



Liquid Silver Books

LAWLESS

SARAH BLACK



Lawless
by Sarah Black

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Chapter One

It was the time of the siesta, and the air was so still and quiet that Colton turned off the little fan that sat next to the bed and listened. "Did you hear that?"

Diego was splayed out across their bed, his head pressed into the white pillowcase. Colton saw a long, curved line of sweat down his backbone, so he turned the fan on again and angled it to blow over his skin.

"Thanks, that feels good. Did I hear what?"

"Nothing. That's the thing. No chickens, no babies, no horses, no little boys sneaking around."

"It's nothing sinister, Colton. It's too hot. Everybody's asleep."

Colton nudged him with his toes. "You've been sleeping for an hour. Maybe longer."

"That last duty kicked my butt. Thirty-six hours, Jesus. They had the patients backed up in the ER, just waiting for an OR to get free. I was second to one of the ortho guys. That ortho surgery is hard, jerking bones around. I don't think I'm cut out for it."

Diego had wanted to be a heart surgeon, but a vicious hate crime the year before had left him with only one eye. Now he believed his depth perception wasn't good enough, and he was working as a general surgeon. Colton had felt a quiet undercurrent of sadness in him this last year, like he'd lost some of the joy in his work, in being a doctor. But Diego

said he was fine and would change the subject when Colton brought it up.

"It's too quiet around here," Colton said again. Since the three Juans, little boys who lived on the ranch and were all named Juan, had peeked into the window when he was giving Diego a blow job, Colton had been a little skittish about fooling around during siesta.

The thick adobe walls of the small casitas kept the temperature down some, but it was still almost ninety degrees in their bedroom. "It's too hot to fool around." He didn't sound very sure.

Colton's ranch was on the border with Mexico, in the badlands between Nogales and Sasabe. They had four generations living there, most of them washed up in that dry land by strange tides of fate, and with nowhere else to go. Maria Goretti took care of the ranch. She was the niece of the original Maria who had taken care of the ranch; had a reputation for plucking girls in trouble out of the reach of the men who were abusing them, letting them stay at Colton's ranch to have their babies in peace. Some of them never left again.

Nobody in the borderlands would mess with Lt. Colton Wheeler or his ranch or the people who lived under his protection. He was a lawman, the old-fashioned kind who knew which rules could bend and which rules could break and which butts needed to be kicked. He was a legend, and so was the old man who lived out there with them, Lt. Manuel Del Rio, a tough retired Mexican cop and Diego's great-uncle. Between Manuel and Colton, one in Mexico and one in

America, they had protected this rough scrubby desert land for nearly seventy years. They loved it with a passion that was hard to understand, and they loved Diego, too.

Colton wondered sometimes if Diego wouldn't rather be living some cool urban dream in Paris or Amsterdam instead of kicking around the Sonoran desert. Well, he'd had the choice, and he chose Colton and the borderlands, his family and his people and a medical practice that would never make him rich.

"I don't hear any little boys," Diego said, rolling over and letting the fan blow on his chest.

Colton reached for the sweaty black hair that covered Diego's chest in wiry curls, traced it down to his belly, then down into the thick, curly nest between his legs. His dark cock was stirring, and he stretched his arms over his head, stretched and yawned and reached for the cup of green tea he'd left on the bedside table. "So, Colton. Let's fool around."

Colton sat up and looked at the little windows. They were covered with white linen curtains that fluttered a bit when the fan blew in their direction.

Diego leaned up on an elbow and looked at him. "So what if the three Juans look in the window?"

"It was my ass they were staring at," Colton reminded him. "And laughing at, the little jerks."

"You're just so pretty. They wanted to see what a natural blond looks like."

Diego put the cup of tea back on the table. He was propped up on his side, and Colton looked at the long curvy length of him, ivory skin and curly black hair, long, slender

legs with runner's thighs. He was wiggling his toes, a sure sign he was getting turned on, and another sure sign was rising, heavy and dark between his legs.

"Why don't you let me fuck you, Colton?"

"Wha..." Colton felt his mouth drop open. "What?"

Diego had never fucked him before, never, not in the two years they'd been together. He stared at the cock stirring between Diego's legs. That thing was a monster!

He rolled over, lifted the bottle of gold tequila he had sitting beside the bed on the floor. Diego started laughing, and Colton hefted the bottle and took a healthy mouthful. It burned going down, and Diego reached for his cup of green tea, offered it to him. "I'll pass," Colton said, and took another swallow. "Okay, what do I do?"

Diego laughed harder, reached for him, then let Colton drag him across the bed and into his arms. "Are you a virgin?"

"What? I ... no, hell no, I'm not a virgin. It's just I got to get used to the idea."

Diego wiggled closer, took a gentle bite out of his shoulder, moved up to his neck. "All my life, men have wanted to bend me over and fuck me. I just wanted ... I just thought I'd try it once. See what it's like."

Colton studied his face, pushed the black hair off Diego's forehead. His chin was dark and rough with whiskers, his mouth red and swollen. Colton leaned over and kissed him, felt himself melting into Diego's arms, into the heat of his mouth, the heat between his legs. "You're so beautiful, that's

why. And yeah, you can fuck me. I mean, I'm yours. I'm all yours. Take what you want."

Diego smiled at him, his face lighting up, and Colton felt a punch of tenderness, awe at the beauty of Diego's face.

Diego kissed him again, slid a quick tongue between his lips, counted Colton's teeth. Colton opened his legs, pulled Diego into him, heat to heat, cock to cock, wrapped him up close between his thighs, and Diego kissed him, wiggling and slippery as an eel.

"Where's that stuff?" Diego pulled away, opened the small drawer next to the bed. "I can't believe you found some tequila flavored lube. It's a mad world, man."

"There's an entrepreneur under every rock, baby. How do you want me?"

Diego sat up, looking at him. "On your hands and knees, I guess. I don't want you to put your legs around me and squash my head. I can't afford any brain injuries."

"Yeah, that would be bad." He rolled over, got up on his hands and knees, rocked back and forth. "This feels pretty damn awkward." He looked back at Diego over his shoulder. "Don't even think about trying to tie me up."

Diego unscrewed the top off the lube. "You didn't like being tied into the Stryker frame when your neck was broken? I thought you had the nurses giving you blow jobs."

"Only once. Don't remind me."

Diego reached for his back, trailed fingertips light as a kiss up his spine until he got to the scar on the back of his neck. The scar where they had fused the broken bones. Then those

delicate fingers traced slowly back down, slid into the cleft of his ass, slid down and pressed in gently.

The lube was cold, and Diego slid it around with the precision and confidence of a surgeon who had done a hundred thousand rectal exams. Colton thought he heard the snap of a latex glove, then he was pierced, Diego's finger sliding inside him, reaching straight for the sweet spot. He looked back over his shoulder. "Diego, you're not doing a prostate exam while you're back there, are you? I mean, that will totally fuck up the mood!"

"I know you haven't had a physical in awhile. Just relax, lean back against me. It'll just take a second."

"Diego, goddamnit! Just..."

"Fine, fine." He pulled his finger out and peeled the glove off. "Not enlarged."

"Jesus."

Now Colton felt something heavier at his ass, Diego's cock sliding up and down, then nudging him just a bit. He leaned forward. "Let me in, Colton." His voice was a ghost, a whisper. "Will you let me in?"

Colton took a breath, let it out, eased back just a little, enough for the head of Diego's cock to slip inside. "You can do anything, Diego. My lover." He looked back over his shoulder. He wanted to watch Diego's face flush, heat and passion blooming with wild color. Colton could feel his hands digging into his hips, feel him push in just a bit, and he bit down on his bottom lip. That thing was as big as an orange! *Shit!* "Ow!"

Diego's hands slid to his back again. "Does it hurt, Colton?"

"Not really. It's okay. Go ahead. I can take it."

Diego was laughing behind him, his body shaking with it, and Colton breathed a great sigh of relief when he pulled out.

"Diego, just go ahead, do it."

Diego pushed him over to his back, fell into his arms, and Colton wrapped him up tight, cuddled him close.

"Jesus."

"I don't like not being able to see your face, Colton. And I heard you say 'ow'." His breath was a warm tickle against Colton's neck.

"I love you." Colton didn't mean to say it. It slipped from his mind and out of his mouth before he could stop himself.

"And I love you." Diego leaned up over him, then sank into his arms again, mouth to mouth, tongue to tongue. "I could kiss you forever. I need to make up names for all your kisses, the way the Eskimos name snow, their most important words." And Colton could feel Diego melting into him, mouth to mouth, chest to chest, fingers twining together, belly to belly, cocks gently rising, and Diego was wiggling his toes again.

The knock on their door was quiet. "Boys? Colton, are you awake? We've got trouble out here."

It was Manuel, and Colton was up with a gun in his hand. He pulled the door open. "Manuel, what's wrong? What is it?"

The old man turned his head away, waved a hand at him. "Shit, Colton, you've got time to put your shorts on! Put the

gun away. It's not your kind of trouble. We need the ladyboy."

Diego climbed out of bed. "What is it, Uncle?"

"You're not dressed, either? Do you ever wear clothes, Diego?"

"Not when I'm in bed with Colton."

His grin was a little cheeky, and Manuel waved him off, too. "I don't need to know about that. Bossy Maria sent me to get you. She says there's a girl about to have a baby. Like any minute. Something about the head showing."

Diego knew how to get dressed faster than anyone Colton had ever met. White t-shirt, Levi's, Crocs, no underwear, and he was sprinting across the ranch to the tiny building he had set up as a clinic.

Colton looked at Manuel. "The head showing? What the hell does that mean?"

Manuel shook his head. "It means we don't have time to get the girl to Nogales, and I don't need to know any more than that. Get dressed, boy. You got a bottle somewhere?"

"Yeah." Colton picked it up from next to the bed and handed it over, then hunted around on the floor for his jeans. By the time he was dressed and under the palo verde tree with Manuel, he was feeling that big slug of tequila he'd taken earlier.

But the sound of a young girl's voice, very loud, praying in Spanish for someone to just shoot her, she couldn't take the pain, then a shriek like a scalded cat had Colton and Manuel both reaching for the bottle.

Samuel, their teenaged *vaquero*, stuck his head out of the stables, looking sick, and Colton thought he saw traces of the three Juans sneaking over to the clinic to have a peek.

Diego emerged an hour later. Colton turned to Manuel. "He looks real pleased with himself, don't he?"

Diego stopped in front of Manuel and Colton. "She's going to name the baby Diego. Well, Juan Diego. That's pretty close."

"Another Juan." Manuel sighed, held the bottle out to him, but Diego shook his head.

"I need some tea." He looked at Colton, his hands on his hips, and Colton stood up.

"I'll make you a cup of tea if you go out to the stables and let Samuel hose you off."

Diego pulled the bloody t-shirt over his head, reached for the waistband of his jeans. Manuel sighed and shook his head. "He's taking his clothes off again. I tell you what I think, Colton. I don't think we're gonna get any supper tonight."

* * * *

They did get supper, though the women could talk of nothing but the baby, how sweet he looked and the way his black hair stood up like a little rooster and the strength of his cry. One of the women had driven the new mother and baby into the hospital at Nogales to get checked and the baby's birth registered.

"She was so young, too young," Maria Goretti said, absent-mindedly folding paper towels into napkins long after they all had one. "Dr. Del Rio? What did you think?"

Diego looked up at her, then down at the bowl of *pico de gallo* in his hands. He scooped some onto his plate. "I thought thirteen or fourteen. No older than fourteen, I would guess. The baby was full term, though."

Maria shook her head. "I wonder if her family sent her over the border to have the baby."

"She was illegal?" Colton took the *pico de gallo* from Diego. They had seen more and more people and drugs coming up and across the border in the lands around the ranch. The fragile desert was being destroyed. It couldn't handle the traffic.

"She was screaming and bleeding, Colton. I could hardly stop and ask her for her papers."

Diego glanced at her, and his dark eyes held the softest reproach.

She clicked her tongue. "I'm sorry, Colton. I don't know, but she probably was."

Colton just rolled his eyes and exchanged a look with Manuel. The women of the ranch had never paid much heed to him, certainly didn't treat him with anything approaching respect. But they fell over themselves trying to impress Diego, who was beautiful and elegant and charming and listened to them when they talked. And he worked like a dog whenever he came to the ranch, running his tiny free clinic for the local people.

Colton didn't feel one bit guilty sitting under the palo verde tree, drinking tequila with Manuel or listening to his stories or riding out with the men, fixing the fences. Diego didn't know what free time was, he had no idea how to relax and do nothing, and he always did exactly what he wanted to do. As it happened, what he wanted to do was be a doctor, but it was still what *he* wanted to do. Colton loved him like he loved the stars in the night sky over his land, but that didn't mean he didn't notice Diego was a little bit soft and a little bit spoiled. Well, Colton liked him that way. He was hard enough for both of them. He liked Diego soft.

The next morning he rode out with Samuel and Manuel to check the fences on the Mexican side of the ranch. The ranchland fell across the border, and it had run in the family so long that the private ownership rights took precedence over the national borders. For now, Colton thought. Change was coming.

He didn't want Mexican immigrants trying to walk into America from his land. The country was too dangerous. There wasn't any water, and this land was more brutal than beautiful. Samuel had come this way, though, walked across the borderlands, lost, nearly out of his mind with thirst before he'd stumbled onto the ranch. Maria Goretti had never been able to get him to say where he'd come from, or why he'd run, and Colton told her not to worry him about it anymore, to just let him stay for now. When he was ready to talk, he'd talk.

They had a sturdy barbed wire fence, four-wire, across the southern border of the ranch. They rode along the length of

it, and anyplace that looked loose, Samuel climbed down and tightened the wires. They only found one broken section, and the rough, reddish hair stuck in the barbs belonged to an old bull that was famous in these parts for rubbing his itches along fences and busting things down.

Manuel was quiet, his hands still on the reins. Colton watched his face, as dark and seamed as this land, eyes squinting into the sun from under the brim of a battered straw Stetson. Colton enjoyed his company more than anyone's, sometimes even more than Diego's. He could talk to him about anything, get swatted down like he was still a kid. Manuel had known him as a child, and he was Colton's kind of lawman. Not many of them left now, and Colton suspected the day would come when he'd be the last.

The pretty bay mare between his legs skittered a bit, did a sidestep, and Colton reached a hand for her neck to settle her down. There were snakes out here and the horses knew it. Colton remembered how he'd felt after his reckless, mescal-drinking grandpa had died, how lost and alone he'd felt, and he thought it was gonna be worse when this old man died. He loved him fiercely. They were the same family and history, all wrapped up in this dangerous, wild land. But change was coming, and Colton felt a little tremble of panic in his belly sometimes looking at the old man.

Manuel was pointing. "Colton, look. You see it?"

He studied the cactus and dusty yellow rocks, and after a moment a path was visible, very faint, like a goat path. They rode closer, studied the signs on the ground. It wasn't a goat path. No dung, no chewed up creosote bushes. Instead they

could see empty plastic water jugs, a torn t-shirt, a tiny pair of purple socks with a Disney princess on the top.

"I bet this is the path these pregnant girls have been taking, Colton."

He looked around. The land was desolate—tumbled rocks, organ pipe cactus ten feet tall with rattlesnake burrows underneath, no water, no shade. "This isn't any place for pregnant girls to be walking alone, Manuel."

"We got to either make it easier for them to get to Bossy Maria for help, or make it harder, so they stay in Mexico. Your call, *Patron*."

Colton shook his head. "It's too dangerous out here. There's no water for near twenty miles. And if somebody got hurt, snakebit or a broken bone, nobody would find them, Manuel. They couldn't find any help. This is the farthest point on the ranch that's down into Mexico, but there isn't anything else until Nogales, and nothing until Sasabe in the other direction. It's too dangerous, Manuel."

Samuel rode up next to them, stared at the path. "This is new, Colton. I'll bring the boys out here. We can pick up trash, clean things up."

"Samuel, maybe you can make up a sign, saying *Danger, No Water, Rattlesnakes*, something like that. But you be careful. You see anybody out here, anybody in a truck, you turn the horses around and go straight back home. Don't try and talk to anyone. If we got drugs being smuggled in this way, it could be dangerous. You just get home and tell Manuel, you hear?"

"Yes, sir."

Manuel was studying the land again. "Tire tracks, boy."

Colton climbed off his horse, slipped under the bottom wire of the barbed wire fence and walked out into Mexico. He saw it now, a single set of tracks, big oversized tires, like a pickup truck. Where the tracks were deepest, like the truck had stopped, he poked around a bit, saw boot prints and a couple of strange cigarette butts, the paper dark gray.

He crawled back under, snagged his shirt on barbed wire and felt it scratch across his back. "Shit! Maybe they let the girl out here, but I only see one set of boots, only one set of tires. It's not a regular drop-off point."

"Somebody's watching the back end of the ranch, looks to me."

Colton nodded at the old man. "Yeah, looks like that to me, too."

* * * *

Before they left to drive back to Tucson, Colton sent word for the three Juans to meet him in the stables. They came in on quiet feet, stood in front of him, eyes glued to the floor. Colton stood over them a good long minute, hands on his hips. "Boys, we're not going to have this sneaking around and spying, not out on this ranch."

Three pairs of soft brown eyes lifted to his, and he felt his heart turn to mush. He made his face tough. "Out here we treat each other with respect. This peeking into windows stops right here, right now. You understand me?"

Three heads nodded, and the little one, the one Colton thought looked like Diego must have looked when he'd been

six, had tears standing in his dark eyes. "Okay, then that's agreed. When I come back in two weeks, I want that saddle to be cleaned with the saddle soap and looking like brand new, and you three are responsible for sweeping out the stables for the next two weeks. Samuel's in charge of making sure you do a good job."

Colton was never happy leaving the ranch, and the last few months Diego had been pretty glum, too, on the road home. Colton suspected the ranch was growing on him, but he also thought that Diego didn't look forward to getting back to work anymore. And Colton didn't know what to do about it.

He tried to do some research on the Internet, thought if he could find a one-eyed heart surgeon, he could ask him to talk to Diego. But in bare feet on hardwood floors Diego could sneak up on a man as quiet as the three Juans. He'd stared at the Google page, one-eyed heart surgeons, and Colton thought his head was going to catch on fire from the look Diego shot at him.

They'd yelled at each other in Spanish for a bit, then walked downtown for a Turkish coffee and some pastries to calm down. Diego's loft was in a converted warehouse, and they could walk anywhere they wanted to go. Diego loved the rush of living downtown, and Colton was starting to like it, too. But not as much as the ranch.

