered into the tack box. Manuel rummaged and came up with a curry comb. With short, sharp strokes he jerked the comb across the buckskin's coat.

"Are you okay?" Jess asked, suspicious. Manuel hadn't seemed like the fuck and run type, but you never knew until it happened. And the way he had purred out that he'd be around all weekend...that was *I want more* if Jess had ever heard it. Something was very wrong.

The older *charro*, the one Manuel called *Tio*, stepped up to the gate. To anyone ten feet away it would seem pretty casual how he hooked his elbows over the pipe and caught his heel on the bottom rung. Jess was way closer than that. A bowling shirt with blue flames running down the front didn't hide the tight shoulders. Knuckles popped as he gripped the gate. Everything

about *Tio* screamed hate. He stank of it. The man chewed on his upper lip, his thin moustache bristling. "You need to go." Menace, unspoken threats, lay under those four words.

"What?" That's when Manuel looked full at him. The skin around his left eye was bruised and swollen. *Holy shit!* A small shake of his head cut the words off in Jess' throat. Jess took a deep breath, pushed the anger down. "I just came to see how his leg was doing."

"He is well." The man didn't take his eyes off Jess. "You are well, Manuel, *no*? Tell him so he will go away."

"*Sí*, I am okay." Manuel sounded anything but okay.

"Manuel has to get ready for his show tonight. They pay him to do this show. So you should go now." The barest nod from Manuel told him to leave, that he would be okay.

Tio hooked his hand on Jess' shoulder, right up next to his neck. One of those deceptively familiar gestures meant for anyone who might be looking. The way his fingers dug into skin, Jess knew it was anything but friendly. He used the pressure to pull Jess out and away from the stall. Its strength reminded Jess that *Tio* was no one to screw with...at his age to still be riding bulls spoke to how tough he was. Most guys were played out from that life by thirty.

Leaning in, bumping Jess' other shoulder with his fist, *Tio* hissed, "You need to leave my Manuelito alone." If it wasn't for Jess' face going tight it might have looked like an old hand giving a young buck a bit of advice.

Tio walked away, leaving Jess standing in a makeshift road with his hands in his pockets. *His Manuel, what the hell did that mean?* Jess looked back to catch *Tio* stepping into the stall. Big hands dropped on Manuel's shoulders and *Tio's* forehead pressed against the back of the *vaquero's* skull. *Tio* was speaking low enough that only Manuel could hear. Manuel kept nodding like he understood. Then the big man's arm slid across Manuel's chest, pulling him back against his body. Manuel's hand covered *Tio's*. Both wore that odd mixture of pain and relief that comes after the first fragile truce in a fight.

Oh, crap. He'd walked into that; older guy, hot young stud. Why did he always get in the middle of things like this? And here he was thinking maybe he'd lucked out and found someone he might be able to connect with. *Fuck.* How could Manuel be with someone who'd hurt him?

Jess figured Manuel would be okay, at least while he was at the rodeo. With a few hundred contestants, staff, family and assorted hangers on roaming around that old man wouldn't risk a fight. Still, it worried Jess what would happen later. It burned him that it had happened at all. It wasn't fucking right. And there wasn't a God damned thing he could do about it. Plus he'd let himself move too fast. Now he was thrown, sitting on his ass, spitting dirt. The worst was he couldn't think about it. He just had to pick himself up and walk out of the ring like nothing had happened.

Visions of that old man wrapped about Manuel ate at Jess all evening. Oh so protective about *his Manuelito*, son-of-a-bitch. And Manuel just shrugging it off. What was up with that? Jess gave himself a good fifteen minutes to wallow in the deep end of the it's-so-not-fair self destructive thought pool. After that he pushed it out. He'd come back to it, there was no way he wouldn't. But for the here and now he couldn't afford the distraction.

He had a ride to do. Even still, he managed to be up on the rails when Manuel did his show. Manuel was still beautiful. The *charro* was still in control. The lasso still moved like water. Jess still wanted him like mad. And as Mango spun, dancing across the rope, Manuel's eyes found his. For the first time that night his *vaquero* smiled. Jess damn near cried. It so wasn't fair.

After that indulgence he had to forget Manuel. Jess knew he had to focus and center and push it all out. Even if it was just for a moment, his life depended on forgetting. So, like he always did before a ride, Jess found a quiet place. Down in the passages and storage areas beneath the Coliseum. Away from the insanity of men, animals and show. Just a little space of wall off from the main area was all Jess needed. Rest his butt on his heels, drop his hands between his legs, close his eyes and breathe. If he concentrated on the air coming in and the air going out Jess could sink into the center of himself. That's where the confidence hid, where he

could find the soul of the horse he was supposed to ride. It was stupid and new-agey, but it worked.

Each breath out pushed away the fear and hurt. Each breath in brought focus. Jess started on his toes, willing them to relax. Up and up through his body he let go of tension. By the time he reached his head Jess' mind was open and blank. That's when things came. The first time he'd been afraid of the openness. But then he remembered his Nana and what she always said, "What you fear is what will hurt you. Just accept it. Use it." When silence flowed then everything faded except the ride. That was where he needed to be.

First he smelled the horse...heavy with hay and dust and animal. Slowly her sight came; he saw through her eyes. The vision was crude and unclear but enough to know. Jess could feel her skin twitch. An itch on her nose she scratched on the gate. Anticipation was hot in both of them. Everything about how she would move became part of him. Subconscious or imagination, it just didn't matter. He understood her. There was meaning, confidence and peace inside his head. Now he could ride.

One last, deep breath and Jess came back up to the world. He felt loose and relaxed. The only thing that could relax him more was a real good lay. Of course, the horses didn't come with that. Chuckling, he opened his eyes; a sharp toed set of boots hovered at the edge of his vision. Jess' gaze wandered up a hard set of legs clothed in chamois and silver buttons. Quiet and calm went claustrophobic.

Manuel stood there, his sombrero in his hands. "¿*Qué tal*, Jessé?"

"What?" The cinderblock walls and low ceiling were confining. Jess did not want to be confined with Manuel.

"I asked, 'how are you?'"

"Fair to middling." Now it was Manuel's turn to look perplexed. Jess sighed and stood. "I'm doing okay. Just getting, you know, up for it."

Nodding, Manuel murmured, "Good." No questions, Manuel just seemed to get it. Jess fumed more. They could have been so good together. "I wanted to talk to you before you ride."

"Tio's okay with that?" He couldn't keep the venom out of his voice.

A sly smile slipped across Manuel's lips. "I told him I was going to the bathroom."

"Okay, look," Jess palmed his face. He didn't want Manuel to see how much it hurt to say what he had to say. "I don't want to be a part of that shit. There's just some things I don't need to be in the middle of." When Jess figured his features were set hard, he moved his hands to his pockets. "So great, thanks for coming and I'll see you around." A bob of his head, a half-sob masked as a sigh, and Jess spun on his heel and headed up the corridor.

Before Jess got far, Manuel caught his arm and pulled him back. "What's wrong, Jessé?"

Pointing to the bruised eye, Jess snapped, "That's what's wrong. Somebody gets all worked up like that there just ain't no stopping them. It ain't worth it to you. It ain't worth it to me. So, you know, that's just it." Somehow he couldn't bring himself to move Manuel's hand off his arm. "I've got to get out there now. I'd say see ya round but it's probably not a good idea."

"You know I will stay to watch you ride." Hurt, confusion all of it was under Manuel's words.

"Look, Manuel." *God, why was he sticking around to explain it?* It was best just to cut him off and go. Jess couldn't make himself do that. "I don't want you to get hurt. And I don't know why you're with him. Shit." Jess threw his back against the wall. Boot heel caught into a chink in the cinderblock, knee jutting out into the hall, he snorted. *Probably look like some damn cowboy poster.* He took his hat off so he could run a hand through his hair. Why that made him think better, even Jess didn't know. "I don't want to get between it. You need to sort things out first."

"What are you talking about, Jessé?" Now Manuel just sounded confused.

Spinning the brim through his fingers. "You and Tio. I'm not going to be the guy you cheat on him with...I don't do that."

Manuel's eyes went wide. Then he snorted covering his face with his hand. From behind his fingers, "Jessé, you have no Spanish?"

Hat back on his head, hands shoved in his pockets, he snorted. "I know what *chinga* means." Jess kicked a pebble on the floor. It skittered across the hall and bounced off the far wall.

"Oh, *sí*, you do." Manuel's voice went low and needful on those four words. Then he laughed, butting Jess' shoulder with his own. "*Tío* means uncle...Uncle Jose. He's my mother's brother. He raised me until I was fifteen, because *mí mama* went to Arizona to work and *mí papa*..." rolled eyes and an exhaled breath conveyed what words didn't. "So *Tío*, he is angry right now, but the same way he would be if I were his son."

Slack jawed, Jess stared. Finally he found his voice, "I don't know if that is better or worse."

With a small shrug, "It just is. So are you staying after, for the concert?"

"No." Now he was reeling again. A good kind of reeling this time but completely off center all the same. Flustered, he managed a coherent response, "I'll probably just head back to my room and wind down. It takes me a long time to wind down after a ride."

"*Bien*." Manuel picked at the silver thread on the brim of his sombrero. "Because maybe I need a ride tonight."

Cocking his shoulder against the wall, Jess grinned. "Going any place in particular?" Jess really hoped he had someplace in mind. If not, he was more than willing to give Manuel a few suggestions. All of them ended in his bed with a lot of naked going on.

"I think," a huge grin told Jess that Manuel was pretty much thinking the same thing, "you will just have to find out. I will wait with Mango, *sí*? After your ride go there."

Unable to shake the picture of Manuel and *Tío* in the stall, "There's nothing funny...ya know, going on between you and him?" He knew it was a sick question. Still he had to ask it. "I mean, he was, ya know, hugging you and stuff."

A hard shudder ran through Manuel's frame. More than any words could that denied it. "*¡Dios, no!* He is like my father."

"Gotta love family," it was Jess' turn to laugh, "'cause ya can't kill 'em." Standing this close to Manuel, he could smell him. Almost spicy and flavored with horse and sweat. A working man's smell; it made Jess' body stand up and pay attention. "Shit, now I have to get all relaxed again."

"Relaxed?"

"Yeah, you know, loose so I can ride."

"Ahh, I do this to you, huh?"

Jess just rolled his eyes. Tight chaps framed Jess' crotch. Just how un-relaxed he was had become pretty obvious. Quick glances up and down the hall and Manuel smiled again. This time it was wicked. Jess could sure get used to that smile. Manuel yanked him across the hallway, pulling him behind a stacked set of fold away bleachers. The space Manuel backed them into was narrow and dusty. Dim light from the hall seeped through shadow.

"I know," Manuel purred as he leaned into Jess' body, forcing him up against the wall, "what will relax you." Brown fingers worked Jess' belt and zipper.

Afraid someone might hear, Jess could barely hiss out, "What are you doing?" Manuel just laughed. His lips tortured Jess' neck and jaw with hard kisses. Strong hands pushed open his jeans and pulled his cock from beneath his shorts. That incredible grip was stroking Jess. It was all Jess could do not to start pleading for more. Still he was chanting "Aw, shit!" just under his breath.

Manuel knelt. His hot tongue snaked out running across the tip. "Oh, *papi*, you taste like honey." The whisper shot shivers through Jess' skin.

When Jess looked down, he damn near died. His *vaquero* was kissing and licking, torturing him with pleasure. Dark eyes half-lidded, Manuel traced the head with his tongue. He was so into it. Nothing in the world existed but Manuel's mouth and Jess' cock. Nobody'd ever focused on Jess like that before. Finally, when Jess almost couldn't take the teasing anymore, Manuel wrapped his lips over Jess' head and sucked.

Jess bit the back of his hand to keep from crying out. It felt so damn good. He laced his other fingers in Manuel's hair. Urging him on with his grip, Jess drove into that blissful heat. Manuel kept taking it, more and deeper and harder. Finally, Jess shuddered through his fingers, "Fuck, I'm gonna cum!" Instead of backing off, Manuel swallowed him. Stars shot off behind his eyes it was so good. Manuel kept sucking until there wasn't anything left to suck.

Pulling back, dragging his tongue along Jess' sensitive shaft, Manuel teased, "You good now, *papi*?"

Jess had to steady himself on Manuel's shoulder. "Hell yeah." He was better than good.

As Manuel pulled the band of Jess' shorts up, he ran his finger around the tip. "You take good care of this tonight. Don't get hit in any of the wrong places." Standing, he helped Jess zip his jeans. "Remember, I get my ride later." The last word was whispered against Jess' lips. This kiss was long and deep and had tongue all inside everybody's mouths.

Finally, Jess pulled back. "You taste like me." Kissing someone after you'd cum in their mouth just rocked. It was so hot.

"I'd give you some of it back, but it was so good I took it all." Pushing Jess' hat back on his head before tracing the cowboy's lips with one finger, Manuel whispered, "*Suerte m'ijo*. I'll pray for you. You go first, so no one sees us go out together." Before Jess could open his mouth, Manuel was pushing him out. "*Vamos*, you have a ride."

Well, Manuel was right about both things. Besides, they had later, and later was good. A quick glance and Jess sauntered out like he hadn't just been blown behind the bleachers. He was halfway up the hall when Manuel's call caught him.

"*¡Momento!*" The *vaquero* jogged up. "Jessé, I forgot this." Manuel pressed something into his hand. "*Mí mama* gave this to me for when I ride. You take it tonight." The bright smile was back. "So you can be safe when you ride."

Jess looked at what the *charro* gave him. A small red plastic envelope with a snap catch rested in his palm. Not more than two inches long and stitched on the edges with white yarn. When Jess popped it open, the left flap held a print of the Crucified Christ. The center picture was of a young woman. Simply dressed in a red robe and blue shawl, a golden light surrounded her. She stood on a crescent supported by an angel. Virgin Mary; even Southern Baptist raised Jess could figure that out. Tucked into the right flap was a folded piece of paper with typing so small you'd need a magnifying glass to read it...probably a prayer. A little tin heart pierced by a sword dangled from a center string. Jess folded it back together and snapped it shut.

"Thanks," he slipped it into his back pocket. The whole thing weighed maybe three ounces. "I'll keep it with me." Turning down a good luck charm was never a good idea. And Jess was really touched that Manuel would think to give him one. Especially that Manuel would give him the one he usually carried.

They parted at the end of the hall. A firm grip on Jess' arm and a punch to his shoulder and Manuel was off. Knowing that they'd be together again was as much a comfort as the packet wedged in his jeans. Jess finished his preparations up near the chutes. Still relaxed, Jess waited for his ride. Manuel was right there with him in the weight of the charm in his back pocket. Finally, it was Jess' turn.