* * * *

Diego had fallen asleep in the truck, one piece of long black hair falling over his eye patch and across his nose. His face was so beautiful, ivory skin, black hair, and a mouth soft

and red as a pomegranate. Colton could hardly look at that mouth without wanting to take a big bite.

An eye surgeon down in Mexico City had placed a beautiful dark artificial eye in the socket. Colton hated it. Diego's eyes were like a night sky full of stars, and the new, artificial eye slapped him in the face every time he saw it. It didn't shine like Diego's eyes. It didn't look real, didn't feel real. Diego must have noticed how he felt, because when he came home, he put the eye patch back on and kept it on.

Colton thought he looked like a dangerous and sexy pirate lord in the eye patch, and so did most of the gay men and all of the straight women in the greater Tucson area. Colton picked up Diego's hand from where it was resting on his thigh, pressed the palm against his cheek, slipped the ball of his thumb between his teeth.

Diego stirred, his face still sleepy. "The smallest Juan came to see me before we left. He asked me if you were anybody's father."

Colton kept his eyes on the road, felt his heart stumble a bit in his chest. "You think I shouldn't have said anything? Maybe I should have just let it go."

Diego shook his head. "I think you're a good man, *Patron*. Pretty soon so many people will love you, I'll have to stand in line. Why is the back of your shirt all torn and bloody?"

"Is it?" Colton thought back. "Oh, yeah. I crawled under a barbed-wire fence, snagged it. It's nothing."

Diego made his face look polite. "Really? Did you consider coming to me and getting it cleaned up?"

"No, I didn't. I figured I'd let it bleed until it looked so bad you'd notice, then you would volunteer to climb in the shower with me, scrub it down. Scrub me down."

Diego looked out the window, and Colton could see a grin sliding over his face. "I could do that."

Colton parked his pickup next to Diego's Morris, a mini-car the ridiculous color of blueberries, and they climbed out and grabbed their overnight bags from the back of the truck. In the lobby, Colton opened the mailbox, pulled out a handful of envelopes and a pink note that said he had a package. He looked at it closer. That was odd. He had a package, but it was from Mexico. Diego got stuff from Mexico all the times, but he never had before. He handed Diego his mail, a couple of bills and three letters with the same strong, masculine hand and Mexican stamps.

Diego stared down at the letters, and Colton didn't say a word, anger sparking red behind his eyes.

Rodrigo Valdez. Diego's first lover. The man he'd run to when he'd needed help, after Colton's uncle, the sheriff of Pima County, had put a knife in his eye. The man Colton had taken him back from.

How much of this old lover bullshit was he supposed to put up with? Diego had been getting letters and packages from Mexico for nearly a year. Was he writing to Rodrigo? Why was the guy still hanging on, still writing, if he didn't think he had a chance to win Diego back?

Rodrigo Valdez was the most beautiful man Colton had ever seen, lean and elegant, a classic Spanish face, and the long hands of an artist. He was cultured, urbane, charming,

wealthy. He had put his hands on Diego, made him his lover, when Diego was only sixteen.

Colton had hated his guts since before he'd met him in the flesh, and he hated him more after. Rodrigo had come to see Diego before they left Mexico, had stood there and told him that he could come home, come home and back into his bed, anytime he wanted. He had stared at Colton just for a moment, and Colton could see the desire in his beautiful dark eyes to look upon his dead body. It was a mutual desire. Colton had spent many a happy hour since then imagining twisting Rodrigo Valdez's neck until it snapped. He and Diego had been back in Arizona for two months when the letters started.

Upstairs in the loft, Diego leafed through the letters, but didn't open them. He stuck his hand out. "Colton, give me the pink slip. I'll go get the package."

Colton handed it over without a word, picked up the bags and walked into their bedroom. He could feel Diego watching his back, then the click of the front door as he left.

He wasn't gonna think about it. He didn't want to get pissed off at Diego and he didn't know what was going on. It felt creepy, though. Creepy like Diego could be in danger.

No, he was okay. He was just being paranoid. Colton thought he'd just been a cop too long, seeing danger in even the normal stuff. He put a load of dirty clothes in the laundry basket, including the ones he was wearing. When he pulled the shirt off the cuts on his back, he felt them start bleeding. He took a look in the dresser mirror. No big deal. Just some scrapes.

He was in the shower, his forehead leaning against the cool tile, hot water pounding on the scrapes on his back. Diego opened the shower door and stepped in behind him, hands sliding around his waist, sliding up his chest, quick fingers reaching for his nipple in a sweet little pinch. "Why didn't you wait for me? You don't know how to get yourself clean without me."

Colton turned into his arms, pulled Diego up close against his chest. Diego rested his head on Colton's shoulder, turned his face into his neck, touched the tender wet skin with his mouth. "Don't be mad at me, Colton. I don't know what's going on."

Colton tilted his chin up, watched the shower splash water like diamonds across his face and in his dark hair.

"I'm not mad, baby. But I'm getting worried." Diego shook his head, but Colton didn't think he looked all that sure of himself.

"He's just ... I don't know."

"Diego, does he talk like he thinks you're gonna go back to him?"

Diego hesitated, his hands tightening around Colton's waist. "I'm not writing to him, Colton."

"I know that." Colton's big hands were sliding down Diego's slender body.

"You do? Really?" Diego stepped up, stepped closer, his elegant hands reaching down into the wet curls between Colton's legs. Gentle fingers stroked Colton's balls, tracing their curve, and he hefted his cock, traced the sensitive underside, then reached for the foreskin.

Diego slid the foreskin back, exposing the heavy purple head of Colton's cock. His fist tightened around the shaft of his cock, sliding up and back, and Colton felt his toes start to curl, watched Diego's face start to flush with the heat of the shower, with desire. He reached for his head, dragged it back by the hair, that long ivory throat, that wet open mouth, and Colton plundered his mouth, the sweet-tasting tongue, so soft, and Diego's fist was pumping between his legs. There was nothing like it. No one had ever touched him like Diego touched him. No one had ever known him like Diego knew him, and the passion caught in his belly, came boiling up hot out of his balls and spilled over Diego's fist.

His touch gentled, and Colton eased his hand out of Diego's hair, slid down, his mouth making a trail over Diego's wet skin, down his chest and belly. He nestled into him, mouth moving over the straining cock, sucked him down deep. Diego caught his breath, moved his hips, thrust into Colton's mouth. Colton let him slide in deep, that way he loved, let his teeth scrape just a bit along the velvet soft skin. Colton felt it when he started to come. His ass tightened and his thighs tightened and he went up on his toes, stayed there for one second, two seconds, before Colton's mouth was filled with his taste.

He held him, sucking him down until Diego stopped moving, until his feet were flat on the shower floor again. He stood up, eased his hands down over Diego's beautiful face, held him close and kissed his chin, his nose, his closed eyelids, lifted him into his arms, wrapped him up and held him close. Diego put one hand between them, over Colton's

racing heart, kept it there, warm and heavy, until the water started to cool, and they scrambled out of the shower before the hot water gave out completely.

Colton pulled Diego into the bedroom, tugged him back into his arms on their bed and Diego curled into him, head on his chest. Colton rubbed a towel over Diego's damp hair, rubbed it down over his back, tucked him up safe between his legs, safe in his arms. "I'll take care of you, baby. No matter what, I'll be there for you. You trust me?"

"Yeah, I trust you." Diego's mouth was against his throat, but Colton thought he felt a little shiver down in his chest, so he tightened his arms, held them closer together.

"What have you got going on this week?"

"Duty Wednesday at the hospital. How about you?"

Colton thought back to the open cases his unit was working on. "Nothing too exciting. I got a complaint from this old rancher who knew my grandpa. He said the Apache were rustling cattle down on the border. I said, 'How do you know they were Apache?' So the old man said he saw their tracks, unshod horses and something about moccasins. I said I thought most Apache wore cowboy boots these days and had gotten out of the rustling business. But he wasn't having any of that. I ought to send Manuel to talk to him, figure out if the old man is living in the world of today or if his mind is back in 1864.

"Your mom called me last week, too, said they had retrieved a cache of smuggled art from the border outside Sasabe. It was old stuff. Old masks. Like demon masks from the old dances. I guess the collectors go wild for that stuff. I

don't know. They were ugly, though, my God. She took pictures and sent them through the email."

"So were they being smuggled north?"

Colton shrugged. "I don't know. I wouldn't assume that, because what would be the point? They aren't protected. I mean, you could mail one into the states if you had an old mask you wanted to sell." They were both quiet for a moment, and Colton thought about the package someone had mailed to him from Mexico. "Did you get the package from downstairs? Was it from him?"

"Rodrigo? No." Diego stretched, wiggled his toes. "It was from Mom. Maybe it's one of those masks. Was she going to send you something?"

"Yeah, actually she was. I thought she'd send it to the office, though. We're gonna test it for drugs, and bomb stuff. The usual border smuggling chemicals. I thought it would be..."

"A bomb? Sent by Rodrigo Valdez? He's not like that, Colton. I mean, I feel like he's just..."

"Just what?"

"Maybe a little spoiled. Used to getting his way with me. You'd think the man has never heard the word no before." Colton was pleased to hear the faint peeved note in Diego's voice. He ran his hands down over his shoulders, over his arms and lithe back. "Colton, are you bleeding on the new comforter?"

Colton lifted up. "I don't think so." Colton wasn't very impressed with the new comforter. It was soft, but it made their bed look like it was buried under a thick snowfall. They

lived in Tucson, for crying out loud! They didn't need a comforter built for the Swiss Alps. They needed a Pendleton blanket and a cotton sheet.

Diego rolled him over. "Oh, yes, you are. Get up! You don't know what I paid for that thing. It's Swiss down."

"I know exactly what you paid for it. Those Swiss ducks, they must shit golden eggs."

Diego winced. "Thank you. Charming. I'll go get some Telfa."

Diego came back from the bathroom with ointment and Telfa pads, and after he bandaged Colton's back, he got a washcloth and some club soda, scrubbed at the tiny spot of blood on the new comforter. Colton bent over and pinched his ass. "What a cute little wife."

Diego ignored him. Colton walked into the living room, looked at the package on the coffee table. It was big, the size of a hat-box, and inside was one of the ugliest things Colton had ever seen. It was rough-carved wood, painted a dull ochre with black spots, leather ears and a leather tongue protruding from the mouth at least eight inches, painted lurid red. Rough bunches of hair, like horse hair, were sticking out from the mask at odd angles. It had crude eye holes, a snarling mouth and yellow animal teeth. Diego came in and looked over his shoulder.

"What is it? Do you know?"

"It's El Tigre. A jaguar mask." Diego picked it up, turned it around and studied the inside. "It's real. I mean, it's a mask for the dances, not a reproduction."

"Why the jaguar?"

"Symbol of war, I think. Power, something really macho like that. When they have the dances, it's like a ritual to protect the crops. Used to be jaguars were more plentiful, and they threatened farmers like the wolves are threatening the ranchers now. So what they would do..." He turned the mask over in his hands, then put it suddenly back down in the box.

"What's wrong?"

"There's blood on it. What they would do during the dances was someone would be the tigre, and everyone else would hit him with whips, knotted ropes. And they would drive him out of the village. Or kill him."

"Sweet." Colton picked up the note that had come with the mask. It was from Esmeralda Del Rio, Diego's mother. She was the Mexican Consul for his area of the border.

Colton opened the note, and one of his sheriff's department business cards fell out, battered and dirt-smudged. *Colton, one of your cards was found inside the tigre mask. That's why I sent this one to you. I'm not sure what it means. We found no evidence of drugs or explosives, but it was not found on a common smuggling route. The mask has value, maybe two or three hundred dollars to a collector. None of which explains why it was hastily but carefully buried in such a way as to be extremely noticeable or why your card was inside.*

Colton passed the note to Diego, leaned back and propped his feet up on the coffee table. When Diego finished reading, he put the letter down and studied the mask. "Are you

supposed to drive El Tigre out of your fields? Or is someone saying you are the jaguar threatening the crops?"

Colton shook his head. "This sounds as crazy as the old man thinking the Apache are rustling his cattle. I think I need my crimes confined to this century." He nudged the note with his toe. "She forgot to add, 'and I hope you are well, dear son-in-law.'" He lifted Diego's hand, pressed a kiss into the palm. "Are you gonna put the dirty clothes into the washing machine?"

Diego scooted closer, and Colton opened his arms. "In a minute."

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Chapter Two

Colton walked into his office the next morning carrying the hat box. Chan was at the coffee pot, dumping Splenda into his cup. He had been in a bad mood since he got the word his cholesterol needed some serious work. He believed his joint New Orleans and Chinese heritage was going to doom him to an early grave from heart disease, because Chinese people from New Orleans could not stop cooking.

Sanchez was nose-to-nose with a young dirt-bag. "Listen, *cabron*, I think you're too smart to take a fall for that man. What's he pay you, three dollars a day to wash dishes in that dive? He says you stole the goat. If he's serving stolen goats and you butchered them, he's gonna say he didn't know anything..."

Stolen goats? Colton looked at Chan, shook his head.

"Is that coffee cake, Colton? Donuts?"

"No. Something dug up outside Sasabe." He pulled the mask out of the box, and Chan took a step back.

"Jesus, that's ugly."

Sanchez pointed to the kid in the chair. "Don't move." Then he walked over and took the mask. "El Tigre." He turned it over, looked inside. "See that little knob there? Should have a piece of leather on either side. It's how you tie it on your head." He looked closer. "Is that old blood?"

"Diego says it is."

Chan shook his head. "I don't think it's a nuclear device in disguise, boss. Is that one of the things Ms. Del Rio called about?"

"Yeah."

Sanchez put it back down in the box, got a paper towel and wiped his hands. "Kind of creepy."

Colton nodded to the kid in the hot seat. "What's with the goats?"

Chan grinned. "This is just your sort of case, boss. We brought him in because he says an Apache kid sold them a couple of goats under the table. He rode into Sonoyta on a horse, had the goats roped behind. His uncle butchered and roasted one of the goats at his place on the border, over by the Tohono O'odham reservation. One of the Apache kid's goats went missing that night, and this boy was accused of the crime."

"Are you fucking kidding me? There weren't any goats missing from the old man's ranch, were there?"

Now Sanchez was grinning, too. "The old man says three goats are missing. I'd say they were roasted and eaten, and we ain't gonna find a trace."

"Jesus."

Lydia pushed through the doors with her new partner. Lydia was the toughest uniform on the force. She was a triathlete, but had turned her back on the hype and bull of pro sports to be a kick-ass sheriff's deputy. She trained all the rookies, got them toughened up enough the street didn't eat them alive.

Colton nodded toward the mask. "So what do you think? Is it something real, or is it bullshit?"

Chan took a sip of his coffee, made a face. "Bullshit."

Sanchez stroked his moustache with one thumb. He had skin the color of café au lait and warm brown eyes, and his hair and moustache were silver-gray. He was the unit's babe magnet. "I don't know, boss. Traditional people, they really believe in that stuff. Especially the third year of a drought, times like that. Like now."

"It had one of my business cards inside when they dug it up."

"Huh. Okay, maybe sixty/forty bullshit to something religious. Ritual or something."

Colton picked up the mask, held it up. "Lydia, what do you think? Is it bullshit, or is there trouble brewing outside Sasabe?"

Lydia narrowed her eyes, hands on her hips. The kid Sanchez had been questioning about the goats looked at the mask, eyes wide, then he bolted for the door with a shriek.

Lydia's new partner, Joey Monelli, a kid the size and shape of The Hulk, took a flying leap, but the tackle missed. He'd played college ball until he tore up his knee and lost his scholarship. Colton got the feeling he really missed playing football.

Lydia rolled her eyes, reached out and hooked the kid around the neck before he got to the door, put him on the ground. She stared round the room, shaking her head. "What is this bullshit?"

Colton put the mask away, closed the lid on the box.
"Okay, that's official. It's bullshit." He looked down at the kid lying on his belly next to Lydia's boot. "But just to be safe, drag that *cabron* into my office and let's see what he knows about El Tigre."

* * * *

Colton had grown up speaking Spanish and playing rough-and-tumble with Mexican boys. It gave him a bit of an edge, because the bad guys looked at his blond flat-top, at his big arms covered with curling golden hair, eyes the dusty blue of faded denim, and they chattered away to Sanchez, not guessing he understood every word.

The kid had a weak chin with a couple of scabbed pimples, a scruffy little moustache that was trying too hard to do the job. Colton thought he was maybe nineteen, no older. He looked over at Sanchez. "What the fuck is going on? Where'd he get El Tigre? I don't know nothing, man. I don't know nothing about that girl. Did someone ... find her?"

Colton raised his eyebrows, then reached into the box and pulled the mask back out. The kid winced and pulled away. "No matter what you say, I'm gonna put you away for the girl. In an American prison."

"No fucking way, man!"

Sanchez and Chan exchanged a look, and Colton could read their minds. *What girl?* Well, he didn't know, did he? But he was about to find out.

"You were wearing the mask."

"It wasn't me! I swear on the Virgin, man, El Tigre, he's been..." The kid shook his head, lowered his voice. "It's not real. He's not real. He's just a man, some fucking man and he's got everybody so scared. He's got that whip, a handle and a piece of rope with knots tied in it, and he..." His voice stumbled to a stop.

"Tell me about the girl."

"I didn't see it, man, or I would have stopped it, I swear. I just heard about it. She was pregnant, about to have the baby. That girl, she lived with her grandmother, and the grandmother pushed her out of the house when El Tigre said he had come for her. He dragged her into the town square, hit her with the whip across her back. She fell, went down to her knees." They were all quiet, and tears were streaking down the kid's face. "He put her in his truck, drove away. Nobody's seen her since." His voice was a whisper. "Did you find her? Her body?"

Colton shoved the mask in the box and put the lid on top. "No, we didn't. Now, tell me about the Apache goats."

* * * *

Colton picked up the phone and punched in Diego's number.

"Dr. Del Rio."

"Hey, baby. How's your morning been?"

"Busy. I've taken out two gallbladders since 0600."

"Really?" Colton wasn't sure what a gall bladder was, but he seemed to think it was green. And that made him think of

salad. "Can you get off for lunch? I can pick up a couple of salads and meet you at your office."

"I can't." Colton could hear the disappointment in his voice. "I've got to be in the OR in ten minutes."

"I can't believe I'd ever say this, but I think I saw more of you when you were still a resident. We haven't had a salad and a fuck at lunchtime for months."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Listen, can you take a day off? Come out with me to the ranch. I've got to talk to an old man about cattle rustling and he lives down that way."