Jess rolled his right shirt sleeve up to the elbow before rosining his glove. He'd drawn a bronc with a deceptively sweet name of Sashay. Giving one last tug to the laces of his bareback glove, Jess eased himself onto the roan's back. The leather rig, with its hard handle, was strapped tight across the animal's chest. Jess locked himself down, physically and mentally. The arena, the crowd, everything faded into a blur of white noise. There was nothing but Jess and this horse. Even the chute was an abstraction. Legs stiff, left arm high, breathing steady and grip tight, Jess signaled ready.

The hotshot hit as Sashay's head passed the gate. Jess' spurs were well above the shoulder break and touching skin. A good, hard buck out. The tornado of air twisted his ear drums as they spun out and away. His spurs dug into the animals withers. The ride was wild and hard. Every

joint was pulled in sixty directions. Buck, kick, lunge tortured his muscles. Whipped around by the horse the world spun out and away from Jess. Infinite. It wasn't until they pulled the flank strap and pulled him off that Jess realized the ride was over.

As he walked out he could feel Manuel's smile. The warmth of it came up from inside Jess. Anticipation mixed with memory as Jess collected his gear and got ready to go. Before heading to the parking lot, he detoured to meet his *vaquero*. Pools of light dotted every few feet.

Manuel leaned against the stall frame, arms crossed over his chest. Denim jacket, tucked in T-shirt, jeans, boots and a thick leather belt; it was strange how it all looked just a little different on him. Jess shifted his bronc-rig to his shoulder, "You ready, Manuel?"

"Sí." Mango threw his head over the gate and whickered a greeting. The *charro* turned, playing with the velvet muzzle. He leaned in and whispered, "*¿Te gusta ello?*" Black ears rolled forward. Two sets of dark eyes, one animal, the other human, considered Jess. Then the horse whinnied and tossed his head. His hoof struck the bar with a bang. Manuel laughed, "Sí, *también*," and the cowboy figured he'd just passed some sort of test. With a parting pat, Manuel stepped away from the stall. "You ready, Jessé?"

"You don't know how ready." The words were whispered out the side of his mouth. As they walked towards the parking lot, Jess pried, "So Mango approves of me? Does that mean I get to keep you around?"

Manuel stifled another laugh. "*A lo major*," he shrugged, "I like you a lot, Jessé, and I like that you like *me*."

"Of course I like you. You're one hell of a cowboy." For a moment he thought, "And you certainly know how to, ah, do a wild ride."

"That's what I mean. I've been with other men and they don't understand this." Manuel waved back toward the coliseum. The muffled noise of the crowd drifted on the wind. They savored it for a moment. "With those other men, I feel like a prize...look at the hot, Latin stud I got. I don't feel that way with you."

Jess coughed and butted the *charro*'s shoulder with his own. "You are a hot Latin stud."

"*Sí papi*," Manuel kicked at Jess' knee. The cowboy jumped away, laughing. "But you would like me even if I wasn't brown."

"Oh, hell yeah!" Both men stopped short when they came in sight of Jess' pickup. *Tio* leaned against the grill. His shoulders were tight, his hands shoved in his pockets. "Get off my truck." Jess growled.

The older man nodded and stood. "*Bien*. You, I don't care about." He dismissed Jess with a wave. "Manuelito, you come with me." Stepping in, he grabbed the *vaquero*'s bicep. Manuel twisted away. "Don't do this. Think about *tu familia*. *Tu madre*."

Glaring, face tight, "Fly away, *lechuza*," Manuel's tone was bitter, "I've had enough of what you say to me. Always you say these things, make me feel bad." Two fingers tapped the bruise under his left eye. "This, I don't need this anymore. You go home. I stay."

"So, *Mayete*, you like the pretty *gringos* then? Is that what they teach you, at the ranches where you work? When you live in Arizona, away from us?" *Tio* spat. Looking out under hard eyes, he spat, "Maybe I get you a side-saddle so you can be a real woman on that fancy *caballo*, huh?"

Manuel stepped in to throw the same hate filled stare back. "*¡Chupamela!*" Before Jess could yell, *Tio*'s arm went up and came down. The blow knocked Manuel on his ass.

Jess lunged at *Tio*. All he could think was beating that old man into a pulp. *Tio* stepped to the side. A brutal grip caught the cowboy by the hair. *Tio* slammed him against the side of the truck. Jess slid down the metal, staring through double vision at a face full of rage. Then Manuel stepped up behind his uncle. Two fists went down across *Tio*'s neck. The *charro*'s knee came up, meeting the older man's chin as it came down. The hard "crack" and *Tio*'s groan said it was over before it really started.

Shaking his head, Jess pulled himself to his feet. "I think we need to get before security comes running." Manuel was already headed towards the passenger side. They spun rubber while *Tio* knelt on the asphalt trying to staunch the blood pouring from his nose. It was the last thing in the rearview as Jess tore out of the lot.

He smiled at Manuel. "Shit, I would have thought your uncle would have put up more of a fight. One good punch, and boom, he's down."

Manuel's grin had gone wicked again. "That's what my aunt always says...once and he's done." It took a moment for the joke to sink in. Jess snorted a laugh. Manuel coughed. Finally they broke up. Neither could stop sniggering the entire ride back. They'd get it under control and then a look would set the snickers going again. Both were still chuckling when Jess unlocked his room.

Jess barely shut the hotel door before Manuel was on him. Dark hands went up under his shirt, fingers teasing his nipples. "God, Manuel!" He was trying to kiss his *vaquero* and pull the shirt over his head at the same time. Two sets of hands, two sets of buckles and zippers; both kept getting in the way. They wove and twisted back towards the bed. Feet and legs and sleeves tripped them up but didn't take them down. Somehow they got everything undone. Falling back onto the mattress while clothes flew everywhere, Jess managed to never break contact with Manuel's lips.

Manuel was probably the best looking thing Jess had ever gotten into bed. His body was an inferno. His kisses were hard and hot. They lingered over Jess' cheek where he'd hit the truck. They ran down his throat burning Jess' skin. The cowboy's pulse thundered between his legs. He wanted Manuel so bad it hurt.

Damn near panting, Jess managed, "Go on your knees, baby." Manuel groaned and rolled over. The warm plane of his back was just begged for stroking, and Manuel arched into the touch. First Jess kissed his shoulders, then down his spine. The *vaquero's* skin tasted so good; a hint of salt lingered. Every inch got licked, explored, as Jess worked his way down.

Finally, he nuzzled in between Manuel's legs. It took a long time to find Manuel's smell under all that soap. When he did, it was so good. There were probably things Manuel would like other than this, but hell Jess just wanted to be greedy tonight. Sucking and biting at that tender skin. He pushed his tongue deep inside, fucking him with a hot kiss. Not like he was ignoring Manuel's cock. His fingers stroked and pulled and touched. He ran his thumb through the slit playing right at the very tip. But his mouth was wholly wrapped up in what was a few inches farther back.

Manuel was moaning. "¡Aye, Jessé!" Butt high in the air, hands balled into the sheets, he pushed back against Jess' mouth. "Please, *papi*, now!"

He sat back pulled Manuel up and into his lap. That tight, hot body swallowed his cock like it was meant to be in it. Biting down the back of a brown neck, Jess rocked them. Slow and easy, getting into the pace of it. Manuel met him move for move. He dropped his head onto Jess's shoulder moaning out, "*Papi!*" Manuel's cock was standing straight up and glistening with his own juice. Oh, he needed to be pounded.

Jess pushed them forward, lifting himself onto his knees. "I'm gonna ride you so hard, baby!" His hands slid down Manuel's back until they caught his hips. Jess pulled back. Watching his cock slide out of that hot body was intense. Nothing in the world existed but him and Manuel. One knee resting between Manuel's legs, the other planted near Manuel's side, steadying Jess' weight, Jess took a deep breath then drove in hard.

Manuel lunged beneath him, crying, "*¡Dios mas!*" The sound shot through his veins. Jess rode him hard. Manuel bucked into his thrusts. Jess' fingers dug into the *charro's* hips. Wild and hot, he slammed into Manuel's channel. The world faded away as the fire shot up his prick and down his thighs. He reached between Manuel's legs. The skin of his cock burned. Stroking fueled chants of "Jessé, Jessé!"

Harder and faster, he twisted the prick in his hand. "Come on, baby, come with me!" The shudders started for both of them. He could feel Manuel thickening and tightening. "Yeah baby, come on."

The last of it was driven by the *charro's* moans of "Aye! Aye!" Then Jess was lost in the heat rushing through his cock.

Manuel shivered and shivered again as they collapsed together on the bed. Without conscious thought he slipped from Manuel's body and pulled him close. Warm against Jess' chest, Manuel ran his hands over the arms circling his waist. "Will you let me..." now his voice was unsure, "may I stay here with you tonight?"

"I'd like that, stay all weekend. In fact," Jess brushed the black hair out of Manuel's eyes and kissed his ear. "I'm trying to think how to get you to stay the rest of my life." That got him a soft, contented smile. "But what would your uncle think?"

Manuel traced lazy circles across his skin. "¿Quién cuida?" The light touch made Jess twitch.

"Yeah, it's okay with me." He pulled his *charro* closer. Remembering something *Tio* said, "So you live in Arizona, huh?"

"Sí." Jess felt more than heard the word. "I work on a thoroughbred Ranch outside Nogales. ¿Por que?"

"Wow, pretty close to me actually." Sometimes fate was good to him, or maybe it was the charm working. The plastic packet was still buried in his pants' pocket. Nuzzling under that black, black hair, he mouthed the words against Manuel's skin, "Construction, Tucson."

"Ahh." Manuel twisted in his embrace, smiling up at him. "*Bein*, because I think after tonight, Mango and I will need a ride home."

The look on *Tio's* face when they drove away floated back from memory. "I think you're right." As he kissed up Manuel's neck, "What's your thoughts on us, you good with it? I don't want to take advantage of the situation. Well I do, but you know, I don't want you to feel like you're obligated or anything."

"*Mañana incierto*, we worry about it when we need to." Manuel's kisses drove any lingering uncertainty out of his mind. When they had to pull back and breathe, Manuel chuckled, "*No hay mal que por bien no venga*."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, bad never comes without bringing some good."

Now Jess laughed, "Daymn straight!" Then he drowned his *charro* in his mouth.

Chapter Three

Sleep rolled off Jess slow and easy. It was the kind of feeling where he knew he was awake, but didn't much care. Soft cotton sheets brushed his skin, swaddling his legs, keeping him content. Like a cat by the fire, a drowsy Jess breathed in the morning. God, what a wonderful dream he'd had about landing just the right guy. Sexy, good looking, and one hell of a cowboy...just about perfect.

Then Manuel stirred. *Oh, yeah, it wasn't a dream.* Jess smiled and opened his eyes. That warm, hard body was still wrapped in his arms from the night before. Wow, he must really like the *charro* to have been able to sleep like that. Manuel sighed and blinked away slumber.

"Morning, handsome." Jess mumbled the greeting before settling into a leisurely kiss. It had been a while since he'd had someone to wake up to. Manuel, in his opinion, was just right for that job. Hopefully, the *vaquero* would be interested in at least a part-time position of bed-warmer. Then Jess could ease him into a full-time gig.

As they kissed, Manuel's hips pushed against his thigh. Early morning wants throbbed hard between his legs. A similar part of Jess' anatomy woke up with the attention. Little shivers settled between his shoulders, then moved down through his chest and belly. Both shifted so their pricks could touch. *Oh, hell yeah!* That was exactly what Jess needed. Manuel's thick cock ground against his own aching length. It didn't take much movement to fuel the slow burn. They slid against each other. A measured, easy pace, skin against skin, there was no better way to wake up.

"This good?" It was a statement and a question. Jess ran his palms down Manuel's thighs, skimming just above the skin. His *charro* shivered, then rotated his hips. Jess gasped as the head of Manuel's cock slid up his shaft; licking the skin with the slick heat leaking from the tip. "Oh, damn," he shuddered.

Fingers working down Jess' spine, Manuel nipped his throat. "Oh, *sí, papi.*" Languid rolling of his hips pushed them together again and again. "*Muy bueno.*"

"Uh-huh. So, so good." Jess closed his eyes and rode the feelings. This kind of sex was so different from the hard passion of the night before. It was warm and comfortable. Their juices mixed each time heads bumped, adding to the chills creeping through the cowboy's frame. They had time to kiss and taste and tease. Manuel always tasted so good. He smelled so sexy. Hands wandered over backs and arms. Their tongues explored each other's mouths. Jess' fingers latched onto Manuel's hard cheeks. Manuel moaned as the cowboy pulled him hard against his body. Pricks rubbing together, they rocked sweet and slow. Each stroke made them twitch. Each kiss drew out sighs.

With a hiss and a shudder Jess fell up and over into ecstasy. "Manuel!" Manuel joined him seconds later.

"*¡Aye, tan perfecto!*" Satisfied, Manuel nuzzled into Jess' shoulder while his fingers traced lazy circles at the small of the cowboy's back. Their combined essence cooled sticky on skin.

Jess could stay that way forever.

As he was drifting back down, Manuel's voice brought him back up. "*¿Que hora?*"

"What?"

"Time," Manuel laughed low, "what time is it?"

Jess' head lazied over to gaze at the clock. He had to blink twice to bring the red LED into focus. What the display told him couldn't be. "Shit," he propped himself upon his elbows. "Like six in the freaking morning."

Manuel began to shuck off the sheets. "It's late."

"Late?" Yanking the sheets back up to cover them, Jess grumbled, "It's damn fucking early." He kissed his way along Manuel's jaw to his mouth.

For a moment Manuel gave into the kiss. Then he pulled back. "I have a *caballo* who will be very angry if he doesn't get his breakfast."

"He's a big boy; he can wait for a bit."

Manuel reached behind him. Then he dropped the pillow he'd grabbed over Jess' face, "*Cabrón*," and rolled away.

"Did you just call me an asshole?" Jess swatted Manuel's back with the offending pillow.

"No, *papi*," the *caballero* leaned back into quick kiss before he sat up. He thumped Jess' forehead as he moved. "I called you a jerk." Manuel swung his knees off the bed and stifled a yawn, "asshole would have been *pinche cabrón*." He stretched. "Shower with me. Then we go feed Mango. After that we can eat."

Jess moved in behind and kissed up the back of Manuel's neck. "You come up with some damn good plans there." The *vaquero* arched and purred into the touch.

Finally, Manuel pulled away. "Give me a few minutes and then join me." He smiled and stood. As Manuel disappeared into the bath, Jess stretched. Life was damn good. They'd take care of Mango, find some grub, then mess around until it was time to check in. After the show, they had a whole night ahead of them. The sound of the shower cut off his thoughts.

Oh, yeah, he had an invitation. Jess drifted into the bathroom and swept aside the shower curtain. Water beaded on warm brown skin and ran in little rivers down Manuel's spine. Flecks of lather dotted his arms and shoulders. And, damn, his ass was toned.

Jess stepped in behind and grabbed one hard cheek. Manuel jumped and knocked Jess in the ribs with his elbow. "Stop it, Jessé!"

"Never," he kissed behind Manuel's ear, "ever," and drifted down to where his neck met shoulder, "gonna stop."

With a moan, "I don't think I can go again so soon." Still, he leaned back against Jess' chest letting the spray caress them both.

"Neither can I." Fingers playing lightly over Manuel's chest, Jess laughed. "But that doesn't mean I can't touch you."

"True." Both sighed, content. "But why don't you touch me with soap?"

Jess followed the path of the water down Manuel's arm with the back of his hand. "Soap?" He teased with another kiss, "I can do soap." Grabbing the bar, Jess lathered up his palms and ran them between Manuel's legs. The *vaquero's* prick was soft and heavy in Jess' hand, his balls thick weights. A whole body made for Jess to explore. As he cupped Manuel's sac, a heady, "Mmm," matched his own. He kept one hand stroking, while the other scrubbed a brown chest with the tiny bar. Slippery foam added such a wonderful sensation as he rubbed. Manuel's skin slid like silk between his fingers.

Damp, black hair tickled where Manuel's head dropped against Jess' shoulder. It gave the cowboy perfect access to suck on the *charro's* neck. With the bruised eye, he was betting no one would notice a hicky overly much. He never let up on the caresses. Running that gorgeous cock in his hand sent fire up his arm. His other hand circled sensitive nipples. As he stroked, Manuel's body responded. Each twist, each pull, got him harder. Thumb rubbing the tip and fingers tracing the veins, Jess made Manuel moan.

Heat thick in his hand, Jess chuckled, "I thought you said you couldn't get it up again?" Jess squeezed and the *charro's* prick pulsed.

"You are so bad for me." Manuel moaned.

"No." Dragging his tongue along the line of the *vaquero's* jaw, Jess whispered, "I'm so good for you."

Manuel's hips rocked into his palm. "Oh, *papi*," he reached back, tangling his fingers into Jess' curls, "you want me to touch you?" His other hand wandered almost aimlessly across his own skin.

"Nope." Sometimes giving was better than getting. He could watch Manuel enjoy it. "Just relax and ride it. I owe you one, after all." Pumping faster and harder, Jess savored the moans. It was delicious. Writhing against Jess, Manuel's whole body was into it. "Come on," he whispered, "I'll get you there."

The friction in his palm was heaven. It shot sex up Jess' arm. He squeezed Manuel's hard prick to feel it more. The veins ran thick underneath that silken skin. Red and swollen, the head of Manuel's cock was swallowed by his foreskin; a little O of skin just letting it peek through. When he pulled back, the skin slid away so gently, adding its own caress to that delivered by the cowboy's fingers. Jess had never played with anyone who wasn't cut. So soft. So responsive. It added a whole 'nother dimension to his prick and Jess liked it.

Manuel shook as he fucked Jess' tight fist. Breath hitching, the *vaquero's* cock grew thick, pulsed. His face went tight. "*¡Aye, aye!*" He moaned as he shot between Jess' fingers. God, Manuel was beautiful like that; all tense and overcome. Just to see him twitch, Jess kept stroking and touching. Finally, he let Manuel help him scrub both of them. It took twice as long to get clean that way, but it certainly was more fun.

Towelng off ended up as just another excuse for touching each other. Manuel's body was heaven. It was almost a shame to cover it with a T-shirt and jeans. The *vaquero* seemed to have a similar opinion of Jess since Manuel's hands kept getting in the way while he dressed. Attention like that kept him more than half-hard the whole time. He wasn't about to let Manuel get him off right now. Slow, deep and hard, in bed, after breakfast. The anticipation just fueled that want, made it better.

"I promise, later." He kissed Manuel, unhurried and easy, taking his time to savor the flavor of those swollen lips. "You'll get ridden so hard later."

Before he tossed last night's clothes into the suitcase, Jess pulled the charm from his pants. Then he slipped the small envelope into the rear pocket of Manuel's jeans. Another excuse...this time for the cowboy to pull his *caballero* close and grab his ass.

"No, *papi*," Manuel teased, "if I have to wait, so do you."

They both laughed as Manuel pushed him away and headed out the door to the Jeep. A little shy of seven, they pulled into the Coliseum.

Cool wind bit at the pair as they crossed the parking lot. Manuel moved slowly and with a hint of a limp. Guilt twinged Jess. More than likely, he was responsible for the stiffness. Legs tangled together wasn't the best sleeping position for a bruised hip.

Manuel's hands were buried deep in the pockets of his jacket to ward off the morning chill. Jess still couldn't get over how handsome Manuel was. No matter what he was wearing, denim or leather, his body was made for tight clothes. With his jacket collar turned up against the wind, grazing the edge of his sharp jaw and cowboy hat pulled down tight to his ears, Manuel looked like a walking, talking slice of the old west. Appreciative gazes from the women they passed said Jess wasn't the only one who thought so.

Horse people were notoriously early risers and the place was already thrumming like a small city. Horse people were also pretty personable sorts. Friendships formed fast and easy. Rounds of "good mornings" followed Manuel. Both tipped the brims of their hats with a nod at the greetings. The closer they got to Mango's row, the fewer "good mornings" and more quizzical stares they got.

Jess swallowed. Then he shook it off. It wasn't obvious. Something else was up. *Fuck, maybe Tio had complained to security.* If they'd been asking for Manuel, well, people wouldn't want to get involved, but regs were regs. A fight could get them all fined or tossed. Or maybe

he'd set himself up by the stalls, knowing Manuel would have to come feed Mango. That old man could make a lot of trouble that way...pick another fight, say the wrong things to the wrong people, or just be his hateful self; none of it would be good. Distracted by the thoughts, the cowboy ran headlong into Manuel's back, nearly taking them both to the pavement.

Manuel stood in the middle of the makeshift road. His hands hung loose at his sides. Shoulders slumped. His jaw tightened to breaking. Jess almost said something wicked, but then his eyes followed Manuel's stare. Mango's stall was empty. Straw littered the ground. All the tack was gone, even the horseshoe charm. The gate banged with hollow notes in the slight wind. A note fluttered from the center bar.

Manuel ran.

By the time Jess caught up to him, the *charro* had ripped it open and was reading. Each word seemed to sap the smile out of him. "He's gone home." Manuel looked up, lost. "He says that he will leave my things with *Tia* Graciella." Words gushed, trying to make sense of things by giving it voice, "She lives in Juarez. Outside the city. He left last night and probably crossed first thing." Manuel was shaking, "The Santa Teresa gate opens at six...if we come through here it's what we use; you wouldn't want to take horses over the Zeragosa bridge. The traffic is insane; the city is a nightmare to drive a truck in."

This wasn't happening. Of all the things that had blown through Jess' mind, it never occurred to him that Manuel's uncle would go so low. "How can he take Mango, though?" That old man couldn't do this. Taking Mango, it was just snake mean. Jess tried to use reason to calm Manuel down. "They won't let him take a horse that's not his into Mexico."

Manuel slid to the ground, hands dangling between his knees. "He has a second set of originals of the papers for Mango, the health certificates, branding papers and ownership passport." Waving the paper limply, he added, "Even for going into Mexico. And he has a *carte* from me to carry the horse. In case something happened he could take Mango with him and I would just have to get him from the ranch."

Reason devastated by an abundance of caution. Jess knew that Manuel was probably kicking himself for giving his uncle those rights. There was no way Manuel could have seen this coming when he signed those papers.

"And he has a license to move animals in Mexico. They won't give him a problem." Two breaths and Manuel slammed his back against the gate. "*¡Chingame!*" His yell brought stares. The animals in the next pen shied away.

Butt resting on his heels, Jess knelt next to the *charro*. "They don't just let horses come and go over the border...do they?" They'd catch *Tio* at the border. They could do that. Make him give Mango back.

"It's not hard." A shake and a besieged sigh blew those plans out of Jess' thoughts. "If you come this way, there's a three day wait for a blood test. Going into Mexico, no wait if you have the proper health certificates. We always have the proper papers." For a while Manuel just sat and stared at the note. Jess wanted to pull him into his arms and wipe the hurt away. It might have been the time, but it certainly wasn't the place for it.

Finally, the *vaquero* pulled himself to standing. Yanking Jess up next to him, Manuel barked "Take me to the Zeragosa Bridge." Manuel's voice was as hollow as his eyes. "You can drop me downtown. I'll walk over, catch a bus." Starting off toward the parking area, he explained "There are *passeros* that go almost to her house. It is not a bad walk from where you get left off."

Jess drifted to his side. "What are you going to do when you get there?" He couldn't hug him. He couldn't kiss away the hurt. Instead, Jess settled for the weight of his hand on Manuel's shoulder. Hopefully it would convey everything.

"Figure out how to get home," Manuel sighed and shrugged, "to *Tio*'s and make him give Mango back."

"You know why he's doing it." He had to drop his grip as they sidled between the scattered cars.

"I'm not stupid, Jessé." Manuel glared back at him. "He wants to get me away from you. He wants to punish me for being who I am. Maybe he thinks if I go home things will change."

Jess knew it was just misdirected anger. Still, it stung. "So you're going to do exactly what he wants."

Manuel spun on him, "Tell me what choice I have, Jessé!" Ager at himself, at his *Tio* and at Jess tightened his mouth and hardened his voice. "Unless I want to give up Mango, I have to. I bought him as a foal. I spent my life training him. It would be like throwing him away to not try." Clawing at his scalp, Manuel turned back towards the truck and kicked the fender. "Just take me to the border, please. Give me your phone number. I will call you when I get back to Arizona."

"No." Jess dug for his keys. "Let's go back to my hotel. I'll get my things. I'll take you to your *Tia*'s. I'll take you wherever you need to go to get Mango." His hand went up, stopping Manuel before he could speak. "The son of a bitch won half of it...I'm not going to let him have the satisfaction of taking you away from me as well."

"But, *papi*," relief and concern warred in dark eyes, "you'll forfeit."

"Manuel," he slid his arm around the *vaquero*'s thigh and stepped in. Fuck it if anyone saw. "There's tons of horses, tons of rodeos out there," he dropped his forehead against Manuel's cheek, "but there's only one of you."

"Jessé," Manuel pulled him tight, "You'd do this for me, ah?"

Pushing the hair out of those dark, sad eyes, the cowboy stared into their depths. All the conviction of truth went into the next words, "I'd do just about anything for you."

Once they'd tossed Jess' things into the back of the truck and checked out, the pair followed the signs through Santa Teresa to the border. It wasn't even nine and traffic was already backed pretty solid. Still, it wasn't half as bad as the four-hour delay over the main bridge. A brand new building, arched roof set on triangular adobe pillars with the symbol of New Mexico on one side, Mexico on the other. They didn't get much of a hassle on their way through. That would be left for their return.

Damned if Jess had any idea how they were actually going to pull this whole thing off. *Tio* didn't seem the kind of guy who would listen to reason. And, "hey, came to get Mango," probably wouldn't do it. The old man wouldn't back down without some kind of fight. He was itching for it. *Tio* wanted it. Jess just knew that in his gut. The same way he could feel the fight in the horses, Jess could smell the hate in *Tio*. Why did they have to live in a world where people detested you for who you loved? Why did families carry so much hate within them? Hell, it was easier to answer "why was there still poverty in the world" than those questions.

A little over twelve miles in they stopped at the check point. Cranky heating coils hardly warmed the air inside the building. It was cool enough outside that the structure was almost at ice-box level. The first counter on the left was their initial stop. Visas and a tourist card were needed for the cowboy. Luckily, Jess still had his passport in his luggage from a vacation in Baja. Small bits of luck were still following them. He could have gotten the papers without it, but the right documents smoothed the process immeasurably. Even so, it took a while because of the mid-morning rush. With the temperature and the crowd, American civil service employees would have been down right ornery. The Mexican Federal Workers were polite and had smiles for everyone.

Manuel flashed an ancient Mexican driver's license when the attendant looked at him.

"You had that with you last night?" Jess scribbled his signature on the tourist card.

Manuel snorted. Pulling out his wallet, he flipped through the cards. "Naturalization papers, passport, driver's license—American. I don't go anywhere without these things."

"Okay, if you're a naturalized US citizen," Jess tapped the card with his pen, "don't you need one of these?"

"No, I have dual citizenship." Manuel stated it like such things were entirely normal. Jess shrugged and handed the signed document back to the clerk.

Another hour was spent on the getting the Temporary Import Permit for the truck. Paranoid US customs somehow thought that it would stop the stolen vehicle trade. Jess squeezed his eyes tight when they used his anorexic Visa for the guarantee. Not that they charged anything on it, but it still hurt to see it imprinted. Finally, they were back on the road.

The Comanche bounced through a shanty town of adobe and cinderblock huts, abandoned buses and wooden sheds. One long dirt road wound through the houses. Children scattered dogs and chickens running loose between the houses. Wires spider-webbed from poles to rooftops. TV antennas bristled from even the most desolate structure. Many wore faded coats of baby blue, bubblegum or lime paint. Rickety fences of scavenged chain link staggered off to end nowhere. Pink and black crosses had been painted on the sides of buildings and the word *Justica* scrawled beneath. Photocopied faces of women stared out from sheets pasted on walls, fences and telephone poles.

Getting here had been an adventure. Jess was sure glad that Manuel knew where he was going, because the cowboy was clueless. They'd been on and off pavement more times than he could count. Some of the roads were little more than tire tracks.

A battered white pickup, *Policia Municipal*, lettered in blue passed them, heading off towards the city. Jess took his eyes off the road to glance at Manuel. The *vaquero* was staring out the window with a look somewhere between wistful and relieved. "I wouldn't have thought they had police patrol in a place like this."

Manuel rolled his head towards Jess. "They don't. He probably lives here." Smiling, he teased, "Or his mistress does."