"I can if you wait until Thursday. I've got duty Wednesday night. I wouldn't mind taking a ride with you. I can sleep in the truck. Wait, is this the old man who thinks the Apache are rustling his cattle?"

"That's the one. And the damndest thing is I think he's right."

Diego was laughing through the phone. "Now that's a story I want to hear. Hey, if I get home on time, I'll take you to dinner. You want to try that new pizza place up the block? I think they're open now."

"I could eat a slice. A slice, a beer, you, another slice."

"Right there at Adobe-Oven Pizza's grand opening? Nice. I'll be looking forward to that."

"Diego, listen ... that girl had the baby out at the ranch? Did you see any marks on her?"

"What kind of marks?"

"Like the marks of a whip."

"No, I didn't, Colton. But I didn't really look, either. She was lying on her back for the delivery. You need me to check her? You think somebody hurt her?"

"No, don't worry about it. Maria Goretti will know what's going on. I just heard something weird today. I'll tell you later. After pizza and love. Okay?"

"Yeah." His voice was soft. "I'm there. Gotta go, Colton, Bowel resection waiting in the OR."

"Really? I guess I'll just go get a Whopper."

* * * *

The trouble with jogging, Colton thought, making his way around the downtown city blocks near the loft, was that the bad guys didn't know enough to keep out of his way. Was it too much to ask to jog off a lunchtime Whopper without watching teenagers selling their dope, too cool for school at fourteen, and their mamas were probably working two jobs to keep the family in America with a little extra to send back to Mexico. Those boys needed some work to do, hard physical work that built up hard hands and muscles, but that kind of work didn't present itself to teenagers in downtown Tucson. Too many kids and not enough ranches and cattle and horses.

Colton rounded the block, took the stairs up to the loft two at a time. Diego was already home, on the telephone to Esmeralda. "Mom, just do it, okay?" He turned around and looked at Colton, and Colton felt a little knot of anxiety in his stomach at the look on Diego's face. He looked ... frazzled, upset and two steps away from frantic. Colton had seen this look on lots of people's faces in his line of work, many of

them in handcuffs, but never before on Diego's face. "No, I haven't told him. I'm ... yeah. I'm gonna talk to him soon. No, Mom. He's not like that. He won't do anything crazy."

Colton raised his eyebrows, his hands on his hips, feeling the sweat running down his back and chest, dripping down his legs. If Diego was talking about him, that was a bit of an optimistic assessment. It was entirely possible that he would do something crazy, but only if the situation required it. He detoured into the kitchen for a bottle of water. Diego kept the place stocked with Perrier, and Colton was starting to like it after his runs.

He leaned back against the sink, stayed there when he heard Diego hang up the phone. He stuck his head in the kitchen door. "Colton, get your shower and let's go for pizza, okay? I'll talk to you. Just ... give me a minute."

He offered the bottle, and Diego took it and tipped it up to his mouth. Colton pulled him into his arms, folded him in close to his chest. "I'm here. I'm listening, Diego." Diego closed his eyes and rested his forehead against Colton's shoulder.

They walked down to Adobe-Oven Pizza, the smells of pizza dough in a brick oven and melting cheese luring them to the new restaurant. It was a tiny place, with dark wood and green leather-covered booths against one wall, and huge adobe ovens behind the counter. They had a big grill, too, with a couple of pizzas lying across the grates. The girl behind the counter offered a paper plate with some samples of the grilled pizza.

"Hey, that's good." The dough was puffy and hot, with some sliced tomatoes and herbs and melted cheese on top.

The girl had an improbable light blue streak in her hair, which she tucked behind her ear, her eyes on Diego's beautiful face. "I know you, right?"

Colton stepped up behind him, wrapped an arm around his waist. In the months after the Sheriff of Pima County had been arrested on federal hate crime charges for gouging out Diego's eye with a knife, his face and Colton's had been splattered all over the media. They had had this same interaction too many times, and Colton could always feel Diego cringe a bit. He was so beautiful, that was the problem, and the eye patch made him look beautiful and tough and cool, not that Colton would ever tell him that.

"I think you fixed my granddad's skin cancer. You're a doctor, right?"

"Yeah, I am. Dr. Del Rio." Diego relaxed just a tiny bit back into his arms. "Your granddad doing okay now?"

"Yeah, he's fine. Besides being old, I mean."

Diego stepped on his foot. What, did he think Colton was going to say something? Not likely. Diego forgot he had conversations with nitwits every day. "So, what's good? Is the grilled pizza better, or the stuff in the adobe ovens?"

"Depends," she said, tearing her eyes away from Diego with some difficulty. "If you like lots of stuff on top, the adobe gives you the more traditional pizza experience."

He leaned over Diego's shoulder, tightened his arm around his waist. "Do we want the more traditional pizza experience?"

"Yes, we do." Diego was taking charge. "Let us have a medium adobe with pepperoni, black olives, and onions. A draft beer, that Sam Adams there," he nodded toward the tap, "and a bottle of water for me."

"Great! You're gonna love it, I swear."

"Give my best to your granddad."

"Thanks, Dr. Del Rio."

Diego pulled him by the hand back to the last booth. "So tell me about the Apache rustlers."

Colton slid into the booth across from him, looked at him for a long moment, just long enough so Diego would understand that he was not forgetting the phone conversation with Esmeralda and he would not be distracted forever. "An Apache kid sold three goats under the table to a barbeque joint down in Sonoyta. We wouldn't have heard anything about it, but someone took one of the goats back before it got butchered, and the restaurant owner accused his helper, some skinny kid who's cousin to his late wife. And the kid, he said an Apache sold them the goats and he thinks stole one of them back. But the reason he thinks this is because no one heard the goat being stolen, so it must be the quiet, moccasin-clad feet of an Apache."

"It wasn't because somebody tied a rag around the goat's mouth and everybody in the cantina was drunk and sleeping it off?"

"That's what I'm saying. Want to hear something else interesting? The Apache kid spoke good Spanish. He was wearing moccasins, and I haven't seen anybody wearing moccasins outside of their houses for a long time. And he

brought the goats in tied to his horse. He rode a horse into Sonoyta with the goats, like he was in some old western movie."

"The old man, he said something about a horse and moccasins, right?"

"Yeah, he did. He saw tracks. We need to see him, find out what he knows, because this Apache kid is going to flame out in a bloody disaster unless I can find him and stop whatever is going wrong in his life. Ranchers, they really don't like cattle rustlers. If he does it again, somebody's gonna end up shot."

Diego studied his face. "How do they know he's an Apache?"

"Long black hair tied back, the moccasins, and he's wearing a t-shirt that says *One Tough Apache Motherfucker*."

Diego rested his chin in his hand. "Okay, I can see that. Wonder where he learned Spanish."

"School, maybe."

The girl with the blue hair brought Colton his draft, put it down without looking at him, handed Diego his bottle of water and a polished glass with careful tenderness. Diego smiled up at her, and she stumbled away, already desperately in love. Colton sighed. "You know something I've been wondering. I don't think I've seen you have a drink of anything since you came back from Mexico last year. Not a beer, not a sip of wine, not a mouthful of tequila." Colton was going with a gut-feeling here that this had something to do with Rodrigo Valdez and all these letters. "Did something happen to make

you decide to quit drinking?" *And why haven't you told me about it?*

Diego looked at him, his eyes as warm as melted chocolate, and he reached across the table for Colton's hand. "Yeah." His voice was nearly a whisper. "Yeah, something happened." He reached into the back pocket of his Levi's and pulled out a letter. "What I was telling mom on the phone was I wanted her to try to figure out some kind of restraining order. Something to get him to leave me alone. Leave us alone. But I guess I would have to go to Mexico to do it and ... I don't want to get any closer. I don't know what's going on, Colton. I just don't think it's completely rational. You could be in danger." He took a deep breath and started again. "It seems like you're in danger. And it's my fault."

"It's your fault?" Colton took Diego's hand in both of his. "Let me ask you this, Diego. When you decided to come up to Arizona for college, instead of staying in Mexico, was part of that decision because you wanted to put some distance between yourself and Rodrigo Valdez?"

Diego was staring down at the tabletop. "Yeah. I mean, there was never any question about harm, Colton, nothing like that. But he was so much older, and I felt like he liked me being young and stupid, depending on him for everything. I wanted to grow up, to be a man. My own man. I wanted to have a life that meant something. He would never have let me grow up. I shouldn't have seen him when I went back. It gave him the wrong impression."

"He didn't believe you when you told him you were still with me?"

Diego shrugged. "He pretended to. But I don't know. I'm getting less sure all the time. There was a time I would have told you I knew everything about him, about how he thinks, but now I don't think I know him at all."

"Let me see the letter."

"Colton, I need to explain, to tell you..."

Colton held his hand out. Whatever was going on was bad to get Diego this rattled. "No, baby. You don't ever need to explain. Just let me read it."

Colton opened the letter, dated the week before, and started reading while a delicious-smelling pizza was slid onto the table between them.

My lover, my heart, my life, it won't be long now until we will be together again. I can't wait to hold your willing body in my arms, to feel your skin, like ivory silk under my hands. Diego, this last year has all been a dreadful mistake, but I will take care of that mistake for you. You don't need to worry about it anymore. I will take care of him, make sure that he never touches you again. I know he is keeping you tied to him with threats, and I don't blame you, Diego. But soon you will be free of him and back in my arms, where you belong. When you came back to me, Diego, when you came back into my bed again, when I tasted your mouth, your cock, when I slid my cock into your tender body, I knew I would do anything to keep you with me. Trust me, my young lover. We'll be together soon.

Diego dished up the pizza, slid the plate across the table to Colton. He stared down at the letter, a ball of something cold and bitter settling in his stomach. Diego had slept with

Rodrigo Valdez when he went back to Mexico, after his eye ...
Taste your mouth, your cock. Slid my cock into your ... That was enough for the fucker to get a bullet between his eyes. But what ... He looked up, and Diego was staring down at his pizza, tears rolling silently down his face. "Tell me what happened."

Diego looked up at him, the misery in his face like a knife to Colton's chest. Colton picked up his hand, pressed it to his face, pressed a kiss into his palm. "Diego, I love you. Always."

"I was drinking, tequila and beer, and I woke up in his bed. In bed with him. Naked, Colton. Naked and fucked."

"How much did you have to drink?"

"I don't know. I can't really remember, and that's never happened before. All I can remember for sure is a shot of tequila and a couple of beers, and that shouldn't have been enough for me to black out, or whatever. I mean..."

"You think he gave you something?"

"I didn't at the time. He said something about what a wild party, I was all over him, sucked him off with a mouthful of tequila in front of everyone, and he had to drag me back to his place before I got arrested. I was just ... so sick, so freaked out, I didn't know what to do. Maybe I'm having some paradoxical reaction to alcohol. That's why I decided not to drink anymore."

"Maybe he put drugs in your beer, Diego."

"Yeah, maybe. I think ... maybe so."

Colton stuck the letter down into his pocket and reached for his pizza. "Eat."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Colton. I let another man..."

Colton shook his head. "Hey, that's good pizza. You and me, we're okay. We're always gonna be okay, I promise. Let's eat. Eat and think and go home and make love."

Diego looked at him for a long time, then picked up his slice. "Yeah, that is good. Don't do anything that will make me have to bust you out of a Mexican jail, okay?"

Colton put another couple of slices on his plate. "I'll do my best." But the fury was burning red behind his eyes, and it wouldn't take much for Diego to figure that out. Rodrigo Valdez had drugged him, raped him, told him some bullshit story to make him think it was all his idea, all his fault. A classic abusive trick, but he had done it just weeks after Diego had an eye gouged out with a pocket knife, when he was on the run from the cops with a warrant for murder hanging over his head. And he had been torturing him with that memory for a year.

"Colton, I don't know that he gave me anything. Maybe I was just drinking too much. I was pretty miserable."

"And how does that change anything, Diego?" His voice was very soft when he leaned across the table. "He put his hands on you when you were unconscious. Right? Right? What does that mean? Don't even try to tell me not to take care of this. It's my job to take care of you."

"I want you to let me handle this, Colton. It's my..."

Colton raised his hand. "Save it. We'll do it together, you and me. Okay? You've got my back, right? And I've got yours. Let me ask you. What made you decide to do something now? With this letter?" Colton handed it back to him. "I'll tell you

why you decided to do something now. He threatened me. You were letting him punish you for the whole fucking year. But now he's threatening me, so you're about to climb on a horse and go slice the dragon's head off." Colton leaned back. "I know who you are."

Diego looked up at him, his face full of cold fury. "He gets near you, if he hurts you, yeah, you're fucking right I'm gonna cut his head off."

Colton felt himself drowning in Diego's face, so beautiful and dangerous. "You have a heart like mine, warrior's blood. I felt that the first time I touched you, your strength, like we were the same, you and me. Meant for each other. Nothing can pull my heart from yours."

Diego pulled Colton's hand across the table. "This is your world, I know that. Just let me in, Colton. Don't try to take care of me, or protect me."

Colton shook his head. "You're not a little girl needs to be looked after. We're in this together."

They walked home in the warm night, arms around each other, darkness like a caress against their faces. When they got upstairs, Colton pushed Diego back against the soft warm brick of their living room wall, the same rosy color as Diego's mouth, opened his mouth and touched his tongue. "I want you to fuck me."

Diego's eye went wide. "What? Colton, no, I was just screwing around before..."

"Yeah, I know. But I want it. I want to feel you inside me." He reached for Diego's hands, pushed them back and pinned them against the wall. "Come on. Let's do it." He leaned in,

pressed Diego's body back against the bricks, felt a hard cock rising against his thigh. "Let's do it." He pulled back, took a big sucking bite out of Diego's bottom lip, watched the color flush across his face, the black hair damp and curling against his cheek. "Let's do it."

He pulled Diego into their bedroom by the wrist, started unbuttoning his shirt, slid it off his silky shoulders; let the sleeves tangle at his wrists. Colton held his hands behind his back. "Just a little taste," he said, bending over and sucking Diego's nipple into his mouth, soft lips, teeth, tongue, and Diego moaned, his cock like iron inside faded Levi's.

Colton reached between his legs, stroked a thumb up, moved to the other nipple. Diego's chest was leaping up and back with his jerky breathing. He was moaning, his head back, the line of his throat and neck impossibly tender, and Colton pulled the shirt off his wrists, dropped it on the floor, reached for his jeans and jerked them open, pushed them down over his hips, hands sliding over skin like silk. What did that fuck-head twist Rodrigo Valdez say? Ivory silk. It was a good description and Colton would have to kill him for it, for touching Diego's ivory silk skin.

He pushed Diego's Levi's down, helped him kick his shoes off and tug the boxers over his feet, and while he was down there, Colton dropped to his knees and buried his face in Diego's dark curls, the damp male scent of him like some big cat's musk. Colton had the urge to eat him alive, his face buried in Diego's smell, but he contented himself with sucking one of his balls into his mouth, rolling it around, then wrapping his mouth around the head of his cock.

He pushed the foreskin back with his teeth, let his tongue work around and around the sticky sweet head, and Diego slid his fingers across Colton's face, his thighs trembling, his belly like a rock. Colton wrapped his fingers around Diego's cock and gave him a hard stroke. Diego shouted out in Spanish, *Madre de Dios*, and clutched Colton's head. Colton looked up at him, let his cock slip out of his mouth. "You ready, baby?" And he pulled away, peeling out of his clothes as he went, left Diego plastered against the bedroom wall. It didn't take him long to follow.

Colton pulled the new Swiss comforter off the bed and dropped it on the floor, and Diego didn't even stop to pick it up, just went straight to the bedside drawer, pulled out the lube they kept there. Colton climbed up on the bed, lay on his back, his cock in his hand. Diego climbed up after him, straddled his hips, and his cock was like a dark arrow. Colton slid the foreskin back again, ran the rough callus on his thumb over the sensitive head the way he knew Diego liked it.

Diego reached for Colton's cock, bent over and sucked the head into his mouth. Colton felt a little scrape of teeth when Diego pushed the foreskin back. He slid fingers through his dark hair. Diego didn't lift his head, he just reached for Colton's balls, slid down between them and pressed in at the rim.

Diego's finger was making a sweet little pass, around and around, circling, and his tongue was circling, too, on the head of Colton's cock. He felt his belly tighten, his balls pull up

hard against his body, pleasure and pain like a clutch deep in his pelvis. "Diego..."

"Not yet," he said, letting the head of Colton's cock slide out of his mouth, his breath across the wet skin giving him a shiver down deep. He pressed his finger in, a tiny piercing, then he pulled back, shoved Colton's thighs up and apart, and the head of his cock was lodged in place. "Colton. Tell me what it feels like."

Colton felt it then, a sweet, aching emptiness inside. "It feels like yearning, something waiting for you. That's what it feels like. I'm waiting for you to fill up the emptiness."

"Yeah." Diego nodded and bent over, rocked against him, rocked and looked down into his eyes, and the head slipped inside. Colton eased his legs up as Diego slid inside him like a key into a lock, looking up into his beautiful dark face. Diego's hair fell across his cheek, as dark and shiny as onyx, and he smelled spicy and rich, like some of that expensive Armani cologne littering the top of his dresser.

He was rocking again, sliding deeper and deeper, and Colton reached for him, slid his hands over his face, over his mouth, down across his chest until he could stroke the nipples. He reached down, his hands moving over Diego's slender muscled back, and then his hands were full of his ass. He could almost reach, if he stretched his arms, reach inside that ass, reach for the heat, and he pressed the tip of a finger into the soft yielding flesh. Diego was shaking in his arms, sweat dripping chest to chest, belly to belly. Diego curled into him, curled into his arms, and pressed his mouth to Colton's. One sweet kiss, lips softer than the night air against their

cheeks, and Diego was coming, coming inside him, shaking so hard in his arms that Colton held him tight to keep him from flying to pieces.

He slid out and Colton wrapped him up in his arms and legs, stroked his hair, hands moving down his back, and he felt Diego's sweat and tears on his neck. They held each other, and Colton stroked his skin, told him how many ways he loved him, and that no one would ever hurt him again.

* * * *

Diego came home from duty at the hospital early on Thursday morning. He climbed across the bed, pulled the new comforter off Colton's face and kissed him. "Hey, baby. I'm gonna climb in the shower. You up for a bagel? I got a couple of onion bagels and some smoked salmon."

Colton reached for him, tried to drag him into his arms, but Diego slipped away. "I need a shower. I'll be ready to go in fifteen minutes."

Colton laughed into the pillow, then sat up and looked at the clock. "Fifteen minutes? You've got to be shitting me. You want to make a small wager how long it takes you to get ready?"