As they moved through the shanty village, the roads grew better; alternating from dirt to pavement to gravel and back. Finally they hit what must have once been the center. Now it was merely a nameless suburb of the Juarez sprawl. Every few blocks Manuel would indicate where Jess should turn. They followed an almost eight-foot-tall whitewashed wall capped with red pavers. When the *vaquero* spotted a rough wood gate, he told Jess to stop. Climbing on the Jeep's cab, he cupped his hands around his mouth and called out to the occupants. A few minutes later the gate opened and Manuel directed the cowboy through, indicating that he could park wherever in the beaten dirt courtyard.

A gap-toothed boy, age eight or so, waved them through. A small house sat off center in the yard. Shorter walls sprang off, probably framing exterior courtyards. Reddish adobe walls were set here and there with cornflower blue framed windows. The front door was more of the same blue, but the panels were picked out in shades of orange, yellow, and red. Twin pots of geraniums sat to either side. Running from the house was a slightly older girl dressed in glitter jeans. She waved and called back through the open doorway, "*¡Mama, Manuel aquí!*"

Manuel jumped from the top of the pickup and grabbed up the boy to squeals of, "*¡Primo!*" As he moved toward the door, he threw the child over his shoulder. The boy squirmed and struggled. Obviously, he enjoyed the attention of an older relative.

Laughing, Jess clambered out of the Comanche. He hadn't expected this kind of home in this kind of area. It looked like your typical Arizona adobe. Everything was pretty middle class and normal. Except for the eight-foot-tall fence. The young girl passed him, giving the cowboy a furtive once over before flashing a shy smile with down-turned eyes. He upped her age to somewhere in early adolescence. She kept looking back over her shoulder at him as she closed the gate. Just what he needed: a pre-teen crush.

Manuel dropped the boy back to his feet, tussling his hair. "*Arturo, vamos. Dile a tu madre tengo un amigo.*" When Jess caught up, Manuel wrapped a strong arm around the cowboy's shoulder. "You will like Graciella." The embrace carried them through the door and into a cool interior courtyard. Built in a U around the space, double doors opened onto the patio at various intervals. "She is very nice." Slightly embarrassed, he coughed and spoke into his fist. "Graciella understands me."

Without realizing it, Jess relaxed some. "So we don't need to, ah, hide anything."

"Not unless her husband is around." Black eyes rolled. "he knows. He is not as bad as *Tio*, but not in his house."

"Gotcha." Manuel led him left, into a small but comfortable living room. There he was formally introduced to the family. Maria-Luz was thirteen, Arturo nine. Jess had been a little off with both their ages. Their father was away on business. Without realizing it, Jess relaxed at the news. Then Graciella appeared with sodas, ordering them all about like children and switching fluidly from Spanish to English and back again. Finally everyone was arranged to her satisfaction.

"I don't understand why he did this." Manuel sat on the floor, his cousin Arturo twisting and turning in his lap...killing monsters on his Game Boy. The conversation was punctuated by occasional electronic explosions. Even with the sound turned down, it was obnoxious. Maria-Luz was parked at the dining table pretending to tackle her homework. Jess guessed that she was more intent on hearing the family gossip than finishing her math.

Cultured and beautiful, Graciella perched on the edge of the leather couch. Manicured hands rested between her knees as she leaned forward. "Oh, *m'ijo*, he is jealous of you." In pedal-pushers, a sweater set, and high heeled sandals, she looked like any other southwestern housewife. Because Jess was there, they were speaking in English. Better that the children not quite understand the conversation than be rude to their guest.

Voices raised to counter the computer generated soundtrack. "*¿Celoso? ¿Tio?*" Manuel pushed the boy off his legs and shooed him across the room with a comment in Spanish. Then he returned his attention to the adults. "He's like my father to me. Why would he be jealous?"

"Because, you have the *don*," Graciella smiled like it should be obvious. "Your life is blessed, *m'ijo*. All the gifts he wished are yours." She pushed her carefully styled hair behind her ear. Gold rings flashed on her fingers. "Why did you not do the *Cala de Caballo*? Hum? Tell me."

Stretching his legs out and easing off his sore hip, Manuel countered, "Because Gillermo has trained his horse for that."

A shake of her head denied his reason. "But Mango is a better horse than his. You are a better trainer than he is." She laughed. "You forget, I taught you both how to work the horses."

"Gillermo is good." It was obvious to Jess that Manuel was defending the indefensible. Even his own voice said it.

Her look said he was not. Not by half. "And *la Mangana? Jineteo? Colear?*" She rattled off the events of the *Charreda*. "You could do all of them for your association. I know *caballos* and their riders as well as my brother. We all grew up with them. You could be *el charro completo*. But Jose won't let you, *m'ijo*...because his own sons are nothing compared to you. He is nothing compared to you."

"But why?" Manuel leaned back, one elbow supporting his weight on Jess' knee. "Why would he hate me? Why would he take Mango?"

"Because jealousy is a strange thing, *m'ijo*." With a sigh she settled back into the couch. "I told him it was wrong for him to do this. But you can not tell Jose anything. It is why your mother left, would rather work cleaning someone's floor then have him say how she should live her life. She knew he would take care of you, but she was so sad. You know it was very hard for her to say good-bye to you. She cried so much." Moving back into the present, she added, "You must be careful, you understand this? Jose can be very mean when he thinks he is right and you are wrong." She stood and smiled gently at the pair. "Tonight stay here. Tomorrow you can go follow him. Take the trailer Miguel uses. It is out back. I will make dinner and have Maria-Luz and Arturo clean up his room for you." Her tone said she understood they would share it.

An old horse trailer, single, straight load, sat behind a rickety outbuilding. Rust stained every seam. *Shit, the thing has to be at least thirty years old.* Jess kicked the tires. They were, surprisingly, in reasonably good condition. He hitched himself up onto the rear gate, using the crumbling backed fender as a step. The only thing in reasonably good condition was the tires. Inside, a warped plywood floor was gouged and cracked.

"Manuel, you sure about this?" Open vents ran down each side. The floor of the manger had fallen into the tack compartment below, which was missing the access panel. Bumpers were long rotted out. "You're going to put Mango in here?"

Moving up behind the cowboy, Manuel yanked the bolt. As it screeched in protest Jess jumped down. "If you have a better idea," Manuel forced it open and stepped inside. With a bounce he tested the floor. "You tell me."

Jess followed. The trailer smelled like oil and old metal. "This thing looks like it's been through hell. What did your uncle do with it?"

More rust flaked to the floor as the *vaquero* kicked at the sides. "He sometimes uses it to deliver the wrought iron gates he makes." Face lined with concern, Manuel turned and rested his butt against the manger. "It will work. It has to work."

The last thing Manuel needed was more doubt.

"Yeah, we'll make it work." Jess slid his arms around Manuel's waist and pulled him in close. "No matter what, we'll make it work."

All the strain of the day finally hit him. He dropped his head on Manuel's shoulder. Nuzzling in behind one ear, Jess drew on Manuel's resolve. What strength he had, Jess tried to pass back through his touch. The sheepskin lining of Manuel's jacket tickled the cowboy's nose. Jess exhaled with a puff, trying to move the offending fibers without having to actually move. The *vaquero* shivered as the breath slid under fabric and across his skin.

Standing there, with Manuel in his arms, the weight of his *vaquero* worked its way through his senses. Faint memories of Mango and hay drifted up from Manuel's coat. Stress smelled good on the *vaquero's* skin. All cowboy...all guy. Suddenly Jess' jeans were way too tight. "Fuck, I should no better then to get this close to you."

Soft laughter floated between them. Manuel's fingers buried themselves under Jess' coat and tugged the T-shirt from his jeans. "Aye, *papi*, I have the same problem."

Finally, fingers found skin and Manuel ran a light touch up Jess' spine. The cowboy shuddered as chills followed fingers. He rubbed himself against Manuel. Two hard cocks trapped in two pairs of jeans, Jess didn't know if he could stand waiting for what he wanted...what he needed. Desperate for a taste, he drove his mouth onto Manuel's. The *charro's* hard kiss answered him. It was still wonderful—somehow Jess knew it would always be wonderful. A need and an execution matched to his own. They could kiss this way forever and it would be enough. Manuel shifted and their erections bumped together again. Okay, well, enough for the time being. Things would eventually need to be taken care of.

Right now Jess relished the flavor of Manuel's mouth. One hand slid between denim and skin to squeeze Manuel's tight cheek. The other worked its way behind a tense brown neck and Jess' strong fingers worked on relaxing the corded muscles he found. Manuel was still lighting fires under his skin with bold caresses. Already, the *vaquero* had found most of his sensitive spots. He sought them out and responded to the tiniest cues. No wonder he was so damn good with horses. If Manuel kept this up, Jess would be trained in no time flat.

Not that that was a bad thing.

Parting lips with his tongue, Jess toyed with the other man. So good. So hot. So much want and comfort flowed between them.

When Manuel began fumbling with his belt, Jess jumped. "Out here?" Shit, they were kinda away from the house, but it was hardly private. Anyone coming round the building would get an eyeful.

"Sí." He was working all kinds of crazy into the cowboy's thoughts. "*Aquí*."

"Right now?"

Manuel pulled away and stared at him with heat. Licking his lips as an evil grin spread, "You'd feel better about it in *mís primo's* room after dinner?"

Yeah, that did sound just a little creepy. "Right now." He shuddered, then moved in close. "I guess warped minds think alike, huh? You, me, a quick roll in the hay. Bet you had this planned from the get-go."

"Less talking, more kissing."

Jess didn't need to hear that more than once. He cupped both of Manuel's toned cheeks in his hands and pulled the *vaquero* against him. If the words didn't break down his resolve, the kisses did. They were both so hard. This kind of desire, it was like he was back in high school—when you couldn't think of anything but sex. It was amazing how Manuel could get him from mildly interested to a state of got-to-have-it-now in a matter of seconds. They'd have to kill him to make him give it up.

If he was lucky, it would still be there. Fishing in the inside pocket of his jacket, Jess found what he was after. Sample packet of lubrication and condom left from his last foray into Tucson's night life just before heading out for El Paso; some awareness organization had been passing them out. He was so glad he'd taken them on the just-because theory. "I," he hissed against Manuel's lips as he worked at freeing the caballero's throbbing dick, "want you."

Fingers yanking Jess' belt through the loops, "*Sí, papi, también.*"

While Manuel fought with his jeans, Jess ripped open the pack. Then he leaned in for another taste of his lover. It was so good like this. It was about to get ten times better. The plastic packet drifted to the floor. One hand, thumb cradling the lube against his palm, settled along the small of Manuel's back. The other took control of that beautiful, uncut cock. Slowly he rolled the condom down Manuel's length.

"What," startled, the *charro* pulled back, "are you doing?"

Jess laughed. Moving in, brushing Manuel's lips, he finished sliding the latex into place. "I said I wanted you." He pushed the shirt up the flat planes of Manuel's stomach. Damn, he was so fine. "Don't you want me?"

"Oh." Hips rolled into his touch. "I didn't know you meant like that."

Maybe Manuel wasn't into everything. "You okay with it?"

Instead of words, Manuel used his mouth to answer. His tongue forced itself between Jess' lips to pillage his mouth. The force of his body backed them across the tiny space until Jess was flat against the metal. Strong hands yanked the denim off the cowboy's hips. *He was definitely okay with it.* Desire like that promised a wild ride. He pressed the sample into Manuel's palm and then buried his hand in a mass of black hair. Manuel's fingers slid in from behind, circling his hole before slipping inside. Jess shuddered and moaned.

He wanted Manuel to fuck him hard and deep. The way the *charro* was opening him up, Manuel wanted to fuck him hard and deep. His cock slid under Manuel's T-shirt. Skin on one side, cloth on the other, it felt so damn good. Slow, burning fire worked through his thighs and prick. Barely able to breathe under the assault, Jess managed, "I got to turn around, baby."

Manuel pulled back. Dark eyes smoked with desire. "Aye, Jessé," he purred, "*te adoro.*"

Jess swallowed. God, the man was so sexy. He didn't want to turn away. Still, the way Manuel's cock was poking up into the air all red and hard and impatient, he couldn't wait to have his lover inside him. He licked his lips and turned.

One hand braced on the wall, the other gripping the manger, Jess bent over. Manuel's fingers dug into his hips, taking control of them both. He could feel that hot, pulsing head at the entrance to his body. It felt so big. It was going to spread him so nice. Anticipation thrummed in his veins. Then the *vaquero* moved. A hot tongue ran behind Jess' ear as Manuel's sheathed cock slid between his tight cheeks. Fire and chills warred within his body.

"God, yeah!" Jess took it slow, enjoying the ride as he pushed back onto that thick prick, letting it go deep.

Manuel wrapped himself around Jess' body, pushing up their shirts and coats so skin could touch skin. The cowboy's hand worked his cock, his balls, reached back to explore where their bodies met. He could feel the velvet of Manuel's prick as it slid in and out of him. A warm, strong

hand enveloped his dick and stroked. Manuel angled himself to rub right against *that spot*. Jess bucked and moaned. Fuck working horses, Manuel knew just how to work a man.

Jess rolled his hips, riding the cock deep inside him. "Deeper, fuck yeah! Like that!"

Manuel's hands soothed like magic. Inside and outside, Jess was in heaven. Sure and confident in his thrusts, Manuel picked up the pace. The touching burned in between Jess' legs, spreading out in waves through balls and cock. Jess gave up and let Manuel control them.

Manuel pounded him so good. Jess dropped his head on his arm and just let himself fall into pleasure. "*La ultima*," Manuel's whispers shredded any last resistance, "*mí corasón*." Jess rocked back, feeling himself open up and take everything Manuel had to offer. Things were tightening, tingling. Jess' balls sucked up into his body. His cock throbbed in Manuel's grip. Manuel chanted, "*Papi, papi*," as he shuddered and squeezed Jess hard.

Moaning, Jess threw his head back. Everything faded except he and Manuel and their shared pleasure. He couldn't stop the shudders even after he was spent. "Goddamn, Manuel," shivering as a brown finger ran up the inside of his thigh, "that was so good."

"*Perfecto*," Manuel sighed, resting his head on Jess' back. "Always with you it's perfect." Jess figured it always would be, too.

Chapter Four

First light found them heading towards the highway, bouncing along the same dirt roads out of town. Miles and miles of endless highway passed beneath the truck's tires. Red brown clay stretched off into a horizon littered with arid hills. Crumbling sandstone and black basalt broke into the vast expanse of a turquoise sky. At one point they crossed over a twisted strip of blue water bordered by narrow margins of green. Thirsty cottonwood trees hugged the banks. Scrub mesquite and creosote bordered a graded dirt road. Manuel indicated that he should turn off onto a road that was little more than wheel tracks leading off into undulating grey hills. Occasional stands of Prickly pear appeared at the margin of the road.