Diego flipped him the bird and went into the bathroom. Diego was as vain as a boy model, the bathroom sink and dresser cluttered with lotion and mousse and aftershave and other expensive department store crap. Colton would take him anyway he could get him, and if it made Diego happy to put mousse that smelled like cantaloupes on his hair and then blow it dry, well, it made Colton happy, too.

His own grooming was much simpler. A flat top that required no maintenance, a bar of Ivory soap, skin scrubbed dry with a towel. He did occasionally let Diego rub his back with lemon cream that smelled good enough to eat, but that was as far as he was willing to take it.

He climbed out of bed, went into the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. Back in the bedroom, he pulled the sheets straight, climbed into a pair of jeans, his boots, and a long-sleeved chambray shirt. It was a funny-feeling shirt, sort of silky. Diego had bought it and put it in his closet, said it was the color of his eyes.

Diego was out of the bedroom in just under thirty minutes, a record, and Colton gave him a low whistle under his breath. He was wearing Colton's favorite pair of faded Levi's, his snakeskin cowboy boots, and a black silk T-shirt that looked painted on. And he was carrying a straw Stetson with a curled brim and a snakeskin hat band.

Colton slid the bagels onto the table. "You look hot, baby. Where'd you get the hat?"

"A place uptown. The hat band matches my boots. The guy sold it to me said, 'Your man will be all over you!'"

"You found the only gay cowboy shop in Tucson."

"Yeah, well." Diego took a big bite of his bagel. "That's good, Colton." Colton had piled the toasted bagels up with cream cheese, chopped purple onions, and smoked salmon. "You and me, we're the most famous gay martyrs in the borderlands."

He stopped, the bagel halfway to his mouth. "Tell me you're kidding."

Diego shook his head. "Don't worry about it. You're too big and scary for anybody to try and talk to you, not unless they're wearing a uniform and a gun." Diego nudged his knee under the table.

"Boy, you are in a mood today."

"Yeah, I'm happy to have the day off work, and to be spending it with you."

"Me, too, baby. We should have enough time to swing by the ranch for supper."

"You want to check on your boys?"

"Yeah, I guess I do. And I want you to check on that girl, if you would. Oh, don't let me forget the mask."

Diego wiped his hands carefully on a paper towel. "So what's going on? You said something about whip marks on the girl?"

"Yeah. I heard a story about El Tigre. Somebody wearing the mask, terrorizing the villages. Hitting a young, pregnant girl with that whip, the rope with the knots, then taking off with her."

Diego narrowed his eyes, propped his chin in his hand. "So the mask is buried with one of your cards. Then you just happen to hear this story that is bound to make you climb on your horse and ride to the rescue."

"You think it's all some kind of trap? To what point? All I'm gonna do is go find the stupid fucker and take him down. I think one of the villagers stole the mask from El Tigre, buried it with my card. Asking for help."

Diego smiled at him. "Yeah, you're probably right. Who could resist such a hero? So what's with the Apache cattle rustlers?"

"I don't know yet. If that old man is like my grandpa, and he sounds like he is, he's waiting for me to show up, talk in person."

"You think he'll mind if I tag along?"

Colton shook his head. "You can be my deputy."

Diego made a rude noise and picked up the rest of his bagel.

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Chapter Three

Scrubby juniper and pinon pine, twisted and bent by the wind, dusty sage and tumbleweed dotted the landscape out the windows of the pickup. Diego leaned over and put his head in Colton's lap to sleep on the drive out to the old rancher's place. This is what heaven would be like, Colton thought. Driving an old pickup around the southern Arizona desert with Diego asleep on his lap. He put his hand down, rested it in his silky hair. He had come very close to losing him in the weeks after the hate crime that had cost him his eye. Closer than he realized, thanks to Rodrigo Valdez.

Diego stirred against his thigh and sat up, yawning. "We nearly there?"

"Yeah." He opened the directions Sanchez had written down for him. *You'll pass the sign for the abandoned copper mine on the left. Check your odometer and go seven-tenths of a mile further. On the right is a dirt track. Turn there and drive two miles until you get to the house.*

"Have you seen the sign for the mine yet?"

Colton shook his head. "Should be coming up soon. You have a busy night at the hospital, baby? I didn't even ask."

Diego shook his head. "A couple of acute abdomens I decided to watch. I stitched up a nasty knife wound. The girlfriend he cheated on practically carved her initials into his ass. That boy's gonna have quite a scar. Colton, look. Is that it?"

He looked out the window. A big, weathered piece of wood with faded red lettering was propped between a couple of juniper fenceposts: Peligro! Danger! Abandoned Mine.

"Looks like it." He glanced down at the odometer and turned onto the rough dirt track that in these parts passed for a road. "The old man needs to get a grader out here. I wonder how many tires he loses in a year?"

The ranch house was small and old, ochre colored adobe, built in the old way, thick walls, vigas and a flat roof, a couple of buildings out behind the pasture. The adobe looked like it needed some patch work. Colton had checked out the fences as they drove in, and they were in bad repair. The old man might have just lost his cattle because they took a walk out one of those broken pieces of fence.

He pulled up and parked next to a battered old Chevy. Impossible to tell if it was originally the color of dust, or if it had acquired that color through time and hard living.

Diego climbed out and walked around the front of the pickup, fitting the new cowboy hat down on his black curls. Faded Levi's, snakeskin cowboy boots with dust on the toes, black silk T-shirt and his hair was loose down to his shoulders. And that Stetson. Colton felt the bottom drop out of his stomach, lust, helpless love. He could have dropped to his knees in the dirt. "Jesus."

He had Diego backed up against the hood of the truck, one hand sliding through his hair, another sliding around that slender waist, and he pulled him close, buried his face in his warm neck. "Jesus, Diego..." It hit him like this, sometimes, like he was standing on the ocean shore, and a huge cold

salty wave knocked him back on his ass. It was shameless, the way he felt about his man.

Diego slid fingers up under the new shirt, back and forth over Colton's belly. "Now, that's the reaction I was looking for."

His arms were trembling, his heart thudding in his throat. "I want to die in your arms. That's not too much to ask, is it?" The words fell out of his mouth before he could stop them. Diego's hands stilled against his belly and he moved closer, turned his head until his lips grazed Colton's ear, his cheek, his jaw, and settled on his mouth. Diego opened his mouth, let Colton slide his tongue inside and touch him.

"Goddamn, boy, your granddaddy know about this?"

Colton turned around and studied the old man. He was so skinny his Wranglers were held up with a rawhide belt wrapped twice around his waist. His head and his chin were covered with prickly nubs of hair, like an old boar, the exact color of the dust and sandstone surrounding them, and not a tooth in his head.

"Yeah, he probably knew." He let Diego go, turned around and offered his hand. "Lt. Colton Wheeler, Pima County Sheriff's Department."

"I'm Joshua Weaver." Colton reached into his pocket for his ID, but the old man waved him off. "I know who you are." He pointed to Diego with a tobacco stained forefinger. "I know I've seen you somewhere."

Diego adjusted the Stetson. "Ah..."

"You're that doctor fixed my ball last year." He turned back to Colton. "One of my balls, it turned ugly, swelled up as big

as a coconut and the thing was turning black. I thought it was the end, gangrene, but that boy fixed me right up. Seems like he had two eyes back then. Well, it's a mean world."

He turned around, waving for them to follow. "Come on in, boys. You're here about the cattle rustling, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I thought I'd die of old age before somebody showed up." They followed him up to the front porch, and Diego studied the arrangements. There were a couple of battered lawn chairs and a low sprung couch made of some yellowish-brown colored material. They could see where the old man's spot was on the couch. It was leaning, about ready to dump him on his ass on the weathered boards of the porch, and his bottle and ashtray were in easy reach. Diego grabbed one of the lawn chairs and pulled it around, dumping the sand off the seat, and he passed it over to Colton and got the other one for himself.

Joshua went into the house. "I'll bring us out some coffee." They could hear him rustling around inside, and Colton was thinking it would be better for Diego not to see the old man's kitchen. Colton wasn't quite sure where the water was coming from, but he suspected the hand pump around the side of the house was it. He also thought he had spotted an outhouse about 200 yards out back.

"Here you go." He handed around heavy old mugs, filled about two thirds with black coffee, then he settled in his spot and reached for the bottle. He poured a healthy slug of whiskey into all three cups. Colton looked at Diego staring down at the coffee. He looked up, met Colton's eyes, and his

eyes were somber, the memories of what Rodrigo Valdez had done to him chasing each other across his face. Colton took a sip of his coffee. Bitter and black, with a smooth bite behind it. Good ranch coffee. He nodded his head, and Diego bent his head and took a sip.

"I need to tell you a bit about the boy's mama," Joshua said. "Then you'll know why I know it was him took that livestock."

"What all is missing?" Colton put his cup down and pulled out his little notebook.

"Two cows, two calves, and three goats. I can't blame him for the missing chickens, though I have my suspicions, cause we do have coyotes out here. I don't want to blame the boy unfairly."

"You think it was just him? That's a lot of livestock for one boy to handle on his own."

"He's a smart one, and a good roper. He took the calves first, and their mamas just followed behind. But we're getting ahead. I got to tell it my own way, boy, because in truth I don't know how much of this is my own damn fault."

Colton settled back, took another sip. This was working up to be a fine tale, just the kind he liked to hear. The kind that worked its way around to the truth in its own sweet time.

"Her name was Tamale Pie." Colton could see Diego twitch a bit. "She was a, well, I guess you could say she was a whore. But I never thought of her that way. She was a good old gal, had a trailer up there in the mountains and she used to entertain, you know. You could go visit her and you knew she would have a pot of stew or beans on the stove, and

she'd make you up some fry bread. You could have a hand of cards and somebody to listen to your stories and somebody to share a bottle with. She had a bit of trouble with the drink, but, I mean, who doesn't! Anyway, that's what I mean she was a good old gal. Just a friendly, nice sort of woman. She didn't have the boy until she was more than forty. She told me she thought she was going through the change early. He was a bit of a surprise."

"Sounds like."

"She's part Apache, and the boy grew up dark, so she thought his daddy must have been Apache or maybe Mexican. She named him Johnny Bravo, and it didn't take the other kids in kindergarten very long to let him know he had been named after a damn cartoon character. That old girl never had the sense to fill a teacup. The boy, he grew up one of those lonely boys who like to ride off alone and read books, looking all handsome and desperate. He was always on a horse, every chance he could get, and he about drove those bookmobile ladies crazy demanding they bring him books. I don't know how he acted with his mama, because he always took off when there were any men around."

"How could his mama afford him a horse?"

Joshua shifted a bit on the sofa, reached for the bottle and tipped it up to his cup again. "Well, she couldn't have, and that's the truth of it. Her money went straight into the bottle. Now, she didn't drink, not one bit once she knew she was pregnant, 'cause I had to listen to her complain about it a good deal. But she's not out of the hospital from having him for two weeks before that came to an end.

"And if the truth be known, I gave the boy a horse when he was, oh, seven or eight, something like that. He was a serious boy and he was horse-crazy already, so I knew he'd take care of it. I thought he needed something to take care of, because there was no trying to take care of his mama, and some people just need that. And he loved that horse. Of course, he used that same damn horse to rustle my cattle!" He leaned forward, stuck a gnarled old finger at Colton. "You got to find him and stop him. He thinks he's living in some sad western song and he's gonna go down in flames, rustling. That's just the wrong way to go and he's gonna get hurt. What I want you to do is find him and help put him back on the right path."

Colton thought for a minute, and Diego spoke up. "What's he reading? Louis L'Amour?"

The old man shook his head. "No, it's that damn Cormac McCarthy! That old boy can write a crazy cowboy story."

"All the Pretty Horses? Not Blood Meridian? Damn."

The old man shrugged. "If it has a horse in it, he'll be reading it."

Joshua had a pattern to drinking his coffee, Colton noticed. He would take two sips, then top off the cup with whiskey. Two sips, then top off the cup. He needed to get him up and moving around or he was going to pass out and they would have to make three trips out here to hear this whole damn story. "Why don't you take me on a tour of the ranch?"

The old man struggled up from the couch. "I could do that. There was a time, this was the prettiest valley in Arizona. Still is to me."

Diego was resting his head on his propped up hand. "I'll just stay here a bit if that's all right."

Joshua nodded. "You just rest easy, boy." He followed Colton down the porch steps. "He's a pretty one. And he's a good doctor, too. What happened to his eye?"

"The sheriff of Pima County put his pocket knife in there and dug it out."

Joshua stopped in his tracks. "Not your uncle? What did he do a damn-fool thing like that for? Was it because he didn't like you being a queer?"

"He just wanted somebody to hate."

"Goddamn, boy, I am sorry to hear that. Where is he now, prison?"

"Dead. He got shanked in prison about two months after he got there."

The old man was shaking his head. "Goddamn, it's a mean world. And that doctor, he's something special. You know, I showed up at the ER, and I'd had a bit on, cause I thought the best thing to do would be to just cut it off myself."

"What, you mean your ball that got all swollen? You were gonna cut it off yourself?"

"Yeah. I haven't been to the hospital since I got my arm broke when I was a kid, and I figured, just go ahead and cut the bad parts out like you'd do to a bull got his balls twisted. I've castrated a lot of calves over the years. So I got tanked, preparing to do the job, but then I couldn't do it. So this old man lives back over there," Joshua gestured with his hand, "he rides me in to the hospital. Soon as I'm in the door some

child with red hair keeps asking me for my insurance card. I say 'insurance for what? The truck?'

"'Health insurance,' she says, looking at me like she's smelling somebody's rolled in cow shit. 'How are you planning to pay for your care?'

"'So I say, well, you can just send me the bill and I'll pay it, like I do all my bills.' 'You must be joking,' she says, and I was getting riled by then. So here comes the young doctor, and he says, 'Let's see what we're talking about here.' And the girl, her face is getting all pink looking at him, which does nothing for her looks with that red hair. 'You're doing too much pro bono, Doctor,' she says, 'and he doesn't have any health insurance,' and he just smiles all gentle and says, 'well, Michelle, what I want to do right now is examine this patient.' Next thing I know he has me in the exam room and I show him the problem. He rears back like a horse just kicked him in the teeth. 'We'd better do something about that right now, don't you think? I don't want to put you to sleep, though, cause you've had a bit to drink. So let's just numb it up and do the job.' I say, 'fine, you sound like you know what you're talking about,' and next thing I know I'm in the operating room and somebody's stripping me off and scrubbing me down and the job's done."

"How much was the bill?"

"He sent me a bill for forty dollars, and I paid it off when my social security came in. Want to hear something funny? I seem to remember I told him that forty dollars was how much the vet charged to whack off a twisted ball. Maybe they all set their prices the same."

"Maybe."

"Now look out that way, boy. You ever seen anything so pretty in your life?" The old man was pointing to where his land began, a little creek running down through a mountain pass, falling down into the valley.

Colton turned in a circle, taking it all in. He could tell that Joshua wasn't seeing the disrepair, the fences falling down and the old tractor abandoned where it had stopped running. "It's fine country up here. I love the mountains. I don't have water like this down on my ranch. That creek running all year, that is a blessing."

"I first saw this land when I was seventeen. I had me a bit of money from selling my daddy's Trading Post. It was up there in Navajo country, but I had gotten a broken heart from some proud girl wouldn't have anything to do with me. So I sold up and went on the road, looking to find me some land of my own. I've got some pronghorn, like to come at dusk and drink out of the creek. It's right pretty watching them run across the land. I know those fences are down," he said, surprising Colton. "Last year a baby pronghorn got hooked up in the fence, trying to jump it. The little leg got broke and I just never had the heart to try and put the fence back up. Not that I could do much these days by myself."

"I got a strong boy living out on my place. If you want, him and me could come up some weekend, give you a hand. You want to have a pen for the goats when they come back?"

"Thank you. I sure would like to have a good pen for those goats. But what makes you think they haven't been turned into barbeque already?"

"Two of them have. I think he's still got the third. Joshua, is that boy yours? You're sure acting like you're trying to be a father to him."

Joshua shook his head. "I'd stopped being with his mama that way about ten years before he was born. But I couldn't help but wonder, all those times I was with her when we were both young, what if she had gotten pregnant? Had she gotten rid of those babies? It's just that, I knew he wasn't, but I kind of thought he might have been." Joshua looked out across his land. "He might have been, in another life."

And in another life, you might have had a son.

* * * *

Colton told Diego the rest of the story while they were driving down south to their ranch. "So the mama dies, and the boy goes and lives with an uncle on the reservation. Joshua decides to check on him, cause he has a bad feeling. The uncle tells him to get lost, he can't see the kid. So Joshua goes to the school, says he has some books for the boy, and they tell him the kid hasn't been there for two weeks and is being automatically withdrawn for absenteeism. So he goes back to the uncle, says if he doesn't see the kid he's calling the cops. The uncle comes to the door with a shotgun and a dog and runs him off. But then he gets a phone call out at his place, woman says she's the boy's aunt. Says the uncle tried to sell his horse and the boy took the horse and ran off. They haven't seen him or heard anything for a couple of weeks, but the aunt put some food out by the stables a couple of times and it was gone in the morning."

"He sounds like you," Diego said, surprising him. "That sounds like the sort of thing you would do. But that doesn't mean anything. What you need to know is he the kind of kid who is using this old man because he knows the old man has feelings for him, or is he really the lonely, romantic young cowboy the rancher thinks he is? Because if he's just using this old man, or torturing him as some kind of stand-in for all the men his mama had around, well ... That's just wrong. Tamale Pie. Colton, can you imagine? And she named him Johnny Bravo. So what are you going to do now?"

Colton tapped the steering wheel. "I don't know. I'm more worried about what El Tigre might be up to. It's got to be money. Extortion, smuggling, something. I can't see the point in all the drama otherwise."

When they pulled up at the ranch, the afternoon siesta was just finishing up. The smallest Juan came pelting out of the stables, threw himself at Diego's legs and hugged him fiercely. Colton looked around the corner. The other two boys were peeking out, watching, and he gave them a 'come here' gesture with his hands. They came running, and he caught them up in his big arms, gave them a little rough and tumble. Diego picked up Juan, hugged him and passed him over. Colton gave him a snuggle. He smelled like little-boy sweat and horses and straw, everything good in the world.

Colton set him on his feet and addressed them. "You boys been helping Samuel? And being good?" Three heads nodded, eyes very big. "I'm glad to hear it. I'm gonna check that sweeping later. Where's Grandfather?"

"Out by the garden on his bench."