They stopped at a village—not more than a few shacks clustered around a rundown gas station. Manuel bought them sodas pulled from a chest of dirty water. Then he used the break to phone *Tio* from his cell. Jess leaned against the truck, chewing on a *torta* Graciella had packed. Whatever Manuel and *Tio* said to each other, it was angry. Finally, Manuel jabbed the disconnect. Smiling, he took the meat-filled roll Jess offered.

"What are you so happy about?"

"*Tio* thinks I am stuck in Juarez." Manuel winked. "Graciella told him I was trying to find a bus ticket. She said she would say that if he called, because he deserves whatever I give him. And he needs to be surprised."

Jess shook his head. "Remind me to never get involved in one of your family conspiracies."

Manuel's smile grew so big all of his teeth showed. "Too late, Jessé, you already are." Slapping the cowboy's shoulder, he laughed, "Come on, time to drive. We have a long way to go to get there."

There was a certain majestic beauty to all that space. If you looked close, there was so much life. Tiny yellow flowers bloomed under grey-green mesquite. Stands of bright-red wolf berries dotted the hills. Behind that, the rich, deeper shades of scrub oak framed rust-streaked boulders. A lone hawk traced circles in the sky. Jack rabbits bounded across the road. Once Jess swore he saw a mule deer peeking from behind the ground cover.

As the sun dropped low in the sky the road started to climb through the foothills. A bend in the track skittered around the margin of a hill, then opened up to the vista of a small town. Unlimited adobes and whitewashed homes peeked out between trees and cleared fields. The valley rolled around between hills, moving off into mountains. Above them drifted immense, white clouds. Their paths were marked by shadows staining the ground. The first fences Jess had seen began to appear. Rough, long branches shoved into the ground supported strands of barbed wire. Jess figured they were less for the safety of drivers and more to keep valuable livestock from getting run over.

An adobe building with a flat, corrugated tin roof and a sign advertising sodas and cervezas marked the edge of the town. Almost at its door step, the road went from just dirt to gravel mixed with dirt. Outbuildings were randomly tacked together with more tin and plywood fencing to form one continuous jigsaw. Behind, a slightly less ramshackle two-story building sported a satellite dish. Even farther back, among a few twisted trees, Jess could just make out the rusted carcass of a water tank. A pink on pink adobe hotel sat slightly down and across. An open porch ran along the front, also roofed in tin, and threw a bit of shade along the walkway. Beyond that the road dropped off into an *arroyo*. Barely visible between the cottonwoods was the red clay roof and yellow bell tower of the local church.

The farther into town they went the brighter the buildings became. There still was no pavement, but gravel began to dominate, and thick, concrete sidewalks materialized. Lemon yellow with mint casements and railings on the left, turquoise to the right and directly ahead a bubblegum cantina. None of the intersections had even stop signs. Telephone and electrical wires zipped above their heads. People seemed to park their cars wherever the mood struck them.

Manuel tapped his shoulder and pointed to another long, low building. "We should stop for now." This one was off-white with a red border at the base. A hand lettered sign, also in red, proclaimed *Cuartos de Renta*. "We can stay there tonight."

Manuel spoke with the woman in charge. Except for bits and pieces, Jess didn't understand a word of it. Finally, the lady handed Manuel a key and pointed him through an arch way. A narrow hall dead-ended at a wrought iron security door with what appeared to be plywood bolted on the other side. Unpainted hollow-core doors were spaced at uneven intervals, and an occasional exterior style window broke up the expanse of wall. Their boots clicked on terra-cotta tile floors as they made their way down the space. Hand lettered numbers were stenciled on the walls. Each was surrounded by flowers, and people and dancing animals.

The place was clean; clean in Mexico was a good thing. An unadorned room with concrete floors greeted them when Manuel opened the door. He flipped the switch to reveal an eight by eight space. The room held two beds, one a seventies era cast off and the other a military cot with barely enough space to sidle sideways between them. Linens of stripes, checks, and flowers covered the pillows and mattresses. A child's paisley quilt, in faded pinks and purples, was folded at the foot of the cot. The bigger bed sported a thick Indian blanket. Jess didn't have to guess which would be warmer.

"So where's the bathroom?"

Manuel tossed his bag on the smaller bed. "The door at the end of the hall." He stretched and offered up a bright smile. "*Señora* Ortiz has invited us to dinner. She has no other guests tonight."

Thinking back over the long, lonely drive, "Why am I not surprised by that?"

"Do not worry. This is a good place." He slid up next to Jess, brushing his thumb across the cowboy's cheek. "Also, she says to pull your truck and trailer into the yard. They will be safer there."

After re-parking the vehicles, they wandered down to the cantina and bought a few bottles of beer. Outside of the tourist areas drinking in public was uncommon. A dinner of *Posole* awaited them. They ate in the kitchen of the owner's home. A short, covered walkway accessed the simple kitchen. They got the nice, metal chairs, the owner a stool and his wife and their three children stood or sat on the floor.

When Jess moved to give the woman his seat, Manuel kicked him under the table. Leaning in, "No, Jess," Manuel hissed in his ear, "we paid, we sit. Even for money we are his guests. They would think it rude if we did not."

The eldest girl served them bowls of hominy, chilies, and pork stewed in a thick broth. Their host's mother slapped *masa* between her palms, forming tortillas as they ate, and baking them quickly on a cast iron skillet before tossing them onto mismatched plates.

Dinner eaten, they sat in their host's backyard, drank their beer, and watched the sun set. Manuel seemed overly pensive, quiet. Trying to bring him back up, Jess offered, "It'll be okay." Jess wasn't sure how or why it would be okay; he just knew he had to tell Manuel that.

"I don't know, Jessé." Manuel tipped his bottle back and considered it for a time before taking a drink. "It could be dangerous. We could get arrested. *Tio* is a powerful man where he lives. Maybe I should do this alone?" He set the bottle between his feet, resting his elbows on his knees. "If I get caught, I might spend a little time in jail, but everybody knows me there and our family would make him back down eventually. You don't have family here. Things could get very bad. I don't want to make problems for you."

"Don't you even think about doing this without me," Jess sputtered. Manuel better not be getting any crazy ideas into his head about facing his uncle alone. The guy was a snake. "You don't have to face this by yourself. I'm here for you and I'm not going to leave you. Got it?"

A soft footfall behind them startled both men and cut off Manuel's response. They turned to find *Abuela* Ortiz smiling from the kitchen doorway. A well-thumbed deck of cards was clutched to her bosom. She spoke to Manuel in Spanish and he responded in kind. After a brief conversation that Jess couldn't understand, *Abuela* waddled down the porch to a small table, beckoning them to follow.

"And?" Jess' prompt caught Manuel as he stood.

Embarrassed, a flush crawled up the *vaquero's* neck. "Sorry, Jessé. She said I looked worried and maybe I could use some help."

"That's damn certain." Jess took a swig of his beer as he pushed out of his chair.

"She says," Manuel ran his teeth over his bottom lip, "she says she will read my future for me."

"You're shitting me, right?"

"No, I am not *shitting* you." Manuel shrugged and glared. "What is wrong with letting an old lady tell my fortune? Besides, she may have the *don* and know these things."

"The *don*?" The first time he'd heard it, Jess had just let it pass. Now he wanted to know. "Didn't your Aunt Gabriella say you had the *don*?"

Manuel's face and tone were serious. "Yes, but with horses. To say someone has the *don* means they have been gifted by God." Scratching the back of his head, he continued, "Not everyone is blessed, and those who are blessed are not all given the same gifts. Some can heal. Some can see the future. Some can remove curses. But it means God has chosen you to do something special."

"And your something special is with horses."

"That's what they say." More self-effacing, Manuel dropped his chin as a shy smile drifted across his mouth. "I know, when I touch an animal, what it can do, what I can make it do. They know me, they trust me." As if pointing out a string of horses, the *vaquero* gestured into the yard, "I see them and I can say: this one can jump, that one only wants to win, to run. The mare doesn't like dogs or this horse will be good with children. If they are upset, I can calm them. I can make them do things no one else can. I don't know how I do these things, but I am always right." He shook it off. "It is something you cannot fight."

The old woman shuffled the yellow-backed cards and handed them to Manuel as he sat. They were soiled from use and smaller than regular playing cards. Manuel showed them to Jess, spreading them so he could see the faces. "*Loteria*, it is a game, like bingo...but she uses the cards for other things." The cards were brightly colored with pictures of men, women, animals and things, but no suits or face cards that Jess recognized. Each card was numbered and below the picture was the item's name. "She says she will use them to tell my future." Scooping them back up, Manuel reshuffled the deck and set it on the table in front of the old woman. She drew the first card from the top of the deck.

The first card went down face up and *Abula* Ortiz sang out its riddle. As the old woman spoke Manuel translated, "The camel carries his home in his hump." She smiled and tapped the card, "This is Manuel, me, it is a strong card. It says what troubles are in front of you, you are prepared, have the strength to overcome. Everything you need is in you." Below the first card she laid down a brightly colored rooster, above it a spread hand. Those cards had come from the middle, and then the bottom of the deck. It was the pattern she would use for drawing all the cards.

"The foundation of the problem is jealousy. The rooster does not want to give up his position as king. A criminal hand is working now...someone who acts rashly and does not hold his temper in check."

Jess snorted. "That's what your aunt said about *Tio*." Mirroring Manuel's dark glare, "You didn't need a fortune teller to tell you that."

"*Callete*," the *vaquero* chided him, intent on what the *abuela* said. The next three cards were dealt out to the very left, above and right of that representing the conflict. She tapped the faces as she spoke, "The *Valiente*," a bullfighter stood with his cape at his side, "there have been quarrels in the past with those I love, and they have not been resolved. Now they have made war, disagreement, broken trusts." The second card in the series pictured a leaping stage. Moving to the third, crossed arrows tied with a ribbon, "These things have made my future shaky; how I meet the problem...my own courage will be what solves things."

A rearing horse was turned and placed over the picture of the criminal hand. "I will be helped by good friends." With that she looked up and smiled at Jess. Now a scorpion went down on the pile. "But she says I must think about not being overconfident, I should listen to my friend and let him help. Things will go badly if I do not. The scorpion bites with his tail not his claws." Next came skeletal death and Jess sucked in his breath. Manuel shook his head. "No, it is a good card. Strength, courage, a clear mind and heart will overcome problems." The final card was a spider sitting in her web. "The spider, in her web, lets dinner come to her. Prepare yourself, don't rush, let things go as they will once you have made your plans and things will go right."

An intense discussion in Spanish slipped between Manuel and the woman. Jess was dying to know what they were saying. Finally the *charro* translated. "She says that this problem has been coming for a long time and I have not wanted to see it. I was blind to it because I trusted that he loved me. And he still does, but right now his anger has overcome his heart. Everything I need to help us get Mango back, I have. But I must listen to you, trust you and other people, and plan, not rush or things will go badly. When I put my pride ahead of me, I will be just as bad as him. Only with a clear heart can I get Mango."

That pretty much summed up fortunetelling for Jess. A lot of vague statements that could apply to just about anything. Jess thought they were done, but the old woman began to shuffle the cards. Then she tapped them to Manuel's forehead and slammed the remainder of the deck on the table. Pulling one final card from the center she set it facedown, out and away from the others. Manuel licked his lips, and then turned it over. A violoncello, the instrument's neck tied with brightly colored ribbons, showed on its face. The old woman laughed and said something in Spanish. Manuel looked away without translating the last.

With a pat to his hand she stood and waddled inside. The cards were left on the table and Manuel studied them for a time. Then he ran his hand over the table mixing the cards. He stood, "Come on, Jessé, I am tired."

Following Manuel back to the room, Jess had to tap Manuel on the shoulder to get his attention. "What was the last card?"

"Nothing." The *charro* shook his head as they stepped into their room.

Manuel was hiding something from him. Jess didn't like that one bit. He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. "Bullshit," he spat. "Tell me what shook you up. Did she say something bad was going to happen?"

"No, nothing like that." He sighed, and dropped onto the edge of the bed. "The last card, it is the Devil's card." Half of it was almost lost as Manuel pulled his T-shirt over his head. "It is for the question you are afraid to ask or you don't know to ask."

Toeing out of his boots while he unbuckled his belt, "And what was the question?" Jess dropped his jeans on his bag and then followed it with the rest of his clothes.

"I don't know." Manuel twisted the shirt in his hands. Responding to Jess' heavy stare, "No, I really don't, but the answer is everything in my life is changing," his voice wavered, "and it is because I love someone and they love me and it is stronger and bigger than I've ever had before." Crumpling the shirt into a ball, Manuel tossed it onto the smaller bed. "That's just what an old woman says. It is nothing."

Jess crawled across the bed. That old woman had insight into people if nothing else. His Nana had been like that: able to just look at someone and know why they were hurting. It could really throw you when she hit the nail on the head. Hell, she'd known he was gay years before he'd admitted it to himself. Insight like that could shake you to your core.

"No, it's everything, and that's why it's scary." Kneeling behind Manuel, his thumbs worked out from the center of the *vaquero's* spine and across his shoulders. Manuel rolled his head into the touch as he kicked off his boots.

After a time where he just relaxed under Jess' massage, Manuel sighed and flopped back on the bed. "I would feel very bad if something happened to you, Jessé." Manuel picked at the blanket with one hand and ran his other along the cowboy's bare thigh.

Jess could see the wheels turning, trying to make sense of things. Sometimes there wasn't any sense and you just had to go with your gut. He reckoned this was one of those times. Jess' gut told him this was exactly where he needed to be.

Sliding down so he could be closer to his *vaquero*, Jess whispered, "It scares me, too, how I feel." He wrapped his legs and arms around Manuel, drawing him farther onto the bed. "But it's okay, you know. Everything will be fine."

Manuel snuggled back into Jess' embrace. With a deep sigh, "Oh, Jessé, I don't know."

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you." The cowboy ran his fingers through the fine pelt of hair along the back of Manuel's skull. "I'm not going to let anyone take you away from me."

"You take care of me, huh? Is that how it is?" Manuel's voice went bitter. "Keep *Manuelito* all protected from the bad men out there."

"Don't like that idea, do you?" Jess chuckled. "Let me guess...you've said some things that got me thinking that you've spent a lot of time pushing people away. You're never quite sure why they want you. You don't really trust it. Been hit on by a few too many, ah, chasers?" The *caballero's* snort said he hit it right. Moving in close to whisper in his lover's ear, "Manuel, I love who you are...not what you are. I'd love it whether it was packaged in black or yellow or green." With his other arm, the cowboy pulled Manuel in tight. "I've fallen hard and I've fallen fast. But everything is telling me this is right where I'm 'sposed to be. Yeah, so I take care of you and you take care of me. That's how it is."

"I think I've fallen for you, too, *papi*."

"You called me your '*mí corasón*' yesterday. What does that mean?"

Manuel was quite for so long, Jess didn't think he was going to answer. Finally, "It means you are my heart." He tickled the hairs along Jess' arm with a light caress. "I live only because you exist."

"I wish I had some way to say it as pretty as that."

"Every time you touch me, your body says it."

Jess worked his way over Manuel's neck with his kisses. "Then I'm going to say it forever." Sliding his hands down across that flat, brown stomach, and underneath the band of Manuel's jeans, he found what he wanted. The *vaquero's* cock was soft and warm under his fingers. Feeling him come alive in his hand, Jess hissed. Right there, that feeling was magic. It lit up every nerve in Jess' body. Each pass of his fingers across Manuel's silky skin was heaven. How he moaned and pushed into the touch let Jess know Manuel felt it, too.

The *vaquero* popped the buttons on his jeans. Jess helped him work the denim off his hips. He savored how warm Manuel's body was against his. "You're incredible," he whispered as he fumbled behind them, searching for what they needed. Kicking his pants to the floor, Manuel twisted against Jess to find his mouth. Manuel's thick cock thumped in time with his heart. Jess had never seen anything so sexy.

His hand ran down Manuel's side, playing with that heavy weight in his hand, stroking rock hard silk. He left off the touch for a moment to get prepared, and then his slick fingers were back toying with Manuel's hole. Manuel shivered against him.

"Aye, *papi*, it's so good with you."

"That's 'cause we're meant for each other."

"*Sí*," the *charro* rolled his hips, encouraging Jess to push inside. "*Dios los cría y ellos se juntan*."

"And that means?" He hissed as the slick heat sucked in his fingers.

"God makes them," more rocking as the cowboy's fingers explored, "and they find each other." He rode Jess' hand for a time then, "You're so good to me, *papi*, but I need you to be bad right now."

Jess moaned and withdrew his fingers. "I can do bad." The *charro*'s back was so warm against his chest. With the cool night air sliding over them, the heat of their skin was almost unbearable. One hand stroked Manuel's cheek and ear, pushing him gently towards Jess' lips. When they finally kissed, Jess shuddered. Tonight Manuel was needy. Jess could feel it through his kiss. What he didn't want to admit with words, the *vaquero*'s body cried out for. "I love you." He mumbled against Manuel's lips. "Want you so bad." With his other hand Jess pulled Manuel's bruised leg back over his hip, and the cowboy slid into that velvet heat from behind. Damn, always so tight, so good.

"Aye, *Jessé*!" Manuel arched into the kiss. His hands wandered aimlessly over Jess' arms, lighting fires wherever he touched. Every ounce of Manuel's soul sucked Jess inside. The cowboy could watch Manuel's body, fill the void deep inside like this. Whisper how much he wanted him, needed him, hold him so close as they rocked together.

"You like my cock deep inside you, huh?" Slow and easy was so good right now.

Manuel's hand moved to stroke himself. "*Si, papi*, I do."

"I like it inside you, too," Jess murmured. Manuel bowed his back, gripping the cowboy's cock with his entire body. It was so hot inside. So tight. Watching Manuel's fingers dance across that beautiful, thick shaft sent chills drifting between Jess' legs. How did Manuel get so sexy so fast? Maybe 'cause he didn't put any pretensions on it. They were just together, and whatever happened was okay with him.

Manuel's hips were grinding him down on Jess' cock. Good God, the man knew how to move. His luck, or gift, or whatever, seemed to go beyond horses. He knew just when to arch. He knew just how to buck to drive Jess deep inside. Manuel drove Jess nuts with the sensations, but the cowboy could tell it wasn't heading towards the buzzer as quickly for Manuel. He tried to hold back. And then he looked in Manuel's smoky eyes. They dropped to half-mast and a wicked smile played over his lips then Manuel bore down hard.

It was all Jess could do to whisper, "Fuck!" as he came. Jess tried to find his breath. "Oh, Manuel, oh damn, Manuel!" Finally, "So not fair."

Manuel laughed. "But I like to give you that."

"You think it's funny?" Spent, he slipped from Manuel's body. Wriggling out from beneath, Jess simultaneously smacked the *charro*'s shoulder and got rid of the condom.

Still chuckling, Manuel flopped back on the mattress. Languidly he stroked himself. "*Sí*, I think it is funny." As desire lit up his eyes, Manuel's fingers danced along the pulsing veins. Jess watched for a bit. Watching Manuel touch himself was so hot. Hot enough that his own prick tried to rally.

Lower lip caught between his teeth, Manuel ran his free hand across Jess' hip. The cowboy shivered at the touch. "Come on, *papi*," Manuel smiled, "suck on me."

Now Jess laughed. "You are a pushy fucking bottom, you know that?"

"I know," his touch grew more tenuous, more electric, "what I want; what you want."

Why fight fate? "Yeah, you do." Jess caught Manuel's hand and kissed his palm. Then he bent forward and ran his tongue across the tip. Manuel lifted his hips into the contact. The little drops of moisture dripping from that red, hot head tasted so good; sweet, musky and so male.

Slowly he worked Manuel into his mouth. The *vaquero* was almost big enough to choke him, but he wanted to take all of Manuel. Savoring the heady flavor, he sucked slow and hard. Manuel's burning skin ran like velvet between his lips.

Manuel moaned and bucked. Jess sought out the *vaquero's* sensitive hole. He stroked and teased and tickled before pushing inside. Even after all that Manuel was still so tight. Another deep moan rewarded the cowboy's efforts. Manuel wasn't the only one who knew how to work a guy. Jess sucked and pulled until Manuel was shaking. He pressed the *vaquero's* sensitive head against the roof of his mouth.

Manuel's fingers clawed into his scalp. It was as though he couldn't decide whether to push the cowboy down or pull him off. Chants of "*Aye, papi!*" drove him harder. Manuel shuddered. His body balled. Then all that sweet flavor exploded inside Jess' mouth.

The cowboy kept sucking. He kept it up until Manuel dropped, exhausted, onto the bed. Then he crawled up and kissed his *charro* deeply. Manuel's tongue slipped inside his mouth. They shared the taste for what seemed like forever. Finally, Jess' body reminded him that it was damn cold. He wormed his way under the covers, pulling the Indian blanket up and Manuel under with him.

Snuggled deep under both sets of blankets, Jess held Manuel tight. "I don't want you to worry."

"If I said that to you, what would you say?"

"I'd say you were full of shit." Jess chuckled and Manuel smiled. "Okay, I'm nervous as a green filly...you?"

"We say, like a rabbit who smells a snake, but the same."

"So we going in guns ablazing or bust that pony out all quiet like?"

"We don't have guns."

"Just take me literally why don't you?"

"Let me think tonight, *papi*." A soothing kiss passed between them. "We will talk tomorrow."

Chapter Five

Manuel was still snoring when Jess woke. It was early—early by his watch dial. No matter how tempting, there was no sense waking the *vaquero*. Manuel could use the shut eye. Jess jumped into his jeans, grabbed his other clothes, and snuck to the bathroom. After hosing down as much as possible, Jess finished dressing in the cramped space. Light found him attacking the horse trailer. He always kept a few tools in the box in the bed of the truck. Not that he needed a lot for this. Tin snips, duct tape, and a big ass staple gun were plenty.

When Manuel appeared, bearing a cracked mug of coffee, the cowboy was stapling the last of his ancient sleeping bag onto the wooden bumpers. "Hey," Jess called out the back, pointing to a pile of miscellaneous stuff he'd dug out of the construction castoffs Jess carted off his last job, "you wanna grab me that bucket and bungees there?"

With the toe of his boot, Manuel sorted suspiciously through the pile of bits and parts. The *charro* pushed the bright tie downs to one side. As though the old paint bucket might bite him, Manuel kicked it before grabbing the handle and tossing the bungee cords into the bucket. Handing the coffee to Jess, "What have you been doing?" Manuel peered inside the trailer.

Jess smiled and took the offered mug. Leaning against the newly re-upholstered bumper, "Trying to fix this piece of shit up enough that we don't kill Mango before we get him home." As he swallowed the bitter brew, he looked over his handiwork. It wasn't the best, but it would do.

Strips of faded blue nylon ran down either side and across the front. Fabric folded over twice made a nice cushion against the bumps of the road. For his first attempt at upholstery, Jess figured he'd done damn well. You could hardly see the staples tacking down the padding. A scrap of corrugated tin, duct-taped into place, re-floored the manger. Another covered the door-less storage underneath. The point was to keep Mango from hurting himself on sharp edges. Pretty, it was not.

"Why don't you use the bungies to lash the bucket," Jess used his mug to point to the manger, "up front for water."

Scooting past him, Manuel suspiciously fingered the taped down tin. Then he began strapping the bucket to the wall. "All this with tape and staples?"

"There ain't nothing that can't be fixed with staples and duct tape." Jess pitched the remainder of the coffee into the yard. "Grab your stuff. Let's head out. We got a horse to rescue."

With a wave they were off. The *machaca Abula* Ortiz insisted on packing bounced in a box on the seat. The shredded beef was dried and mixed with some odd sort of vegetable Manuel called *nopales*. Jess wasn't sure he wanted to try it, even if Manuel wolfed it down.

Early road trip teasing disappeared into silence as the miles passed by. They hadn't seen a soul in hours. Trails doubled back. There were far more roads leading off into the wilderness than were indicated on the maps. Not that those were terribly accurate anyway, contradicting each other time and again. Generally, they stuck to the path of the power lines, since those tended to head towards habitation. Once they hit the mountains, Jess had to abandon even that small comfort. They relied mostly on Manuel's memory and dead reckoning. New roads had been added, old paths washed away, since the last time he'd visited *Tio*.

The track they followed zigzagged off into the hills. Its ascent was marked by greener and greener foliage. Mesquite was replaced by scrub pine. That in turn gave way, first to *piñon*, and then ponderosas. Grading went from uneven, to rough, to almost impassible. Just for fun, narrow and windy was thrown in on top. Time and again, the road fell off into sheer chasms. No

guardrails bordered the track. You could either drive, or you could watch the scenery, but not both.

In between sessions of being utterly lost, they made decent time.

A bang and a jolt to the steering column followed by the all too familiar *whup, whup* of deflated rubber sent Jess' insides spiraling. There was a wobble Jess was certain hadn't been there before. The truck shuddered and fought him. Crappy roads didn't help one bit for keeping control. Of course, it had to happen now, in the middle of nowhere, hours from the last hint of human habitation, and on a dirt track barely wide enough for the truck. He ignored Manuel's surprised "*¿Que es?*" concentrating instead on not slamming on the breaks and sending them sliding over the side. There was no shoulder, so the cowboy just eased the old Jeep to a stop in the center of the track.

Finally Jess managed to breathe. "Shit, blew a tire!"

Manuel leaned out the open window, glancing first to the front and then the rear of the pickup. "Not on this side." Of course not. That was the side where the mountain went up, not down.

Jess' door opened onto about a foot and a half of dirt before falling off into sky. Reddish boulders and scree tumbled down a steep, undulating slope where scraggly bushes and windswept trees clung. Gnarled branches clothed in red bark clutched the air as they leaned out over the canyons. The vagaries of the Chihuahua Mountains, cactus mixed with pines, scrub oak and tall stands rye grass to make one torturous hill side. Not too far down, the clatter of a small stream could be heard. Jess eased himself out of the cab and slid along the side of the truck. When he was at the bed, Jess confirmed the rear tire was intact. So the front had blown.

At least that meant the jack could be anchored under the front bumper and give him a little more room to work. He hauled out the jack, lug wrench, and balding spare from under the box. *Fuck, the damn thing was worse than what it replaced.* If the spare survived the rest of the journey, it would be a miracle.

Manuel hooked his arms over the side of the bed. "So, not too good, Jessé?"

"Could be worse." Jess half pushed, half threw the tire towards the *vaquero*. "Could be raining. Throw a rock behind that back tire. Then you can haul that piece of crap spare around front for me. I don't want to pitch myself over the side carrying all this junk."

As Manuel searched for a stone, Jess eased himself around to the front. The road was hard packed enough that they shouldn't need a plate to set it on. He dropped the wrench in a rut, laid down on the road, and scooted under the front end. Damn, they'd been over so much dusty country that the undercarriage was almost white. He searched around the funky suspension set up—off-roading had been planned with this vehicle—for a place to brace the jack.

Laughter floated down from in front of the truck. "I could think of better reasons for you to be on your back."

Jess rolled half-over to peer out from beneath the undercarriage as the black tire bounced into view. Then Manuel's laughing eyes were staring at him from just beyond the bumper. One hand was on his knee, the other supporting his weight on the ground.

"Do you need help?"

Answering the first comment, "So," he grunted, pushing the jack to a solid purchase point, "could I." One problem down, about one hundred more left. He wiggled out from under the Jeep. Jamming the wrench into its slot, Jess began pumping. Easy enough going at first, but when the weight of the truck settled onto the jack, the cowboy realized just how stiff he was from two days of rough roads. "Okay, so not the fun part of our trip." He grunted the last three pushes on the wrench, then pulled it out. "Grab me if I start to fall, okay?"

"*Sí, papi.* I wouldn't want you to fall."

Jess grinned as he knelt by the tire. "That makes two of us." Jess fitted the wrench end on the first nut and gave the cross bar a good couple of thumps to get it started. Zig-zagging between the

nuts, he loosened them all just enough for the start. Then the cowboy passed the wrench back to Manuel. "Okay, jack it the rest of the way up."

A metal snick sounded as it slipped into place. Then a grunt as Manuel pushed the lever down. The Jeep Comanche was pretty damn solid; not your average eighties' era piece of tin. "You give me the hard job?"

"I'll give you a hard job..." Both of them snorted. When the truck was properly elevated, Manuel passed the lug wrench back. Jess removed the nuts in a star pattern, passing each over to the *vaquero* for safe keeping.

As he held out the third, Manuel commented, "You work very fast."

"Only on fixing flats." Jess flashed a smile and half stuck out his tongue. "I like to take my time on everything else."

That made the *vaquero* laugh. "I like when you take your time...on everything else."

Jess spun the lug wrench, showing off under the faint praise. Before he could stop it, the metal X slipped from his hand and bounced into the scrub. "Shit! Grab it!" He yelled.