"Okay. You boys go tell Samuel I want to see him, send him out that way." Colton turned to Diego.

"You're sending me in to talk to the women? Nice."

"They're always happy to see you. They see me first, they'll just be mad there's two more for supper." He lowered his voice. "Check the girl for whip marks. Find out if anybody's heard anything about El Tigre."

Manuel had his battered straw Stetson pulled down over his eyes, a peaceful rattle of a snore coming from under the brim. Colton picked up the paperback novel that was resting next to his boot in the dust. The cover showed a cowboy on a horse, guns blazing, arms full of fainting school marm. *Showdown at Pecos Falls*. What had the old man said about the kid? He'd read any book with a horse in it? Colton had only read *All the Pretty Horses*—he'd been seventeen and had cried himself sick. Cormac McCarthy did not know the first thing about happy endings, that was the problem. He studied *Showdown at Pecos Falls*. Now, you could just tell by the way those strong arms were cuddling the tiny waist of the school marm, the way her hair was coming loose and falling down on his shoulder, that this story was going to have a happy ending.

He needed to put Diego on this job—he'd seen *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* and *No Country for Old Men* on his book shelf. If that was the kind of thing the kid was reading, Diego would have an idea about the current state of his mental health.

Manuel stirred a bit, lifted his hat off and brushed the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. "Hey, boy. What you doing out here? It's not Friday, is it?"

Colton shook his head. "Me and Diego rode out to talk to this old rancher, Joshua Weaver. You know him?"

Manuel thought a minute, shook his head. "I don't think so; might recognize his face."

"I needed to talk to you, too. Diego thinks we came down here because of this El Tigre mask got buried with my name on it, and we've been hearing some strange stories I'm worried about. But I wanted to come see you about Rodrigo Valdez."

Manuel's head came up at that, and Colton watched dull color flood his cheeks. "That fucking *cabron*." He was shaking his head. "Only time Diego wouldn't listen to me, said you couldn't blame Rodrigo for the way his family was. They're old money, the kind made off the backs of slaves in the copper mines. But he's one of them, I can smell it on him. Corruption."

"They were in your territory?"

"Only a couple of their ranches, one small copper mine. I don't know what they're doing down there, but they bought the local police. They were good men before, a strong unit that did honest work. But Valdez has the kind of money corrupts the soul, and if the choice they give you is take our money or lose your daughter, lose your mother, it don't take anybody too long to figure there is only one way to live. They just don't explain that kind of corruption poisons your soul

until you've got nothing left." He leaned over and spit in the dirt. "What does he want now?"

"What he wants is Diego. And me dead."

Manuel grunted and nodded, reached for the bottle of tequila resting in the shade of the tree. "Diego hasn't been right since he came back from Mexico. I wasn't sure if it was the eye, or..."

"Something happened." Colton looked around at the sound of footsteps. Samuel was coming, and he pointed to the kitchen, told the three Juans to bring them out some iced tea. "I have an idea. I'm gonna take care of it."

"You come talk to me first, boy. He's powerful. And he's got enough money to buy him some corrupt cops."

Colton nodded. "Samuel, there's a box in the front seat of the pickup. Would you go get it? I need to show you and Manuel something."

Colton told them the story that the kid from Sonoyta told him about the goats and about El Tigre, backed up and covered Johnny Bravo, the Apache cattle rustler, then opened the box and showed them the mask. It was even uglier in the bright light of day, evil and stupid looking. Manuel and Samuel both leaned as far away from it as they could get.

"So I got a couple of things to figure out, but the most important one is to find El Tigre before he hurts anybody else and figure out what the fuck he is up to in the poorest villages on the border. And I got to find Johnny Bravo. I don't know what he's doing, but if he's roaming around Sonora on a horse at night, maybe he knows something. Have you two

heard anything about this? Any stories about El Tigre visiting the villages?"

Samuel shook his head. Manuel lifted the mask out of the box, studied the back. "You do forensics on it?"

Colton nodded his head. "Nothing there. It was buried in the dirt."

Manuel was shaking his head. "Must be money, Colton. Smuggling. But why all this drama? It's not like it's hard to smuggle anything you want north. Sounds like somebody's trying to make some new routes north, and doing all this El Tigre bullshit to keep the local people from looking too carefully into what they're smuggling. But why? Too many smuggling routes open now for the Border Patrol and Customs to keep track of, so why go to all this trouble? Doesn't make sense."

Samuel took a glass of iced tea from one of the Juans. "Colton, you want me to scout around, ask some questions?"

Colton turned to him, took his own glass of tea. "I don't want you going down there alone, Samuel, trying to investigate. Too dangerous. Manuel knows that part of Mexico, and it's his jurisdiction. I got another job for you."

Samuel looked pleased, sat up a bit. "I want you to go out with me to the old rancher's place. I want to try and get a couple of fences put back up, clean the place up a bit. If this kid is hanging around watching, he's gonna be curious what's going on and he's gonna want to know who you are. So I want you to hang around and see if you can get a line on where he's hiding. If you can bring him in, you let him know he's not in trouble with the law. I just want to talk to him. I

don't think he's got much food. I'm gonna give you a cell phone you can call me for trouble. No more than a week, though. I don't know what the ladies around here would do without you."

Samuel grinned and ducked his head. Colton looked around at the three Juans. "Boys, run into the kitchen, tell Diego to come out here, okay?" When they were out of earshot, Colton spoke quietly. "And I don't want you going back over the border to whatever trouble you ran from before. If there's anything you need to tell me about that, now would be a good time, Samuel."

The boy lifted his head, his face so young and vulnerable that Colton had to keep himself from petting him like he was a puppy. "Nobody believed me."

Manuel shifted on the bench. "That won't be a problem here, boy."

Samuel nodded. "I was working in the mines. This man..." His voice choked, stopped.

"Valdez copper mines?" Manuel passed him the bottle of tequila, and Samuel took a small mouthful.

"He would come and get boys. Sometimes they came back to the mines after he was done with them, sometimes they didn't. He came down when we were getting off at night, looked at us when they ran us through the showers. You know those showers out back?" Colton nodded. "He'd come watch us in the showers, sometimes he'd take a boy then. Sometimes he'd wait. But he started to notice me. Twice I saw him watching me. So I ran."

"Samuel, do you know who he was?"

"Valdez." He shrugged. "The good-looking one. The one who's the artist." Samuel stared down at the dirt. "I was afraid of him."

Diego's hand came down on Colton's shoulder, and he could feel it shaking.

"I went home, and no one believed me. My grandfather tried to make me go back, because there wasn't any money, no other work, and he didn't believe me, what I thought that man was going to do. He said go back to work or get out, starve on my own. So I ran. I didn't know where to go, I just ... I just kept going. And then I got here."

Diego sat down next to him on the bench and put an arm around his shoulder. "I believe you, Samuel." The boy turned his head, rubbed hard over his eyes with a fist. Diego looked at Colton. "I called the hospital. I only had admin scheduled for tomorrow, so I told them I wouldn't be in. We can take the food and supplies out to Weaver's ranch if you want, take the weekend to help out."

Colton looked at him carefully. His eyes looked dark and hollow, but whatever he was feeling, he was keeping it inside.

"What do you think? We could hook up the horse trailer, carry a couple of horses over, and Manuel and Samuel could follow us in Manuel's truck. Bring the old man some food. I don't think he eats much besides beans and canned peaches, but we can't leave Samuel out there with an old man without some decent grub!" Samuel was grinning again. "Let's do it, get out from under the women's feet for a bit. They'll be happy to have all of us gone except Diego."

"And we'll be glad to roam a bit, too." Manuel gave Samuel a gentle shove on the shoulder. "Right? Better take your ropes and your good gloves and your hat. You got cowboying to do."

* * * *

Everyone perked up at the news that the men were taking off except the three Juans. Colton let them help him pack the horse trailer, and before he knew what he was saying, he was promising a camping trip if they were good and helped out their mothers. Diego was shaking his head. "You're on your own with that one. They're supposed to be good because being good's the right thing to do. Then the camping trip is a surprise, like a reward. You aren't supposed to bribe them."

"What? What do you mean, I'm on my own? What happened to all that for better or worse crap? Wasn't there something about camping?"

Diego hauled a load of sheets and blankets into the horse trailer, put them into the storage bin. "I don't think so. The Sonoran desert was not meant for camping, my friend. You should take them up into the mountains."

"They got wolves in the mountains now, and bears. Little Juan could head off to pee behind a tree and we'd never see him again." The boys giggled behind their hands.

Diego laughed. "You're gonna have to try that line on somebody else, Colton. Come take a walk with me."

"I can do that." Colton climbed out of the horse trailer. "Boys, you give us some privacy now. You remember what we

talked about?" The Juans nodded, and Colton slung an arm around Diego's shoulder.

Out behind the stables, the darkness spread over the kitchen garden, and Colton could barely make out the fence posts in the faint, silvery moonlight. They walked out until they got to the gate, and Diego leaned against it, looking out into the desert. "Colton, I believe what Samuel said today, but I swear to you, I had no idea ... I had no idea. I would never..."

"Diego, don't even start trying to figure out how you're somehow responsible for this; or for him."

"I knew he always liked the young ones, Colton, but he never forced me. It wasn't like that. When I was sixteen I was so brilliant, man, I knew everything about everything and nobody could tell me anything. I was so ready to fuck I was practically humping his leg. He looked like what I wanted to be, when I was a man. You remember being sixteen?"

"Yes, I do. And I would have fucked a pile of rocks if there hadn't been a couple of friendly *vaqueros* out on the ranch who thought my little blond curls were so cute they just had to give them kisses." Diego turned and grinned up at him. "I wonder sometimes where those boys are. Not much ranch work around anymore. My uncle, when he came down to get me after my grandpa died, I think he just sent them off home. I never thought to ask if he gave them money, or their horses."

"Well, you were young, just a kid."

"Yeah, Diego, I was. And so were you."

"I looked at Samuel's face today, and I thought he looked so innocent. So untouched still, and brave. I was smart, Colton, but I was never brave, not strong like he is inside. We need to watch out for him."

"I intend to watch out for all of them. You and me together, I mean. We can do it together."

"I'm still not going camping."

Colton wrapped him up, tugged him close to his chest, buried his face in Diego's silky black hair. Silky hair, and the fleeting strange night smells of the desert, the cactus flower, juniper berries, cooling sand.

"Listen, I didn't get anywhere with the women, but I think they know something. Or they're up to something. And I think you need to find out what it is. Maria Goretti is thinking she can push you around, Colton. You got to be strong and stand up to her, find out what she's doing that's making her nervous."

Colton sighed. "Yeah, I've been getting the feeling something's going on. So I need to stand up to her and make her stop doing whatever she's doing?"

"Yes. I believe so. And I know more about women than you do, Colton. Well, anybody knows more about women than you do."

"What?"

"Just don't forget you're the law. And I don't want you to lose your badge and us to lose our ranch to the *Federales*. Illegal means against the law, and you're the law."

"Okay. I'll take care of it." He buried his face in Diego's hair, in his neck. "Just give me a minute. I like the way the

desert smells at night. You ever found one of those fancy boy perfumes you like smells like cactus flowers? Sage? Anything like that?"

Diego shook his head. "I'll look for one. In the meantime we can just come down here, stand out here at night and you can smell my neck."

"That would work for me."

* * * *

The women were folding a big pile of clean clothes that had been piled on the dining room table. "Maria? Come take a walk with me."

She looked down at the washcloth in her hand, wouldn't meet his eye. "Let me just finish this work, Colton."

"Now would be a good time."

The women looked at each other, alarmed little looks from under their lashes, and Colton thought Diego was right, something was going on. He held open the door for her to walk ahead of him, and they skirted the stables, headed out to lean on the gate. This was fast getting to be the place on the ranch all important conferences were held.

He waited for a moment, because lots of people couldn't stand the quiet, and they would start talking. But Maria just stared out into the desert. She had a strong face, a profile like a warrior. She must be forty five, maybe older, Colton realized. She'd spent years out here on this ranch, doing work that meant more to her than anything she'd wanted for herself.

"How many people do we have living out here now?"

She glanced at him, surprised. "Two babies—Tyra Shakira, who was born about a year ago, and the new baby from last week. The three boys. Samuel. Five young women—the children's mothers. Manuel. Esme, that's the old lady. Me, you, Diego. I think that's everyone."

"The child from last week that had the baby. What is she planning? Is she going to stay?"

Maria shook her head. "She wants to go back home. She's just waiting for the baby's birth certificate and Social Security to come through."

"The boys' mothers; what are they doing as far as their education? Do they want to finish school? Do some job training?"

She shook her head again, her face puzzled. "They've started a sewing co-op. They're trying to save enough for a good sewing machine that does embroidery, so they can make the fancy dresses, first communion, christening, like that."

"That sounds good. And the boys are going to school?"

"Yes. What's going on, Colton? Why are you so interested?"

"I should ask you what's going on. And I'm interested because this is my home, and Diego's home, and I don't like feeling like I'm a stranger here. So I want to know who's been on my land, and I want to know what you've heard about El Tigre."

She was quiet, looking out at the desert. The wind tugged a piece of her hair free from the combs, and she brushed it absently off her face. "You know the smallest Juan? His

mother was with a man who hurt her badly. I think he damaged her brain somehow, because she's not ever been entirely well. She still isn't right, and she is afraid of ... well, she's afraid of everything. She feels safe out here, Colton, and Juan is growing up happy and healthy because there are many people around him. A man came a couple of weeks ago, the cousin of this woman. He told us that someone had found out where she was hiding, and they were going to tell her abuser where she was, and where Juan was, unless we helped them get some people north. All we had to do was give them a ride in the ranch truck to a road a couple of miles outside Nogales and give them water. It seemed..."

Colton could feel red dancing behind his eyes. "Did you do it?" He knew his voice was harsh, but it wasn't as harsh as putting his hands around her silly throat and choking her.

"Yes. I ... I didn't know what to do, I just kept remembering when she first came here, how hurt she was, and I thought of the smallest Juan in that monster's hands..."

"Maria, he was just testing to see if you were amenable to blackmail. They always run a trial first. Why not tell Manuel or me?"

"Colton, you aren't always here, and you know the law has never been able to protect women from violent men."

"I have a telephone, Maria. You don't like asking men for help."

They were both silent for a moment, staring out at the desert. Finally she spoke up again. "The cousin who came in and spoke to me. He said the man was El Tigre. That's what he called him."

"What about this girl had the baby? How did she happen to get here?"

"She said El Tigre has been coming to her village, bringing food. He's been telling the villagers the crop is going to fail, the water is poisoned, and the earth is dead. When he took her, he pushed her down in the square, hit her with the whip. But she thought it was just for show, it wasn't hard. Then he put her in a pickup truck and drove her practically to our back gate and told her to come have her baby there, that there was a doctor who would help her have the baby." She looked up and met his eyes. "She's retarded, Colton."

"You sure? I don't like thinking information about the people living here is going back into Mexico for some reason we don't understand."

"I don't think she knows any more than that, but she is very slow. The mark on her back was very faint, and is already gone. It's dangerous, what he's doing, but I don't understand..."

Colton turned to face her, and he had to grind enamel to keep his voice calm. "I can see that you don't understand. But understand this. On this ranch, we work as a family. We trust each other and we work together. Otherwise we will lose everything. I want you to do what you have always done, take care of the ranch and take care of the women and children. And I want you to leave the law to the lawmen. You don't know as much as I do about this sort of business, and Manuel has forgotten more than I will ever know. That's how we're going to do things out here. Have you heard from him again?"

She shook her head. "Maybe he just wanted help that one time."

"You don't believe that."

She sighed. "No, I guess I don't."

"I'll talk to Manuel and Diego and we'll figure out a plan to protect the ranch, and the people. We're going up to Weaver's in the morning, and we're going to leave Samuel up there to help the old man out. But we'll be back tomorrow night. I'm gonna call some of my staff, see if they want to head down this way in the morning."

Colton wasn't looking forward to calling Lydia, because she lived with the new sheriff of Pima County, Sheriff Miriam Boxlighter. Lydia was a good man, tough, appreciated that their unit sometimes had to work in the gray areas between the rules and regs to get the job done. He never asked her how she managed her home life, but he did try to not ask her to step too far over the line.

"Sheriff." She must have the duty tonight.

"Sheriff, this is Lt. Wheeler. Could I ... speak to Lydia?"

"Sure, Colton." He didn't know why this seemed worse than asking his boss's daughter out on a date.

Lydia picked up the phone. "Brewster."

"Lydia, it's Colton. What have you got going on tomorrow?"

"Nothing too exciting."

"How about coming out to the ranch, scouting around? Bring your boy if you want, let him play with the Juans. You can bring that other kid, too, what's his name?"

"Monelli."

"Yeah, Monelli. If you want. If you need a break, just you come. I got a bunch of women down here living on the ranch, and one of them is being threatened by an abuser. The bad guys blackmailed Maria into taking some illegals north in exchange for leaving the woman alone."

Lydia gave her usual snort of disbelief and disgust. "You got to be kidding me."

"Yeah, that's what I'm saying. We're going up to Weaver's in the morning, see if we can round up any information on our Apache cattle rustler, but I don't like to leave the ranch without any protection."

"I'm your man," Lydia said, and hung up, and it wasn't the first time he'd stared at the phone after a conversation with Lydia, wondering if he'd missed something.

* * * *

The boys helped Colton round up some pieces of downed wood, and he piled it up in the fire pit out back and started a bonfire. After a few minutes the women came out to see what was going on, and Diego and Manuel came over from Manuel's casita, and they had a family meeting. Colton spoke first.

"If anybody living on this ranch is engaging in illegal activities, and that includes helping people without papers slip north, then we could lose the ranch." The bonfire was small, a little warmth, red and gold against the desert night. In the light of the fire, Colton could see everyone watching him, looking worried. "Right now we're a sanctuary. But that won't last if the *Federales* get wind of smuggling going on through

our lands. And I don't want that here. This is a good place, safe. It was when I was a kid and I want it to be when these boys grow up here."

Diego stepped up next to him. "My cousins, they're gonna come help, just so we have some extra eyes. They'll be here tomorrow night. Maria, we still have beds out in the bunkhouse?"

"Yes, Dr. Del Rio. The bunkhouse has room for six ranch hands. It's got a bathroom out there, too."

"I think we got three coming tomorrow. My Uncle Manuel, he's staying here when we go up to Weaver's ranch in the morning. He can help the deputies coming out, and he'll be able to introduce the men when they get here."