Manuel lunged into the brush lining the road. Skittering gravel followed by a splash and Jess was sliding down the embankment after the *charro*. Luckily for both, the wash was none too deep at that point. Still, it was treacherous. Jess ripped out his pocket sliding down on his butt. Boot heels hit ground first, causing him to lurch and almost tumble into Manuel. Jess still landed on his knees. He looked up to find Manuel alternately shaking his wrist and mouthing his palm. A little awkward, Jess gained his feet.

"What happened?"

"I cut my hand." Manuel held it up for Jess' inspection.

Adding his kiss to those of the *vaquero*, "Scraped, not cut." Then his tongue snaked out to play with Manuel's fingers. Ignoring the dark look from an even darker set of eyes, he kept going. Each one got a kiss at the tip. Jess' tongue explored the valleys between them. He nipped at the heel of Manuel's palm. Manuel's skin tasted of dust and crushed grass. Losing himself in the flavor, the cowboy sucked one brown finger into his mouth.

Before he could breathe, Manuel stepped in and wrapped a warm arm across his back, pulling them together. "Do you ever stop, *papi*?" Manuel's voice was heavy.

Jess let the *vaquero* withdraw his finger as he mumbled, "Not with you." Manuel's hand slid behind the cowboy's head as Jess' arms circled a narrow waist.

"*Bien*." It was Manuel's turn to mumble as he replaced his finger with an exploring tongue. Damn, his mouth tasted good. Jess' erection pressed into the flesh of Manuel's thigh. Both of them were fully clothed, but that just added to the friction.

Jess hissed and allowed himself to forget about the lug wrench for a moment. They always just seemed to know what the other needed. Jess pressed his hips into Manuel's. Grinding his swelling cock against two layers of denim, the cowboy snaked one hand into Manuel's jeans. Now there was a hand between his prick and Manuel's. Of course there was nothing between his hand and the *vaquero*'s throbbing length. Manuel wasn't the only one with a rock steady grip.

Silk slid against Jess' palm and Manuel groaned. His cock was so hot, like holding a velvet branding iron. While he played, Jess pillaged his *vaquero*'s mouth. He ran his hand along Manuel's prick, pulling the foreskin up over the head. Damn, Manuel was hard.

Manuel's knees wobbled. Jess laughed as he kissed. His *charro* sure as hell hadn't done that before. He cupped the *vaquero*'s cock in his palm and pulled. Manuel shuddered and tried to pull away. No way was he going to let his *charro* fight him. He wasn't about to even give Manuel a chance to breathe. Of course, the damn jeans didn't help. "Fucking need to get you out of your pants."

"Aye, *tambien*." Manuel's fingers fumbled with Jess' belt.

Both fumbled and pushed and finally exposed enough skin to do some good. Jess ground his cock against Manuel's naked hip. As the cowboy licked along the line of Manuel's jaw, he wrapped his hand back around the *vaquero*'s prick and stroked his velvet length.

"Jessé," he hissed, thrusting into Jess' hand, "you are so good to me."

The friction was wonderful, hot and cold all at the same time. It sent little shivers along the skin of Jess' thighs. Jess whispered against his lips, "That's because you're so good to me." He could tell by his breathing it was wonderful as well for him. Jess twisted the heel of his palm against the throbbing head and Manuel moaned.

That was so much better. Manuel's flesh was warm against Jess' sensitive prick. The moisture leaking from the tip coated the *charro's* thigh where Jess worked himself. Manuel was biting his lip and jerking in Jess' hand as he sped up the pace. The cowboy put his lips to his lover's ear. "Come for me. Imagine you're fucking me, pounding me so hard, like in the trailer." The friction was building into a fire in Jess' hips. "Fucking me so hard I beg you stop. But you don't quit. And I am tight and hot and..."

Manuel shuddered and threw his head back. "Aye, Jessé!" Cum bubbled over Jess' fingers. He kept pulling, making Manuel moan again and again.

That face, all twisted up in pleasure was too much for the cowboy. The frost in his insides hit him like a thunderbolt as he spent himself across Manuel's hip. Exhausted, Jess leaned into his body, savoring the smell of Manuel after sex. As he sucked on his earlobe he teased the *vaquero*. "Weren't we looking for a lug wrench?"

"Sí, *papi*," Manuel stepped back, wiping the cream off his hip, "but you have a problem with distracting me." Then, adjusting his jeans, he stepped over to the creek and washed his hand.

Jess yanked up his own britches. Repositioning, zipping, and buckling his belt, he laughed, "I have a problem?" Forlorn winds whistled about them. The only other sound was the chattering of water rushing over stones. Above them, an incredibly blue sky, blanketed by clouds, filled the universe between mountain tops. High, high up, a hawk circled. Miles away from anybody. Just them alone in the world.

It was perfect.

"Manuel, we need," Jess stretched and wandered over to Manuel's side, "we should find someplace like this for just us."

"Us?" The *vaquero* stood and bumped Jess' shoulder.

With a laugh he pushed back. He laughed and smiled more around Manuel than he had in years. "Yeah, a bit of land." A glint in the stream bed caught his eye. Oh yeah, the lug wrench—they'd come down for that. He retrieved the wayward tool. "Someplace for Mango to run. You know, home."

Manuel just stood there looking at him. Crossing his arms over his chest, Manuel repeated, "Home, us?"

"Together." Drops of water spun off the wrench when Jess shook it. That made Manuel dodge.

Scrabbling up and out of the wash, Manuel called back over his shoulder, "We will talk after all this is done."

"Okay, when it's done. I'll hold you to it."

A little more sedate, Jess finished changing the flat. He hoped to God the spare would hold out. If not, it was a real long walk home. Each mile took them farther away from civilization. Each mile brought them closer to a possible nasty confrontation. They teased with each other to break the stress, but it didn't work very well.

For a time the cab was quiet, then Manuel began humming a tune. Jess swore he knew that song, but for the life of him he couldn't place it. "What are you humming?"

"*Es Don Gato*," Manuel looked a little embarrassed at getting caught. "I used to sing it as a child. I sing it when I brush Mango. He likes it."

"It's so familiar to me, the tune. What does it mean?"

"It's silly, about a cat. He sits on the roof and his lover kitty sends him a letter and he gets so excited..."

"That he falls off the roof and dies." Jess almost choked. "Oh my God, I know that song." He picked up the cadence and belted out the first verse, "Don Gato was a cat and on a red-red roof he sat...we sang that at school. The refrain is meow, meow, meow?"

"Si, I guess," Manuel was laughing. Jess didn't have to ask why. Singing was not one of his talents. "But we say *marramiau, miau, miau*."

Riding the high of making the connection, Jess pushed. "So, Manuel, if I tell you I love you, are you going to get so excited you fall off the roof and die?"

"It wouldn't matter, you could just wave a fish under my nose and I'd come back."

Jess turned his attention back to the road. "Okay, that just sounds wrong."

"Very wrong," Manuel agreed.

As the roads became narrower, and fainter, Jess had to slow them down. For a time, they followed a string of barbed wire fencing. Manuel would point out where to turn. Sometimes he missed a landmark and forced them to double back.

When the truck crossed over a series of cattle grates, they were on the backside of *Tio's* property. Manuel claimed this was the route they used to sneak the truck out when he and his cousins were kids. It didn't look like there had been any joy-riding teens along for a while. They were bouncing along what must have been no more than a deer trail, when Manuel told Jess to stop and turn around.

Jess looked for an open spot and swerved the Jeep. "Wrong turn again?" The cowboy threw his right arm across the back of the bench seat, craning his head around so he could maneuver the truck. Three point turns turned into twenty or thirty point turns with the horse trailer.

"No." Manuel smiled and stroked Jess' arm. Whether he was reassuring Jess or comforting himself was anybody's guess. "This is as far as we should take the truck. If we go in much closer, someone will see or hear it." Chewing on his lip like he was thinking on it, "We should have the truck face the way out so that we can leave fast."

"Gotcha." Once the truck was facing the way they had come, Jess put it into park and clambered out. He met Manuel at the back of the trailer. Walking off down the trail, "Let's do this, partner."

Manuel caught up and thumped the back of Jess head. "Let's do it."

Early evening found them crouching on the perimeter of the *Ranchero*. Trees and scrub gave them reasonable cover in the fading light. Jess felt like he was in some B-grade western. He had to stop himself from spouting worn lines. They had to be quiet. Sound carried pretty far in places like this.

The narrow little valley before them sheltered a *hacienda*, workmen's quarters and a stand of barns. A small stream wound through the property, the same one they'd crossed a ways back. Either side sported a windmill. The brook was not large enough or reliable enough to supply the entire ranch with water. Manuel had put them at the forest margin, just on the right side of the creek. Twin ruts headed towards the main house from the road. Two stories, white washed with a tile roof, Jess figured the *hacienda* would be pretty nice inside. An undulating wall of thick, red bricks separated it from the rest of the compound. Nearby were two stables and Manuel pointed out the smaller as the one used for breed stallions. Closer to the main drive a small chapel served the ranch and the few other farms in the area.

Hands were settling in the animals for the night. Checking locks, arranging feed, the men moved with the typical bustle of organized chaos. One man, similar in height and build to Manuel, led three horses in from the corral. One of them was a buckskin...Mango. He pranced and fought the lead, nipping at the other two animals. Jess figured the horse knew he was where he wasn't supposed to be. Animals had a way of sensing those things. His eyes followed their progress, watching them disappear into the larger barn.

Now, it was just a matter of waiting. Jess tried to find a comfortable spot. Most he'd chosen ended up poking his butt with sticks or rocks. He settled himself against a tree, smiling as Manuel crawled over. They huddled against each other. Jess would slip into a light doze, and then some

noise would startle him out of it. Manuel seemed to suffer the same problem. Finally, first the *vaquero*, and then Jess, drifted into a restless sleep.

Cold and discomfort woke him. Manuel was snoring on his shoulder. Glancing at the LED of his watch, Jess figured it was time to get going. It was near three. Everyone should be well settled in and sleeping. He shook Manuel awake and tapped his watch. The *vaquero* nodded, knowing what he meant.

As quietly as possible they snuck down into the ranch proper. Split rail fencing wandered around the paddock and barns. Along one side a red-roofed feeding line stood empty. It and trees spaced randomly would give the horses shade at mid-day. They gave Manuel and Jess a ready source of cover as they slipped through the early morning. Not like they needed much cover. Pre-dawn fog had settled in on the mountain, chilling the air and causing jeans to cling damp on skin.

Jess froze as three dogs charged out of the night. They stopped, legs splayed, and growled. *Shit, of course there'd be dogs on a ranch.* Slow and easy Manuel knelt, calling softly to the pack in Spanish. As he coaxed, the biggest dog sniffed the air and then gave a short woof. Tail wagging, the dog padded up to Manuel. Jess remembered how to breathe. The *vaquero* scratched the animal behind the ears and stood. *Of course Manuel would know the dogs...he was family.* Hopefully, no one had bought any new dogs since Manuel last visited. All three hounded their heels as they crossed the last open space to the cluster of buildings.

Dust and hay and warm horse scent tickled Jess' nose as they snuck into the barn. The stables were a typical hanger style set up: an isle down the center, open at either end, and rows of stalls on both sides. Each stall had a wooden wall separating it from the next and a half wall looking onto the middle. Gates were two short shanks of chain. This wouldn't be where the breed animals were kept.

A shadow within shadow, Manuel moved silently down the row, looking for Mango. Jess followed carefully. Stables were land mines and not for the reasons people would think. Tack, buckets and tools hung at random points. Mice, and usually rats, skittered about the horses' bedding. A curious animal could throw its head over the wall and knock you flat.

The dogs weren't helping. They were in and out of the stalls, waking the horses and getting them worked up. Then one mutt got too close to a skittish mare. She brayed and lashed out. With a sharp yelp, the dog rolled into the aisle. He ran barking his displeasure into the night. Manuel snapped his fingers, catching Jess' attention. The cowboy could barely make out Manuel waving him over. The other dogs hadn't learned their pack mate's lesson. Both were still darting in and out of pens. More horses were snorting and stamping their displeasure.

When he got to the stall, Manuel was kissing and whispering sweet nothings to Mango. For a moment Jess felt slighted and a little jealous. Then it passed. You just couldn't get in between a guy and his horse. He was about to whisper a tease when a sleep-heavy voice yelled at the dog. Both men stilled. The *vaquero* put his hand on Jess' lips. *As if I need to be told to be quiet.* The only thing worrisome was if whoever could hear the pounding of his heart.

Manuel ducked under the chain and grabbed Jess' sleeve. The cowboy slid under as well. Then Manuel pulled them to the back of the stall and ducked down. Jess wouldn't have wanted to try this with a horse he didn't know. It was a good way to get your head stove in.

Just over the sound of nervous animals Jess heard the rolling crunch of someone walking into the stable. A flicker of light traced an arc on the wall. Mutterings in Spanish didn't need translation. Whoever was pissed that they drew the short straw and had to haul out of bed to check the horses. *Shit, shit and shit again...* he couldn't breathe he was so scared. Horse theft was not something he wanted to be caught at. Like Manuel warned him, it was a good way to disappear into Mexico's prison system.

When the man, and Jess was assuming it was a guy by his voice, got about half way down, he cursed. For what seemed like an endless amount of time, the man just stood there. He coughed, he stamped his feet, and then he muttered again. The mumblings faded as the guy walked from the barn. Both Manuel and Jess let go the breath they didn't realize they'd been holding.

Manuel started to stand, and then dropped back down as an engine revved. Headlights lit up the interior of the barn. Then they were left in a darker blackness when that light disappeared. They waited. There wasn't much else they could do. Finally, when the animals had all calmed down, Manuel stood and pushed past Mango to lean over the short wall. Jess worked his way around to the chain. As he unhooked it, Manuel slipped the halter he'd grabbed over Mango's head. As quickly and quietly as they'd come, the men moved off into the night.

Mango followed Manuel without hesitation. He probably didn't even need a lead for the horse. Still, it was a problem when they got to the climbing back towards the road. The footing was treacherous and a few times the animal slipped. It took them longer than expected to make it back to the truck. First light was just tingeing the sky blue when they spotted the trailer. When they rounded a turn in the path, Jess' gut froze.

A full-size extended cab pickup was parked next to the Jeep. Manuel swore under his breath. Jess just swore, "Fuck!"