Colton took the beer one of the women handed him. "When I'm not here, Manuel is in charge of safety and security. Anything looks funny, you need to tell him. We aren't ... we aren't going to make it out here unless we work together, make this a safe place. And unless we do the right things. I know people sometimes have different ideas about what the right things are, and for this ranch, Manuel gets the final say if there is any question." He didn't want to scare them, these young girls who had been scared for so much of their lives. Samuel was watching the dirt between the toes of his boots. "Anybody got anything else they want to say?"

Samuel looked up. "I just wanted to say thank you for letting me stay out here, Colton. I promise I'll work hard and I won't..."

Colton put a hand down on his shoulder. "You have a home here for as long as you want one, Samuel. That goes for the

rest of you, too." The women were giving each other those little looks under the eyelashes, except for the smallest Juan's mother. Her beautiful face was blank in the firelight, and little Juan stayed close between her knees.

The oldest Juan stood up, moved a little ways out of his mother's reach. "Can I say something?"

"Sure."

"I think we should have a dog on the ranch. We talked about it, and we'll feed it and take care of it and train it to bark if anyone comes around shouldn't be here. Like a watchdog."

Colton rubbed his chin, looked over at Diego for help. "It's okay with me if you have a dog."

Diego cleared his throat. "As long as your mothers say it's..." But it was too late. With Colton's okay, the boys did a little victory dance in the firelight.

Colton thought back to various comings and goings and noises from the stables. "I don't suppose you've found a puppy already and have him hidden? Maybe back in the stables?"

The middle Juan's mouth dropped open. "How did you know?"

"I just know. Let him stay in the stables for now."

The boys ran off to check on their puppy, the women went back into the main house to start cooking the food they were going to take to Weaver's in the morning, and to discuss the men. The men stayed out at the bonfire, warmed themselves and passed a bottle and talked about where the trouble would come from, and how to keep their family safe.

Lawless
by Sarah Black

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Chapter Four

It was nearly midnight. Diego came out of the shower, toweling his hair dry, studied Colton sprawled across the bed, staring at the ceiling. Diego wrapped the towel around his waist, came to the end of the bed and tugged Colton's boots off. "You laying there thinking about all the things you still have to do? Let's just go to sleep. I'm tired. Wait and get a shower in the morning. You smell good to me, wood smoke in your hair and all sweaty."

Colton groaned and sat up. "Wood smoke and sweat? Jesus. I guess I'll jump in now, you keep my side of the bed warm."

"I can do that."

Colton stood up, started pulling his clothes off and letting them land on the floor. Diego just stared at them, hands on his hips, and Colton shook his head and picked them up, made a half-hearted toss toward the laundry basket. "We need to send that little girl home with her baby pronto. She may be slow, like Maria says, but I hate feeling like we got a spy in our house."

"I think she's right about the girl being retarded. Maria told me what she said. El Tigre practically drove her here."

"After he made a big show about whipping her in the town square, just to make sure I'd hear about it. How did he know you were here, all ready to deliver her baby?"

"I don't know, Colton. But will you at least consider that this might be a trap? I know what you said before, about one of the villagers taking the mask and burying it, but..."

"Yeah. Well, Diego, a trap is only a trap if you don't know it's waiting there." Colton watched the feelings flood across his face.

"You thought it was a trap all along. You were just waiting to see..."

"Somebody wants to jerk my tail, this is the easiest way to do it. Listen. You know your business in the operating room. You work hard at it and you're good at what you do. I'd trust you to cut me anytime, baby. You trust me, too, to know what I'm doing."

"I do trust you, Colton. I just want to know what's going on. Will you tell me? Before you go ... before you go after him?"

Colton turned into the shower. "Yeah."

When he got out of the shower, Diego was already curled up under the sheet, his eye patch off and his face buried in the pillow.

"Who's coming from your side of the family?"

"Francisco, Antonio, and Cristobal. They say they can stay for a week, then we figure out something else. Francisco, he loves to romance the women. Tyra Shakira's mother, what's her name?"

Colton shrugged. "I think it's Filene."

"Filene? Like in the Marty Robbins song? At least it's not Tamale Pie. Filene's got a very stylish new haircut up over her ears. Francisco's gonna be all over her. Maria is not going to

like it, but maybe that will give her something to worry about besides smuggling people north."

"Cristobal Del Rio is your cousin? Holy shit, Diego, he's like, four time world champion roper, right? The Juans are gonna go crazy. Samuel is gonna kill us for making him miss that."

Diego closed his eyes, put a hand up to his forehead and rubbed wearily where the eye patch had left marks on his skin. "Cristobal, he's crazy like you. He's not afraid of anything, and he's so hardheaded. Only time I ever saw him scared was when his wife had their first baby. She's so beautiful, Anna, a musician, and..." His face crumpled a bit, and Colton climbed into bed and pulled him close, tugged him up between his legs, let his head rest on his chest.

"Diego, what is it? You got a headache? I know you haven't slept much the last couple of days."

"Colton, what Samuel said, I just can't get it out of my mind. It makes me feel corrupt. Complicit. I didn't know what he was doing, but ... it feels like I should have known. Should have known, and stopped it. Rodrigo, he's like me, Colton, the world he comes from, the world that uses people, that can use money to buy and sell people. My family came from that world, too."

Colton didn't say anything, just rubbed his hands down Diego's back, stroked his skin and let him settle against him. "You don't see yourself the way I see you. The way everyone else sees you. Sometimes I think you have this picture in your mind of a giant spider web, going back four hundred years, and you're caught in the strands, responsibilities,

obligations, old sins, crimes against humanity, and you look down and see this blood on your hands, and you'll never pull free of it all. Let me tell you what I see." Diego had his eyes closed, his forehead pressed against Colton's chest, one hand gripping the sheet. "I see a man who looked around at his world, and decided to be a doctor. And you came away to America to get your education, college, medical school, four years of a surgical residency. And you worked hard, and you're a doctor. You're a doctor. You do good in the world, every day. That's who you are. You are the man who made that choice. And you're the man who puts up with my shit every day. You must be a fucking saint to do that."

Diego laughed, gulped back a sob, let Colton pull him in closer. He snuggled in, his lips resting against the skin of Colton's throat. "I don't know what's the matter with me. I'm ready to cry all the time, getting scared ... Getting scared about you. That something's gonna happen to you."

"Something happens to me, I'll just wait for you to come get me, put me back together again. Because no matter what, I'm not going anywhere without you. Sleep now. Let me hold you while you sleep."

* * * *

Colton woke up before dawn, left Diego like an angel in their bed. He got a cup of coffee out of the kitchen, walked over to Manuel's casita. He was up and had his boots on already, sitting with his back to the palo verde tree, a cup of coffee warming his hands. "How is he?"

Colton didn't have to ask who he meant. "Shaky. He's working hard, not sleeping enough. And that fuck-head twist Rodrigo Valdez has got him by the short and curlies, man. I'm gonna have to put a bullet in that fucker's brain."

"Why do I get the feeling he's planning to do the same to you?"

"Good luck with that."

Manuel shook his head. "No, listen, Colton. All this bullshit may be with one goal in mind—for your dead body to feed the coyotes. But that *cabron*, he won't do it himself. I told you, boy, he's got an army around him. He's got plenty of shitheels happy to put a bullet into an American lawman for him."

"We're just guessing. We don't know dick."

"Don't go into Mexico without me. The border's changed. It's lawless now. It's like some other country, not Mexico and not America. But it's still ours to protect, yours and mine, and the people who live there, they're the innocents. We got ... a duty to them, Colton."

"Yeah, we do. My deputy Lydia Brewster is coming out for the day. You'll like her, Manuel. She's a good cop. She might be bringing her partner, Monelli, Joey Monelli. He's just a kid. What about these cousins coming to help?"

Manuel spit in the dirt. "Francisco's so busy chasing pussy he can't see past his dick. Cristobal's a good *vaquero*, if we need somebody to ride a bronco or rope some calves. I think he's a little hardheaded to be a lawman. Antonio..." Manuel stopped and thumped himself on the chest, over his heart. "Antonio is strong. Resolute. He's ugly as sin, looks like me. I

don't know how that little duckling landed in the pretty Del Rio nest. But he's pure gold inside. If I had to ride into hell, I'd take Antonio with me. That's if I couldn't take you."

Colton had to duck his head over his coffee cup so Manuel wouldn't read his feelings in his face. He looked out across his land. "I don't like to think hell's coming closer to our place."

"It's the borderlands, boy. It's where things change. And where nothing changes."

* * * *

Diego woke up in super-efficient surgeon mode, supervised the loading and packing of Samuel's food and clothes in the horse trailer before breakfast was on the table. He ate a rolled tortilla standing up, making notes in his memo book, and conducted an impromptu meeting with the women over a loan for the purchase of a sewing machine, embroidery capable. When he started making a list of the boys' sizes, claiming everyone needed new jeans and sneakers, Colton and Samuel escaped to the stables.

The horse Samuel rode was a tired old mare he called Goldie, for her pretty mane and tail. Colton pulled the saddle and tack off the wall, and Samuel led the horse to the trailer. The trailer was designed to haul a horse, and also serve as stripped-down sleeping quarters for a couple of ranch hands. Two bunks folded down from the walls, and the bench seats had storage underneath. There was a small gas fridge and a two burner camp stove and water and hay storage for cowboy and horse. It would do Samuel as private sleeping quarters while he was at old man Weaver's ranch.

Lydia drove up in her pickup, climbed out without her son or her partner, looking relaxed and comfortable in worn jeans and an old chambray shirt. Diego came over and shook her hand. "Deputy Brewster. It's good to see you. How are you?"

"I'm good, thank you, Dr. Del Rio."

Colton rolled his eyes. "Nice! Just like a tea party."

Diego had pulled his hair back in a tight ponytail and was wearing a pair of black and silver sunglasses that made him look like a petite Mexican cyborg. If he had been a cyborg, the look he turned on Colton would have fried him in his boots.

"Come on," Colton said, waving his hand, and Lydia followed, shaking her head.

"I don't know why he puts up with your shit."

"Yeah, it's a mystery to me, too. Let me introduce you to Lt. Del Rio."

Manuel stood up when they walked over, and he and Lydia stared at each other like a couple of gunslingers, taking the other's measure. The handshake was firm, and Manuel decided Lydia was one of the good guys. "You ride horses, Deputy?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good. I want you to ride out with me to the southern border of the ranch. We saw some tracks out there, a new path. If trouble's coming, I think it'll come from down there."

"Sounds good."

They walked off toward the stable without a backward glance, and Colton felt a little bit like his date had just left

with a jock, but he didn't have time to moon about it. Diego was at his elbow. "You ready to rock-and-roll?"

"I guess."

"Then let's try to go before the cousins get here, Colton. Otherwise we'll be stuck here listening to stories for hours."

"Yeah, okay." Colton climbed in his truck and backed it up to the trailer, and Samuel helped him drop the ball hitch in place. Diego climbed into the middle of the bench seat, and Samuel slid in and slammed the door. The three Juans and a scrubby looking yellow puppy peered sadly out at them from the stables as they pulled out onto the road.

Colton looked over at Diego, who was paging through his memo book. "What's this about a loan for a sewing machine?"

"Microeconomics, Colton. Don't you keep up with the Nobel Peace Prizes?" By which cryptic reply Colton understood that Diego was in a mood and they would all do well to just keep quiet.

"Samuel, what size jeans do you wear? 30-32? Or 32 waist?"

Samuel blushed like Diego had just asked him how long his dick was. "32-32, I think," he said, his voice barely audible. "I've got a pair of 30 waist jeans, but they're getting a little tight."

"Yeah, that's what I noticed. You want Wranglers? Cowboy Cut? Or I can get you a pair of Levis."

Speech seemed to be beyond Samuel, who stared frozen out the front windscreen of the truck. Colton couldn't think of a thing to say. Diego clicked his pen impatiently. "Samuel, it's just us. You can talk to Colton and me. I know you don't have

many clothes because I watched the women folding the laundry last night. If you're worried about the money, I'll just take it out of your allowance. Or you can save up your wages from this week working for the old man."

Colton and Samuel both turned to look at him now, and Colton suspected they had identical thoughts. *What allowance? What wages?*

"I think two hundred dollars for the week seems about fair, since you're gonna be working so hard. Does that sound all right to you? And your allowance is going to be twenty-five dollars a week. But for now, you need another pair of jeans, a shirt, a couple of t-shirts, and some underwear. You want boxers or briefs?"

"Boxers." Samuel's voice sounded numb.

"This what happens when you get enough sleep?"

Diego made a note in the memo book, then took a package of cinnamon Dentyne from his shirt pocket and passed out pieces. They all took a piece without arguing, and the road up into the mountains was peaceful and quiet.

Old man Weaver came up off the porch when they pulled up, waving and looking glad to see them. Colton motioned that he was going to pull around to the back, where the stables were, and he nodded and followed them around. Samuel got out of the truck and shook hands, told the old man his name in a shy voice.

"I'm pleased to meet you, boy." He hitched up his jeans and came alongside the trailer. "That's a good looking horse trailer you got there. Let's get your girl out of there and watered down."

The stables were in good repair, with some sweet-smelling hay and clean water troughs. It looked to Colton like he was keeping the stables ready in case a lost Apache cattle rustler needed a place to stow his horse.

"Mr. Weaver, I hope you don't mind us coming out like this. Samuel can stay with you for a week, help get those fences back up, and he's all fixed up to camp out in this trailer, so you don't need to worry about him."

"I'm happy to have the help, and the company, tell you the truth. I'm especially glad to see you, though. I was gonna try and call you on that phone at the store. I think the boy's somewhere close by."

"Samuel, you unload your horse and the tack, let me talk to Mr. Weaver." Samuel nodded, running his big hands over Goldie's neck. Colton and Diego walked back around to the front porch.

"I started thinking maybe the boy was close by. Because, I mean, where else is he gonna go? He ain't going back to his uncle's place, and he don't have any other relations, far as I know. And even though boys might think they're all grown up when they're sixteen, they still get cold and lonely and hungry, come nightfall. So I'm thinking, what if he's staying someplace close by in these hills? I can't think where it would be, but still ... So I go out to the farthest fence post down south, and the one up by the road, and I post a couple of signs."

"You put a sign up?"

"Yes, sir, I did. It said, 'Johnny, you can come get some grub and feed your horse at the stables if you want to.' I left

some hay out there, and put out some fry bread and pintos, and in the morning the food was gone, and the hay was swept up, looked like it made a fine soft bed for a boy. That was two nights ago. He didn't come back and stay last night, but he did come get his food. He's skittish, I think."

Colton rubbed his chin, thinking. "Well, Samuel being parked back there with a strange horse in the stables is either gonna make things better, make things worse, or not change anything at all."

Diego rolled his eyes, went back around back to help Samuel unpack, and the old man studied the dirt. Finally he said, "Well, I guess you could say that about just about anything. Come on up to the porch, I'll put the coffee on."

It was a sunny and cool morning, and the sky was a deep brilliant blue against the red rocks and scrubby brush of the Arizona mountains. It was the kind of morning when there was nothing better to do in the world than work outside in the clean mountain air, repairing fences. Colton and Samuel and old man Weaver worked on putting up the fence around the goat pen and around the chicken coop, and Colton laughed to see the bossy hens chase Samuel out of their coop. Around lunchtime Diego came out to get them, and they sat together on the porch and ate the lunch he had set out.

"Looks to me like the ladies feel they have something to prove." Colton stared around at the food Diego set out on a board and sawhorse table he had dragged over from the barn. Pintos and homemade tortillas, fresh pico de gallo, roasted strips of beef, and some ears of corn that had been roasted over a juniper wood fire.

"Food is love where I come from," Diego said. "All the ladies love Samuel. I guess they love you, too, but you're still a little alarming."

"Alarming?"

"I believe that's the prettiest spread I've seen in some time," Joshua said, coming up to the porch and taking the plate Diego handed him.

Colton watched him. Diego's sleeves were rolled up to the elbow, and he was dishing up food and passing plates around. He could smell bleach and something lemony coming from the little adobe house. Had Diego spent the morning cleaning the old man's kitchen? Apparently so, and it seemed to have put him in a good mood. Diego dished up a plate of food big enough for a couple of starving wranglers, two big ears of roasted corn on top, put it in Colton's hands and smiled up at him. *Food is love*. Tenderness swamped him, like was liable to happen at unexpected times, looking into Diego's face, and his hands were shaking with the desire to reach for him, to bury his face in Diego's silky dark hair. Diego's eyes got darker, and he took the plate back. "You don't alarm me. Go sit on the steps, cowboy. I'll bring your food."

"Bring yourself, too, and sit with me."

"I can do that." And Colton caught old man Weaver grinning at them, and Samuel's face had shaded bright red.

Diego sat close on the steps, and Colton felt the long, warm length of his thigh in soft denim, pressed against his own. It wasn't but a hop, skip and a jump from remembering how that thigh felt when it was lying beside his own, when it

was captured between his legs. Diego ran his hand down Colton's leg. "I've been thinking about something."

"Yeah, I'm thinking about something right now."

Diego looked up, surprised, then he grinned, and Colton watched the color flush into his cheeks.

"What have you been thinking about, Big D?"

"Where Johnny could be hiding out. I wonder if he's staying in that old abandoned mine we passed, just before we turned off the road."

Colton picked up a piece of roasted meat, wrapped a tortilla around it. "Joshua, you know what the state of that mine is? How dangerous is it?"

Joshua stared off across the ranch. "I don't rightly know. I think they stopped production back in the fifties, because the copper played out. It hasn't been maintained or closed out, as far as I know. Most of the mining operations around here, they hammered a few boards over the entrance, put a sign up that the mine's closed, and walked away. The government has rules about what they're supposed to do when they close a mine, but they never enforce them, not around here."

Diego looked over at Samuel, who was working on his third bowl of pintos. "Samuel, do you think he could be hiding in the mine? I've never been down in a mine. I don't know what it's like."

Samuel put the bowl of beans down. "It's dark, and the air, it's not good. It doesn't smell right. I always thought it smelled like they'd dug down into someone's grave, cold and sort of clammy. You're never warm enough. I don't like the dark so much anymore, unless I'm outside, and can see the

sky. And I think it made me afraid of spaces, little spaces. I think about it sometimes, what would happen if I got caught down there and something collapsed, and I couldn't get out."

Colton could see Diego's fist had clenched on his thigh, the knuckles white. He dropped his hand over it. "So you don't want to work in a mine. I don't think I would either, Samuel. What kind of work do you want to do?"

Samuel looked amazed, like he was surprised Colton had to ask. "I guess I want to do what I've been doing. Work on a ranch. Work with horses and livestock. Be outside, where it's quiet and the air's clean to breathe and you can feel the sun."

Diego had turned his hand into Colton's, laced their fingers together. "We need to get Samuel some cows, Colton. Let it be a real ranch again. Your granddaddy, he ran cattle?"

"Yeah, he did. He tried a cow and calf operation for a while, but it's expensive to do that when you can't grow your own hay. Our land is too scrubby for alfalfa."

"You could run goats on that land."

Colton turned around and looked at Samuel. "Goats?"

He shrugged. "Goats give meat, milk, and fiber. And they can graze anywhere, Colton."

Diego was looking interested. "*Cabrito*, yum. And I can see the women working a little dairy, Mexican goat cheese. What's the fiber?"

"Mohair. You can spin it and weave it to make rugs."

Colton exchanged a look with Joshua. *Goats? What the hell kind of cowboys ride herd on goats? Cowboys worked with cows. That's how they got the name.* "This your Nobel Peace Prize deal again?"

Diego grinned at him and lifted an elegant shoulder in a shrug.

They worked through the long, hot afternoon, and Colton was starting to feel the stretch in his back, the pleasant ache in his shoulder muscles that meant he'd worked hard. Samuel saddled Goldie and took her out for a ride around the ranch in the golden sunlight of late afternoon, and Joshua settled himself on his couch on the porch, prepared to doze off. Diego came out of the house, rolling his sleeves down.

"You about ready to head home?"

"I am if you are, Colton."

"I'm ready. Samuel have everything he needs?"

"I think so. I've got the cell phone charged up on that little battery in the trailer. It should last him a week."

Colton unhooked the trailer from his truck, and they waved good-bye to old man Weaver and headed down the rough dirt track that passed as the road. Colton slowed down when they passed the sign to the mine, but he didn't stop. "I don't want to spook him. Let's just see what happens this week. I think you might be right about him staying out there. If Samuel doesn't see any sign of him by Friday, we'll take a little look-see."

Diego nodded. "Not Samuel, though. I don't want him going down in the mine. I'll go." After a few minutes he sighed and settled back in the seat.

"What has gotten into you?" Colton watched his face, saw him think about it and decide to talk. Diego turned to face him on the bench seat.

"Colton, what you said last night. You understand what that means?"

"What do you mean, what I said last night? You don't mean the dog, do you? I know I should have asked their..."

"No, not the dog. You said Samuel could stay. You said the boys could stay. And all the women. You made yourself responsible for them, Colton. You can't just keep giving Maria eight hundred bucks a month to buy food and run the ranch. What you said, that changed things."

"It changed what? It's worked okay so far."

"Because kids need more than food and a bed. Samuel is sixteen. He needs some clothes, some cash. In a couple of years he's gonna need a pickup truck so he can take a girl to the movies. You made yourself his father, Colton, and I'm not sure you know what that means. What it's gonna mean in the future."

Colton pulled the pickup off the road, a sinking feeling in his stomach. "Maybe you're right. I wasn't thinking of all that. I was just thinking, give them someplace safe to stay. You think I shouldn't have said anything?"

Diego shook his head, reached a warm hand for his thigh. "No, Colton. I think it was the right thing to do. But you and me, we're partners, right? We're together for the long haul, is that how you say it? So if we're gonna do this, I think we need to do it right. That's all. Let's do it right. And that means let the adults out there figure out a way to support themselves, because you and me together don't need to be supporting ten people."

"Yeah, we're in it for the long haul. Diego ... don't let me put too many burdens on you, because I talk before I think. You choose the life you want, not the one I hand you. I don't want your life to be a burden." Colton turned Diego's hand in his.

"A burden? This last year, you were what I was living for. What I was getting up for in the morning. Maybe I need more burdens, to keep me from thinking too much."

Colton's heart felt like it was squeezing itself down into a painful little nut in his chest. He brought Diego's hand up to his mouth, kissed the knuckles. Maybe what Diego needed was for Rodrigo Valdez to leave him the fuck alone. "Well, in that case I don't feel so bad about saddling you with a teenage son, three little Juans, a baby named Tyra Shakira, and all the mothers. And the old lady. And Maria. And a dog."

Diego was laughing, curved his hand along the line of Colton's jaw. "Have you seen that dog? They brought him to me at the clinic. He's got one back paw that was crushed when he was younger, now it's healed up lame. He can't walk on it. The boys wanted me to fix him up a little cast."

"You mean we got a three-legged yellow dog? Well, somehow that seems about right."

"That's what I thought, too. I told them just let him be, he'd make his way."

It was dark by the time they pulled up at the ranch, and Colton and Diego were both slow to climb down and join the others back at the fire pit, where a bonfire was going and there were sounds of stories and people laughing together. Colton pulled Diego into his arms, buried his nose against the

skin of his neck. "I'm not quite ready to share you with the Del Rio clan. I forget sometimes you're the Crown Prince of one of the most powerful families in Mexico. Then I see you with all your cousins, and they look at me like they want to chop off my hands for touching you, and carry you off under armed guard."

Diego smiled, his hands sliding down Colton's back, holding him close. "I won't be sorry when we get back to our place in town, just me and you, going to work Monday morning, eating pizza for supper, making love in our big bed. Me sleeping in your arms, feeling safe."

"Yeah, thank God for Mondays."

Diego laughed against his neck, and they walked back around to where the families had gathered to listen to Cristobel tell stories and do fancy roping tricks. The middle Juan was standing still as a statue in the firelight, grinning, while the rope spun magically around him, floating up and down his body.

Cristobel wore the biggest Championship Roper belt buckle Colton had ever seen, and it was heavy with gold. He also wore a pair of hand-tooled Tony Lama boots so cool that Colton wouldn't have minded having a pair for himself. He was telling the boys a story about being in a rodeo down in Argentina, about the strange *gauchos* down there. Colton studied his handsome face. He was good-looking, not as beautiful as Diego, of course, but with the wide smile and open face of a world-class cowboy entertainer.

Diego walked over to the women, shook hands with a man sitting among them like a peacock perched among the

peahens. This must be Francisco, and he had the coolest sideburns Colton had ever seen, shaved to sharp little points an inch from his chin, meeting in a full black goatee. Black silk shirt with blue roses on the yoke, and jeans tighter than a man could be reasonably expected to breathe in. Francisco stood up, gave Diego a hug, shot a dirty look at Colton over his shoulder. Colton thought he had probably met him the year before, when he had gone down to Mexico looking for Diego after he'd been hurt. Colton ignored him, turned to look for Manuel.

He was sitting at the edge of the firelight, with Lydia and another man Colton didn't recognize. He went over to them, held out his hand. "Colton Wheeler."

"I'm Antonio Del Rio." He stood up, offered Colton his chair. Colton shook his head. "We met last year after you and Diego got hurt."

Colton studied him again. Usually the Del Rio clan forgot to remember that his neck had been broken in the attack that cost Diego his eye. "Thanks for coming down to help out. Manuel briefed you?"

He nodded. "Everything's been quiet today, but Lydia found some new tracks when they were out riding this morning."

Lydia stood up. "Colton, I'll tell you about it on the way to my truck. I need to be heading home."

"Sure it's not too late? We got a bed, you want to spend the night and head home in the morning."

"No, I'm good." They walked away from the group, and Lydia gave her usual succinct report. "Manuel showed me the

tracks you spotted before. We found something similar, with a couple of those strange looking cigarette butts, the silver gray ones, at a couple of places along the eastern edge of the ranch. I don't know if the tracks are a sign of anything. Anyone could be driving around out there. But maybe somebody's scouting around. Checking up on the people living here. Manuel's got the Del Rio boys on a rotation of two up at the house, one out on a horse along the perimeter. Too big an area to completely cover. I actually think just having more men around will likely have the desired effect of running off the bad guys. For now, anyway. Antonio's not an idiot," she added. Colton wasn't sure he would get this same accolade from Lydia. Pretty impressive.

They were at Lydia's truck, and she climbed behind the wheel and started to buckle up. "You're just gonna drive away, leave me with all these relatives?" Even he could hear the whine in his voice. Lydia just laughed and put the truck in gear.

He made his way back around, took Lydia's seat between Manuel and Antonio.

"Well, you find any sign of your Apache cattle rustler?" Manuel passed him a bottle, and he took a sip of gold tequila.

"Yep. The old man put signs up, telling the boy he could come in, put some food out for him at the stables. And the kid came and got his horse some hay and himself some pintos and fry bread." Colton passed the bottle to Antonio, who took a small sip and passed it back. "I think Samuel being there may do the trick. The boy's gonna want to know what another teenager is doing, moving onto his ranch. I just hope Samuel

doesn't get brained in the middle of the night with a rock. I told him to lock the trailer when he goes to sleep just until we know if the kid is friendly."

"You think this Apache kid knows something about what's going on down here?"

Colton turned to Antonio. "I don't know. Maybe. He's been riding around across the border at night, on a horse. I wonder if he saw something. Even if he didn't, I want to get him settled into a safer career path than cattle rustling. Before somebody shoots him."

Cristobel had spotted Diego, sent the middle Juan to sit back down with the other boys and sent his magical spinning rope over heads until it floated down and captured Diego around the waist. Diego let himself get pulled over until his cousin could wrap him up in a big dramatic hug with smacking kisses on both cheeks. Cristobel turned his head, gave Colton a glare over Diego's shoulder. Yeah, here was another one. Colton sighed. He was ready for bed, ready for some loving, but it occurred to him he probably couldn't lay a finger on Diego with all this concentrated Del Rio machismo directed at wilting his dick. "Shit. I'm going to bed. Antonio, thanks for coming down."

"You're welcome."

Manuel just grunted at him, and Colton took himself off, was out of the shower and drifting off to sleep between cool cotton sheets before he heard Diego come in quiet as a mouse, slip into the shower and then slide between his arms, his cool mouth tracing a line down Colton's throat.

* * * *

Colton woke early, reached across the bed for Diego, but he was gone, his side of the sheets already cool. He sat up, swung his legs over the side of the bed, but Diego pushed through the door, balancing a couple of mugs of coffee. He was in jeans and bare feet, his hair tumbled from sleep.

"Hey, baby. You're up early."

"Colton, remind me to bring a little coffee pot down next weekend for our room."

"Will do." Colton took a cup, blew across the hot surface of the coffee. He slid back into bed, piled the pillows up behind his head. "Come on over here, good-looking."

Diego walked toward the bed, grinning, let Colton wrap his hand around his thigh, pull him close. "Watch out. Don't make me spill the coffee."

"Those jeans look a little tight. Skin on out of those bad boys, climb up here with me."

Diego put his coffee cup down on the bedside table, undid the buttons on his Levi's real slow, let Colton see he was going commando underneath. Colton felt the heat flush up through his chest, a tingle down in his belly, watching Diego's happy face. "I think you're trying to seduce me. Watch out. I think it's working." Colton put his cup down, too, reached out and tugged the Levi's down over Diego's slender hips, watched his curly dark hair and cock come into view. "Come on over here to me." His voice was husky, both hands reaching out, tugging Diego close enough he could reach over, take him into his mouth. The heavy weight of his cock pushed against his lips, the head already sticky when Colton

drew the foreskin back with his teeth, and wrapped his tongue around a cock sweet and ripe as a cherry.

Colton dragged Diego up and threw him across the bed, fell on him, his face buried in wiry dark curls, the musky spice of Diego's scent filling his mind, anise and cloves and dark chocolate. A cock was nudging his cheek, leaving wet kisses, and he turned his head, let the long dark length slide between his lips, slide against his tongue. Diego's hands touched his face, tracing his nose, his eyes, his cheeks, until the passion caught him, and he clenched Colton's head, legs spread, thighs trembling madly, and his voice, sounding like the angels making love, a song that went to Colton's heart. His reward splashed across his tongue in great surging gouts, musky and sweet, and his lover reached for his face with his delicate surgeon's hands, traced his lips, traced the cock between his lips. "I love you."

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Chapter Five

Colton thought about his plan all weekend, but he didn't say anything to Diego until they were driving home on Sunday night. Diego looked tired and happy, a little sun on his face from riding out with his cousins. He hadn't even opened his clinic, and no pregnant women appeared with the baby's head already showing, so he got to sleep, he got to eat, he got to enjoy a weekend off. Colton wasn't looking forward to bringing his attention back to their current problems.

"I have a suggestion," he said, eyes on the dark road ahead. "I'm thinking that you should just turn over any additional letters from Rodrigo Valdez to me. Without reading them."

Diego turned and studied him. "Why?"

"Because you get upset when you read them. Because I think the best thing to do ... would be for me to just handle this. I'm gonna go down to Mexico and talk to him."

"Go down to..." Diego stared at him. "What are you talking about? I don't want you anywhere near him."

"No, I don't want *you* anywhere near *him*. I'm safe. You think some artist who likes to screw around with boys can do dick to me? Besides, I'm gonna take Manuel with me. And..." Colton stopped and looked over at him. "And I'm going to take your mother with me."

Diego didn't say a word. He just watched Colton's face, and after a couple of uncomfortable minutes, Colton started

talking, a technique he had used on criminals to get information many times.

"Okay, number one. You get upset when you read the letters. They're not giving you any information you need to deal with this, because, number two, I'm going to deal with this, not you. So I don't see why you're torturing yourself, unless this is some sort of self-punishment for your imagined sins, in which case it's time you got over it. Next, your mom is consul for our stretch of the border. I think she needs to know about two things. That some fruit-loop in an El Tigre mask is playing a game with the villagers, trying to jerk my chain. And I think she needs to know what Samuel told us about the mine. About boys being pulled out of the mine. By Rodrigo Valdez. And you need to stay very far away from both of those things. You just go take some gall-bladders out or something and do your surgeon thing. And let me do my job."

Diego didn't say a word, just turned around and stared out at the desert. Colton could tell he was thinking, so he just let him think, because he was sure that Diego would come around to see that his plan was the only reasonable plan.

His voice, when he spoke, sounded very finely drawn. "When we first discussed this, and we agreed to work together..."

"Yeah? What? We're working together."

"Is that what this is? Maybe I don't want anyone to have to take care of me."

"Good fucking luck with that. Taking care of you is just part of loving you. And you can't help with this. Well, what I

mean is you can help best with this by letting me handle it. By letting me try to get Rodrigo Valdez off your back. Now, is there any reason you need to keep reading those letters?"

Diego stared out the window of the truck. "No."

"Fine. Esmeralda is coming up Tuesday night to have dinner with us. We can talk to her then."

"I suppose you want me to cook?"

"We can order a pizza or something, right?"

Diego turned around in the seat. "One of these days I am going to kick your ass across Sonora, my friend."

"Yeah? I'll be looking forward to that."

* * * *

Tuesday night 1830 hours, and Diego still had not arrived home from the hospital. Colton was feeling the first stirrings of panic-mode. He'd gone by the grocery on the way home from the office, stood there like a steer waiting for the bolt until a grocery girl with a long blond ponytail took pity on him, asked after Dr. Del Rio, *here was another one*, and put three steaks in his basket, three big potatoes and some sour cream. He came around then, picturing Esmeralda's face with a giant hunk of bloody red beef in front of her, put the fixings for banana splits in the basket for dessert. Everybody liked banana splits.

He called Diego but only got his answering service, and a few minutes later a surgical nurse called with the bad news—Dr. Del Rio was stuck in the OR, emergency surgery that was taking longer than planned. He wasn't sure when he would be home.

These were the times that split the men from the boys, Colton thought, putting Garth in the CD player and cranking the volume up a bit. He could do it, no question, cook for and feed and converse with his mother-in-law without Diego hanging around smoothing things over. She would probably not accept the honorific of mother-in-law, though. In fact, Colton thought that Esmeralda was one of the few people who seemed to like him less, the more she knew him. Well, it had been a rough year for all of them.

He slathered the steaks with black pepper and paprika and Worcestershire sauce and set them aside to bleed a bit, then wrapped the potatoes in foil and tossed them in the oven. What next? Set the table, right. Their table was mostly used to stack Diego's medical journals and the mail, but Colton just put everything neatly against the wall and wiped the dust from the top. Diego had put some napkins in a drawer in the kitchen, and Colton also discovered some placemats in the same drawer, and they all appeared to match. He shook his head. He was never going to say another word about Diego's weird desire to go to the mall and come home loaded with bags from Williams Sonoma. Silverware, glasses—what did they have to drink? No wine in the house. They had milk, though, and tequila and some of Diego's Perrier. They were good to go.

One sip of golden tequila, and Esmeralda was at the door. She looked beautiful, stern and elegant, her long black hair drawn back from a center part and held in place with the old ivory combs she favored. She looked taken aback at the news that Diego was still at the hospital, and likely to remain there

for a while, and this cheered Colton even more than the tequila.

"Esmeralda, would you like a glass of milk?"

"Oh. Well, no, Colton, I'm fine. But thank you."

Let's cut to the chase. "Do you know what's going on?"

She shook her head. "I hope you're going to tell me."

"I am, and it's probably a good thing Diego got held up. He wants to paint everything in rosy colors, but this ... You want to come in the kitchen with me? I've got to wash the blueberries. They're for the banana splits."

"Banana splits?" Her voice sounded weaker than usual, and she reared back a bit at the sight of the steaks, ready for the grill.

"Just steak and potatoes, Esmeralda. I can't cook fancy. Two things I need to tell you about. El Tigre is trying to jerk my tail, and I don't know why. But he's started a minor reign of terror in the poorest border villages. Everything he does, he points the victims to me, to make sure I know about it."

Esmeralda took a seat at the little kitchen table. She pulled her memo book out and made a note. "Do you have any idea why?"

"Not yet. I just want you to know what's going on, in case anything escalates quickly. Manuel's got Antonio down at the ranch to help. El Tigre, he was threatening one of the women living there."

"Oh! I heard some of the boys had gone to help Diego."

"That's what's going on, but I don't know what it means. I think the sole purpose is to draw me into something I don't know about yet. I'll do more when I know more."

"Okay. What's the second thing?"

"This business with Rodrigo Valdez." He watched Esmeralda's chin jerk up. He knew she had hoped at one time that Diego would find happiness with someone like Rodrigo, someone elegant and wealthy and sophisticated. She didn't know her son as well as Colton did. "You know he's been stalking Diego for a year with these letters."

"Would we call it stalking? They've known each other forever, Colton. Surely you're exaggerating."

He turned toward her, suddenly furious. "I would call it something much worse, Esmeralda, but I don't have the right to divulge Diego's confidence. Let me just say this. He is hurting Diego now. He has hurt him in the past. I am going to stop it, and you need to help me!"