At their approach a young man swung out of the truck. Jess recognized him from the rodeo. He'd been with Manuel and *Tio*. Plus, there was a good deal of family resemblance between he and Manuel. The guy stuck his hands in his pockets and waited for them to get close. "*Hola, Manuel, ¿que tal?*" Manuel didn't respond. "What, you forget all your Spanish?"

"No, Guillermo." The *vaquero* glared. "I have nothing to say to you."

"I think you talk to me." He snorted. "You don't want to be in trouble for taking the horse."

"Mango is my horse, Memo." Defiant, Manuel crossed his arms over his chest. Mango butted Jess' shoulder and absently the cowboy scratched his nose. Family fights could get ugly quick. Especially with a family like *Tio's* who would punch a nephew in the eye for being gay.

Hands still wedged in his pockets, Memo shrugged. "*Si*, he is your horse."

"*Tio* should not have taken him."

"*Es cierto*, it was wrong for papa to take your horse."

Manuel dropped his arms and glared. "If you are just going to agree with me, why are you here?"

"Because you are my brother to me." Guillermo shook his head and kicked the dust. When he looked back up, "I got *Tia's* call. I knew Manny would not wait in Juarez. You would steal a car to get here. But papa believes what he wants to believe. So tonight, I came out and saw all the horses but Mango are upset, and I knew you had come. I knew you would come here. This is how we always left the ranch if we didn't want papa to know."

"I'm sorry, Memo," sounding a little more mollified, Manuel apologized, "sometimes I get like he does."

"I know. But I still like you. I also know you would go without things you need." He smacked the metal side of the trailer. The sound echoed sending birds flying. "Where did you get this?" Memo waived the question off. "It doesn't matter. I brought you some things." Stepping back to his truck, Guillermo rummaged in the bed. He had to step on the tire rim to lean over the edge. "These were in the truck from this morning when we fed *las vacas*."

Manuel shook his head. "But why? Why do you do this?"

He came back up with stuff jammed under his arms. "I don't understand how you like men. But, I think like you are my brother, Manny. Brothers take care of each other; it doesn't matter what they do. And papa is wrong. This is not the way to do this. And mama, *¡caramba!* They are fighting like...well, *no hay que ahogarse en un vaso de agua*." Both Guillermo and Manuel laughed, bitter edges evident in the *vaqueros'* voices.

Jess stepped in to take some of the load. Guillermo slid his hand out from under the bottom and held out a small, glossy picture of a horse. "Here, put this on the window."

When Jess took the paper, he could see a large script capital S was imprinted over the top. "What is it?" The extended tail on the letter formed a C. It looked like the script brand on Mango's flank.

"It is a sticker for the ranch. All our trucks have them." Next Memo shook out a faded red blanket, "Here, one of the old cooler blankets, no one will miss it. And this." Lastly he handed over a form. Responding to Manuel's raised eyebrows, "It is the order to take the horse to Arizona. I made it while I was waiting for you. All of us are still under his license so with that you will be okay. Do you have food?"

"We will buy some down the road."

"Manny, in the back." He jerked his head toward the truck.

Jess, still holding the sticker, hitched himself up on the side of Guillermo's truck. A broken bale was in the bed.

"That was left from feeding the cows. You take it. And on the seat...take a sticker for the horse trailer."

While Manuel and his cousin wrangled Mango into the trailer, Jess slapped stickers on both vehicles. A sheaf of hay went into the manger through the window. The rest Jess pitched into the back of the jeep. He almost tripped over Guillermo who was kneeling in front of the trailer loading Manuel's saddle and bridle into the tack compartment. At least one access door worked. It screeched like hell when Memo slammed it shut, but it worked. Manuel was still in the trailer cooing at Mango, soothing him.

Jess cocked his hip against the side of the Jeep. "Where'd you get Manuel's kit? You weren't out long enough last night to have picked up all that stuff."

Memo smiled up at him. "It was still in the truck." He had Manuel's smile. "Papa never took it out. I think he still feels bad that he took Manuel's horse." One more tug on the door to make certain it latched and Guillermo stood. "So he said he would take it out, but never did. If he looked at it, papa would have to remember what he had done."

Snorting, Jess held out his hand and helped Manuel's cousin to his feet. When Manuel eased out of the back of the trailer, Memo hugged him and wished them both luck. "I will go back and let the horses out into the far pasture. He has to go to Chihuahua today for business. Tonight I will call and tell him Mango is gone." Memo promised. "It will give you time if you head straight for Agua Prieta. Mama won't let him call the *federales* on you and he must wait until he comes back to the ranch to make the report. Maybe another day." Shrugging, he continued, "You will take care of Manny. If you are not good to him, I will come find you." His smile took some of the sting out of the words.

Since Guillermo still lived in the area and knew the back roads on the ranch, the big truck went first. Jess flowed carefully. It was definitely easier going now that they had decent light. At the junction of the allegedly main road off the mountain, Guillermo turned back towards the ranch. Two beeps of the horn were meant as farewell and luck. Jess echoed them.

"I guess you're just lucky your cousin likes you, Manuel." Jess smiled across the cab at the vaquero.

Squinting into the rising sun, Manuel shrugged, "*Cada quien tiene la suerte que merece.*"

Jess rolled his eyes. He really was going to have to learn Spanish. "Translate please..."

"You get the luck you deserve." Jess just looked at the vaquero blankly. "I stood up to his father when Memo wanted to go to the university. *Tio* doesn't like men who are 'educated on paper.' It was a very big fight and I was only fourteen. But Memo remembers."

"I would, too." Jess stifled a yawn. "Shit, it's been a long night."

"*Sí.*" The cowboy could feel Manuel's stare crawl across his skin. "It has." That stare on that man meant only one thing. That one thing was a serious distraction.

Distracted on top of tired was not good on the treacherous mountain roads. Jess tried to keep the conversation as neutral as possible. "We did it, huh?" As Jess spoke, Manuel ran his hand down his denim thigh. The cowboy slid his eyes to consider the vaquero. Manuel licked his lips. Jess' eyes nearly bugged out, "You can't be serious?"

"About what?" Inching over on the seat, Manuel purred, "What am I not serious about?"

Nearly every bit of willpower Jess had went to keeping his eyes on the road. "You're thinking about it."

All the innocence in the world answered him. "Thinking about what?" Manuel moved closer again and walked his fingers up the seam of Jess' jeans.

Jess shivered. "Okay, if you fool around like that, we're going to end up off the road with two dead cowboys and a dead horse."

"Then pull over." Lust throbbed thick in the *vaquero's* voice.

Blowing out his breath, Jess risked another quick look at his passenger. "You're horny."

"I am excited." Manuel just radiated sex. Dark eyes told Jess how much he was desired. "Don't things like this make you excited, Jess?"

He couldn't say his blood wasn't still pumping after all that excitement. And Manuel was doing nothing to stop his engine from revving. "Yeah, they get me excited."

"Then pull off the road," Manuel's body pressed against him. The *charro's* hand dropped between Jess' legs, "where no one will see us." He laughed and then moved to nuzzle behind Jess' ear. "Do it fast, *papi*, or I'm going to take you like this."

It was so not fair, what Manuel was doing to him. Barely able to keep his mind on driving, Jess searched for a likely spot. The entire time Manuel's hands were running over his body. When a set of tracks veered off the road towards a stream peeking through the trees, Jess took it. They bounced down a path not quite made for trucks hauling horse trailers. Jess managed to keep it as slow and jar-less as possible. As it bottomed out, he found a decent spot where they could park and not be very visible from the road. Slamming on the brakes, Jess killed the engine and almost fell on top of Manuel.

Their mouths met and their tongues tangled together. Manuel's rough hands moved on Jess' arms, one reaching, burrowing into his hair and pulling the cowboy on top of his body. Jess' hand slid down, gripping Manuel within the prison of his jeans. Jess was so pent he was shaking. Adrenaline had been shooting through his veins without outlet for hours. Manuel seemed at that point too. Hard, working muscles and narrow hips trembled under the cowboy's touch.

Jess was desperate to feel Manuel's skin against his own. The *vaquero's* hot mouth moved over Jess' jaw and neck, driving him crazy with want. In a wild jumble of knees and elbows he managed to get his pants down and Manuel's off. God, he hadn't had sex in a car since he was in his teens. Without looking, he fumbled the glove box latch and dug inside. Half the contents spilled to the floor. Still, he managed to find what they needed. His Nana's mantra: always be prepared...or maybe he was just a slut. It didn't much matter at that point.

Kissing anywhere he could find skin, Jess managed to squeeze out a little gel onto his fingers. Manuel's muscular body shuddered beneath him in anticipation. As Jess ran his hand over Manuel's prick he could feel the pulsing veins just under the surface. A low moan escaped Manuel as he lifted his hips into the caress. Jess stroked him with one hand, the other descended between the *vaquero's* legs to explore the opening to his body, slowly pushing inward with one finger.

Stroking his insides with slick digits, Jess whispered, "This good?" Another moan rewarded his efforts.

Manuel's own hands were busy finding all the cowboy's sensitive spots. When the *charro* wrapped that strong grip around his prick, Jess echoed Manuel's moans. Fingers still slick with gel, Jess withdrew and searched for the dropped packet on the bench. When he found it, he tore it open with his teeth. Supporting himself with just his knees, Jess tried to roll the condom on with one hand. The task was doubly difficult with Manuel getting in the way. Somehow they managed it.

Their bodies were covered in a faint sheen of sweat, the leaden air in the cab holding their heat on skin. Manuel slid down onto his back, and wrapped one bare leg around Jess' hip. The other was jammed up against the steering column. Jess had to quit stroking and Manuel's cock

thumped against his belly. The moisture leaking from the tip cooled on the cowboy's burning skin.

Gripping the seat back for support, "You ready?" Jess didn't wait for a reply as he knelt between Manuel's legs, pushing against his tight space. A moan rumbled as Jess entered him. For the life of him, Jess didn't know whether it was his or Manuel's or both.

Slowly at first, spreading him out, Jess forced his way inside Manuel's tight hole. Each time he pushed his cock a little deeper, a little harder. Manuel was tight and hot and slick with the lube as Jess slid within his body. As the cowboy drove deep, Manuel clawed his back. Both of them were mumbling nonsense words and promises as they devoured each other's skin with their lips. The *vaquero's* cock slid in the trail of its own juices glistening on Jess' belly. Manuel's legs wrapped about the cowboy's hips, pulling him deep inside. It lit all sorts of fires inside Jess' joints. Finally, Jess gave into the frost coating his nerves and pounded into him. Every thrust earned an, "Aye!" Jess' orgasm hit like lightening down his spine.

Still moving within Manuel, vestiges of ecstasy thrummed through Jess' body, making him shiver. Lifting himself up, supporting his own weight on the back of the seat, Jess grabbed Manuel's cock and caressed its vibrating length. Manuel shook as Jess stroked his prick, working him harder and faster even while Jess thrust again and again into his tight channel. The *charro's* hand grabbed Jess' arm, fingers digging into his bicep. The other clawed at the dashboard as he screamed out "Jessé!" and erupted over the cowboy's hand and his own stomach.

Panting, Manuel managed to breathe, "Oh, *papi*, you don't know how much I needed that."

Jess' muscles were still twitching. "Oh yeah, I do." He laughed and dropped his head on Manuel's chest. "How long do we have before we get going?" Tongue snaking out to tease the *charro's* nipple through his shirt, Jess sighed. "I could stay here for hours just doing what we're doing."

A bang from the back startled them both. Jess reared up and hit his head on the cab's ceiling. Manuel pulled himself up and glared through the back window. "Somebody does not agree with you."

Damn horse, interrupting them. It was like having a kid around. "It's been about four hours, huh?"

"Sí." Manuel leaned off the seat, searching for his pants and boots on the floor.

"We should," Jess scooted back so Manuel could sit up and started adjusting his own decency, "probably get Mango out and let him stretch."

Nodding as he struggled into his jeans, "Good idea." Another bang was followed by a muffled whinny. "And I think he wants to get out now."

They tumbled out of opposite sides of the pickup. Jess grabbed the lead from the bed and met Manuel at the back. The *vaquero* was still buttoning his jeans. Before handing over the lead, he pulled Manuel into another deep, satisfied kiss. Mango kicked at the gate, breaking their focus.

"Wait your turn." Jess growled.

Manuel laughed as he dropped the gate and pushed past Mango. Jess just shook his head and wandered back to the front of the truck. Clambering up onto the hood, he watched as rider and horse headed to an open spot. Manuel let out the lead and put Mango through his paces. Starting slow: walk, then trot and then up to a canter. Whistles reversed direction. One word and Mango would break into a high step. A flick of Manuel's wrist sent a wave down the line and Mango would jump. Oh yeah, Manuel was showing off for him. And Jess loved it. Those two really were beautiful together. Of course, he was beginning to think he and Manuel were pretty good together too.

When Mango had all the kinks worked out of his legs, the *charro* walked him back. A bright smile was all for Jess. The cowboy blew him a kiss before asking, "So that pass your cousin gave us will get Mango across, right?"

Manuel braced his arms and jumped, sitting, onto the hood of the pickup. His legs swung free. Each time he banged the front bumper. One hand held Mango's lead. "No. We'll have to find

a broker to get Mango back over the border. Only certain people can take them to the US pens for inspection."

Mango nipped grass on the side of the road, seemingly unconcerned about the problems he'd caused. He and his rider were back together and the world was right. Jess figured it was a good attitude to have.

Manuel continued, "There's one in Agua Prieta the ranch I work for uses. I'll call my boss. She'll arrange it for me." Leaning forward, he rested his weight on his forearms, clasping his hands between his knees. "So what comes next, Jess?"

"Well," The cowboy thought a bit before answering. "I'll head home for awhile. Pack up and see if I can find a job."

"I thought you had a job."

"I do, but thought I might need a change of scenery." Jess leaned over and scratched the buckskin's withers. The horse whickered and leaned into the touch. "Time to pull up stakes. Find someplace different, more exciting. Tucson just ain't doing it for me anymore."

"What?" Manuel's voice was crushed and confused.

He slid his arm around Manuel's shoulder and pulled him in close. Whispering in the *vaquero's* ear, "I was thinking something a little farther south," with a laugh, "you know, maybe Nogales."

About the Author

James Buchanan is a multi-published author of homoerotic romance. James grew up in a small Southwestern town, hours away from any other small Southwestern towns. A stint at the State University, where he ostensibly majored in English, garnered him a degree useful for being someone's secretary. The absolute lack of employment opportunities led James to Southern California. After a stint in County Mental Health (administration, not client) he ran screaming into the field of Law. James has been practicing for nine years and someday he might even get it right.

Visit James at <http://www.james-buchanan.com> for more information on his books.