Colton straightened up, aware he was towering over her with a fork in his hand. "Esmeralda, you just have to trust me. This is bad with Diego. And there's more. One of the boys living out on the ranch told me and Diego that he'd been working in the Valdez copper mines, and one of the Valdez was pulling young boys out of the mines. He said it was the handsome one, the one who's an artist. I think Rodrigo is the only Valdez to fit that description."

"Pulling them out of the mine for what?"

Colton just looked at her. "Samuel thought it was for sex, Esmeralda. He ran when Rodrigo started watching him."

"Oh, Colton, I can't believe..."

"He slept with Diego when he was sixteen. You think that was a fluke? Or you think he just likes them young?"

"Sixteen!" Her face went as pale as buttermilk. "Diego was sixteen?"

Colton could have bit his tongue in two. Why would he assume Diego's mother knew anything about what he had done when he was a teenager? "That's a good example of the kind of confidence I can't divulge, Esmeralda! Why don't you trust me about this?"

"Colton, you're jealous of him. How can I trust that this isn't just..."

"I have no reason to be jealous of him, because Diego loves me, Esmeralda. We trust each other. I'm a lawman. I think what he's doing to Diego is illegal and is putting both of us in danger. I'm going to try and deal with it."

Esmeralda sat at the table, studying him with narrowed eyes. "Let me see one of the letters."

Colton walked into the dining room, picked up the bunch of letters that had come in the mail in the past couple of days. He spread them out like a deck of cards, then tossed them on the table in front of her. "You choose. Pick any of them, Esmeralda. They've been coming for a year. A solid, fucking year."

Esmeralda picked up three letters out of the bunch, pulled paper out of envelopes and started reading. It wasn't long before her hand crept up to her mouth, and she swallowed, looking sick.

Colton took the papers back out of her hands, folded them and stuffed them in the envelopes. He didn't need to read them again. They all said the same. *My beautiful young lover, I cannot wait to taste your body again, to make love to you*

while the bones of the man who has been keeping you from me lies in the desert, picked clean of flesh by the ravens blah blah blah. Soon we will be together and he will be dead, your nightmare will be over, and on and on and on.

Colton pulled up a seat next to Esmeralda. "Hasn't he told you about this? Asked for help?"

"I didn't realize ... He didn't give me any specific details, Colton. It does, I would have to agree, appear as though you are in some sort of danger. He doesn't seem quite ... rational."

"I'm not in any danger from that fuck-head twist. Diego is in danger of being driven mad and Rodrigo Valdez is in danger of my shooting him in the head; for hurting my partner. And for preying on boys who don't all know they can run. Now, I think we need to skip the steaks and go straight to the banana splits. That seems to me the right thing to do."

"What? Colton..." She watched him cut the bananas and scoop up the ice cream, pour in the blueberries and the pineapple sauce and the hot fudge, the peanuts, the whipped cream and the cherries on top. Colton put the boat-sized bowl in front of her, another at his place. "Diego is going to be so pissed off he missed this," he said, putting a massive dripping spoonful in his mouth. Esmeralda watched him for a moment, then shrugged just like Diego shrugged, an elegant little gesture with the shoulder, and picked up her spoon.

It was after nine when Diego got home. Colton was lying on the couch, a thick crystal glass of tequila balanced on his chest. Diego looked tired, his face a little paler than usual, the skin around his eyes fragile and thin. He leaned against the

doorway into the living room, studied Colton on the couch. Colton raised one hand a couple of inches in greeting. Diego walked into the kitchen, and Colton could picture what he was doing in there. Looking at a couple of unwashed banana split bowls in the sink, looking at the steaks still sitting on the stove-top, uncooked. He heard the water running, then a few dishes being loaded into the dishwasher. Diego came out of the kitchen a few minutes later, walked over to the couch, and Colton put the tequila down and opened up his arms without a word.

Diego crawled across his body, snuggled into his arms, and Colton wrapped him up, held him tight, Diego's head nestled into his shoulder. They were okay. Everything was good with this fine man in his arms. Colton held him for awhile, felt Diego drift off to sleep for a moment, then jerk himself awake.

"How's your patient, baby? He make it?"

"Yeah." Diego wiggled a bit, touched his mouth to Colton's neck. "Early days still."

"She's going with me. We'll go down to Mexico in a couple of days."

"That soon?" Diego's voice was forlorn, and Colton tightened his arms around the slender body pressed against his.

"I'm coming back, Diego. Let's just get this job done."

"Okay." So subdued. Colton was looking forward to when he would feel free again, free of the past and this man who was torturing him. Let his spirit grow strong and wild again.

"Samuel called on the cell."

"Is he okay?"

"Yeah. He was so excited he shouted into the phone. I don't think he's ever used a cell before."

"Has the elusive Johnny Bravo been spotted?"

"There was a sign. That's why he called. He and the old man put some food out at the stables again, along with a note saying Samuel was a friend, and in the morning it was gone. And in the dirt was scratched the word *gracias*. That's why Samuel was so excited—how does Johnny Bravo know he is Mexican? Why did he leave a Spanish word?"

"So what did you tell him?"

"I didn't need to tell him anything. I just listened until he talked himself out."

"That's the dad's job, I guess."

"I did tell him don't go near the mine, cause I could tell he was getting impatient. We'll be back from Mexico by next weekend. Then you and me can go see about this kid."

"That's a busy week for you, saving everybody."

Diego's mouth was warm against his skin, and Colton tightened his arms. "Yeah, well."

* * * *

Thursday morning Colton woke with Diego pressing his slim butt back against his groin. He reached out, rough hands moving over silky warm skin. He pulled Diego back into his arms, wrapped his thighs around his hips.

"You want some loving, baby? Or do you just need to remind me I've got something to come home to?" He was driving into Mexico today to see Rodrigo Valdez.

"I don't think I need to remind you. Maybe I just want you to slide inside of me, want you to start rocking against me, feel your sweat dripping down my back..."

Colton tugged his head back, his mouth open for plunder. Diego's hands were sliding through the hair on his chest, captured enough to grab a couple of handfuls and hold on. Colton could feel the hook and jerk in his belly. Diego was a master fisherman, and he was a helpless trout, caught on his line. Warmth spread out from his balls, down inside his thighs, and his cock rose, sure as the needle of a compass, pointing straight at true north.

He moved his mouth down to the slender neck, felt Diego's heart beating like a wild bird under his lips, under his tongue. Diego shivered, curled himself into Colton's chest. It was getting better between them. How could it keep getting better? The first time they'd ever fucked, Colton thought he'd died and gone to heaven, though that could have been the tequila. It shouldn't get any better than perfect, but it did. The way Diego curled against his chest made him feel so powerful, like he could protect his man from anything, like he was too tough to tame. Made him want to roll his baby onto his belly, slide his cock inside until Diego made that noise, told him the head of his cock, as thick as a plum, had just hit the sweet spot.

"Roll over." Diego had a little plastic container of lube in his fist, and he handed it to Colton, rolled against the pillows and pressed his face in soft linen. Colton fell on him, spoke against the silky skin of his left shoulder blade. "It's shameless, what you do to me."

Diego shivered again, and Colton slid his hands down his spine, eased over the curve of his ass and peeled him open. He smelled like dark chocolate, sweet and warm, and Colton buried his face in the cleft of his ass, slid his tongue down the warm skin, and Diego pressed up against him, a gasp buried in the pillow. He was humming, the little sound in the back of his throat that meant his nerves were singing like birds on a wire. Colton opened the lube and squeezed it out on his fingers, slid them down until he could press in.

He didn't have the patience to take his time this morning, not with Diego's smell on his face, the gorgeous curve of his ass pressing up against his cheek. His cock was throbbing double-time, the head already wet and aching. He leaned up over Diego's body, one hand on either side of his head, and Diego pushed his ass up to meet him.

Then he was inside, slid in like they were greased up with hot honey. He pushed in deep, and Diego rocked up against him that way that meant *deeper, harder, faster, come on, Colton, rock me*. The bedroom smelled like sex and their sleeping bodies, their sheets, Diego's ridiculous Swiss down quilt, their bed, their room, their house. Everything he'd ever wanted, a home, a lover was right here in this bed, right now, in his arms. Colton closed his eyes, tried to squeeze it out a bit longer. "Baby, I can't..." Then he was coming, the muscles in his thighs so tight and strong he nearly rammed Diego's head into the wall.

He pulled out, tugged Diego over and fell on him, took his mouth, kissed him deep, felt Diego jerk and thrust against his belly, a spill of wet heat.

Colton leaned up on an elbow and studied Diego's face. His skin was flushed and damp, his hair curling on his forehead. Colton reached over and pushed the hair off his face, studied the liquid black eye. Worry was tugging at his beautiful face, and Colton could read him, read every thought. Diego's mouth was as soft as a ripe peach, the way it always looked after they'd made love.

"You're the smartest man I've ever known. I'm listening to you, Diego. I'm paying attention. If you're this worried, then I think there's probably a good reason. But I still need to go."

Diego looked up at him. There was a tiny pulse beating in his bottom lip. "Just be careful, Colton. Don't underestimate him. He isn't used to being denied what he wants. I ... just want you to come home to me."

Colton nodded. "I'll come if I have to walk through hell, because I know you'll be waiting for me on the other side." He reached down, tasted the ripe mouth open underneath him. "Diego. I'll always come home to you."

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Chapter Six

The ranch was quiet when Colton got there, the Juans already off to school, some of the women cleaning, and Colton heard the soft whir of a couple of sewing machines. Diego and the women had decided one regular sewing machine and one embroidery sewing machine were more cost effective or some shit like that, since two could be sewing at a time. Whatever. If it made everybody happy, he was happy.

Antonio was in the stables, stacking some bales of alfalfa against the back wall. The Juan's little foal was growing, and obviously was used to a lot of attention, because he was out of his stall and kept nudging Antonio in the pocket while he worked. Antonio swatted him away a few times, then stood up and gave him a tiny carrot out of his pocket. "You are such a pest this morning. You lonely? Why don't you go out to the pasture and play with that dog." The three-legged yellow dog was curled up in the corner, watching the horse.

"Hey, Antonio." Colton held out his hand, and Antonio pulled off his glove and shook it.

"Hey, Colton. You're driving down into Mexico today?"

"Yeah. Best just take care of that business."

"Be careful."

"Of Rodrigo Valdez?"

"No. Of his hired guns. I don't really know the guy. I just know what Manuel has told me. The family has a reputation as being powerful and dangerous to cross. If they're involved in anything illegal, it's stayed under the radar for a long time.

Most probably they're just doing what they've always done. In Mexico, working as a sharecropper, or working in one of the mines—they can keep you hungry enough you'll sell yourself to feed your kids. That's the way the people in power have always done it. It's making them rich, so they don't have any reason to change."

Francisco and Cristobal had gone home, and Antonio had told him on the phone that they could take care of protecting the people on the ranch with just him and Manuel.

"Things been quiet out here?"

"So far." They walked the foal out to the back pasture, and the puppy hobbled along behind, gave Colton a little dog-grin as he ran past. Colton shook his head. It was a motley crew. "I can stay another week or two, just until we know for sure it's safe."

"You're not going to be in trouble at work, are you?"

Antonio shook his head. "I'm on leave, Colton." His voice sounded choked. "My wife died a year ago this week. She was pregnant. The baby died, too."

"Antonio, I'm sorry." There was nothing to say. Nothing to say to make it better. "You got any other kids?"

"A little girl. She's three. She's staying with her grandmother and her aunts right now. I've got to decide what ... My work, it can be dangerous. I don't know if I can still..."

"What do you do?"

Antonio smiled at him, a little surprised. "I'm a cop. Didn't Manuel tell you?"

Colton rubbed his chin. "Well, maybe he did, in his own way. No wonder I like you. Narco?"

Antonio nodded. "I didn't mind so much for the baby when Valentina was alive. But I don't want my little girl to grow up an orphan." He waved his hands. "I'm thinking about it."

"You can always stay up here. Diego had some idea about goats."

"Goats? Jesus." Antonio was shaking his head the same way Colton was.

"You see what I'm saying? That's what I'm dealing with here. Antonio, why don't you go get your little girl, bring her up here so she can be with you." He shrugged. "It's not safe being a cop anywhere, but maybe it'll be safer up here than working narco in Mexico."

"Maybe I will. I don't like to be away from her right now. But I'll wait until you and Manuel get back and things are quiet. You gonna be here this weekend?"

"Yeah. Me and Diego, we've got to go see about Samuel. That's the kid we took up to old man Weaver's ranch last weekend. But after that, we'll come back here, and you go get your little girl. What's her name?"

"Anna. She thinks she's a princess. Everybody's told her she's a princess since the day she was born."

"Her father, too, I bet. We could use a princess out here. And there are plenty of women could use a little girl to fuss over."

"She needs to get into some jeans and boots, learn to muck out the stables."

Manuel climbed into his pickup truck, and Colton took a minute to make sure they had all the papers they needed to

get themselves and the truck into and out of Mexico for the day. "How you doing, old man?"

"I woke up alive this morning, so already the day started good. You got everything planned out like a good cop?"

"We'll see. I end up with a gun in my ear, we'll know we needed a bit more planning. Everybody keeps telling me what a bad-ass this guy is. I don't see it, myself."

"That's cause you're hard-headed, boy, and you don't listen. He's not a bad-ass. He's just rich and spoiled. So he can hire all the bad-asses he needs to deal with a pain-in-the-ass gringo cop and an old man."

"Luckily we have our secret weapon."

Manuel snorted. "Some weapons are more trouble than they're worth, you know what I'm saying?"

"She looked plenty mad when she agreed to help. I think it was because I told her Rodrigo Valdez had slept with Diego when he was sixteen, and she didn't know about that, and so..."

Manuel turned in the seat and looked at him. "Diego was sixteen? That fucking pervert touched Diego when he was sixteen?"

Colton sighed and shook his head. "Jesus, why can I not keep my mouth shut? How is it nobody knew about this?"

"Diego must have kept it quiet, because the Del Rio's have power, and we would not have taken kindly to one of the Valdez touching our boys." He looked out the window of the truck, then looked over at Colton. "You don't know anything about Diego's father?"

Colton shook his head. "Nope."

"He was a lawyer. Worked for the federal government, like your Justice Department. He was anti-corruption, anti-drug cartels, and he was assassinated while he was running for president."

"President of what?"

"Of Mexico, boy. It was just days before the election, and it would have been a landslide, Colton. He was beloved. Like Kennedy, you know? A breath of clean air and change for Mexico. So Diego, people look at him like they did your little John. He has a huge legacy in Mexico. Everyone is so proud of him being a doctor. Valdez would have known how the people looked at him when he took him into his bed. It's disrespectful, you understand?"

"Yeah, I guess so. You think he was doing it for political reasons?"

Manuel shrugged. "I think probably Rodrigo made sure that the people in power knew he was fucking Diego Del Rio. Diego, he's clueless about that kind of thing. He doesn't know anything about power."

"You think it's disrespectful that Diego sleeps in my bed?"

Manuel laughed. "He's sleeping in your bed? Or you're sleeping wherever he tells you to sleep? I think the ladyboy's got you on a short leash. You just look at him, everybody can tell how much you're in love. You ought to work on that poker face just a bit. Diego thinks pretty highly of himself as it is, you know what I mean? I guess as far as Mexico goes, they think Diego is in love with some big, goofy puppy dog of a gringo cop and they think it's kind of funny."

Colton sighed, stared out through the windshield, decided it was time to change the subject, go on the offensive. "You wanted Antonio up here. You think he's in danger? Where's he working narco?"

"He was outside Mexico City. I got a friend, retired from the DEA. I met him for a beer in Nogales a couple of weeks ago. He'd heard through the grapevine that they were going to run some operations through Antonio's territory while he was off with the anniversary of his wife's death. What they did was try to set him up, put some dope in a storage unit in his name. That way they'd have some leverage if he found what they were doing."

"Did it work? What happened?"

Manuel made a tiny spitting noise between his front teeth. "Del Rio still means something in Mexico. No, it did not work."

"I asked him if he wanted to bring Anna up here. There's lots of law enforcement would love to snatch up a Mexican narco cop, Manuel. We ought to convince him to stay."

"You're as bad as Diego, wanting to take care of everybody, make sure everybody's happy. You better get your game face on, boy. You gonna have to be a mean, tough gringo cop, you want to win this day."

They pulled up outside the Valdez ranch a couple of hours later. Colton hung up his cell phone and rolled down the window of the truck. The security speaker had a button on the bottom, and he gave it several long, obnoxious rings. When security answered, he said, "Lt. Colton Wheeler and Lt. Manuel Del Rio to see Rodrigo Valdez. Police business."

They sat there until a dark green Jeep pulled up on the other side of the big iron fence. There were four guys in the Jeep, and the two in the back had rifles. The driver got out, pushed open the fence, then came over to Colton's truck. He looked like a cop, hard face and suspicious dark eyes. "We need to search you. You bring any weapons in?"

Colton and Manuel climbed out, got patted down. The man looked in the glove compartment and under the seat. "Just follow the Jeep up to the house."

Manuel looked at the lush green lawn surrounding the ranch with disgust. "You see this shit? Green grass in the fucking desert."

"It would be one thing they had cows grazing on it, but I think this is just decoration! Hey, did Diego tell you this idea he and Samuel had about goats?"

"Goats? For what?"

"He wants the women to run goats on the ranch. A little goat dairy. Cheese or something."

"Jesus. Has Diego ever even seen a goat up close?"

"I don't know. But he pays seven dollars for a little package of fancy goat cheese at the co-op."

"I believe that."

They parked in front of the house, a sprawling, low adobe with whitewashed walls and a fountain in the circular drive. The men climbed out of the Jeep and surrounded them. The driver spoke into a cell, then folded it and stuck it in his pocket. "He's coming."

Rodrigo Valdez rode around from the back of the house on a black gelding, and he had a boy with him, eighteen or

nineteen, mounted on a silver. The horses were beautiful and well groomed, and so was the boy. Rodrigo Valdez. His beauty was like a punch in the stomach. His black hair, shiny as onyx, was down to his shoulders, and his dark eyes and red mouth were such a startling contrast to the elegant white skin. His hands were as long and delicate as Diego's. How could Diego not have fallen for him? He was wearing riding boots as shiny and black as the horse, with white riding pants tight against his long thighs and a loose white silk shirt showing the smooth chest underneath. He stopped the horse, staring at Colton and Manuel, then he rode forward, let his horse nudge Colton a bit. Colton put his hand up and stroked the horse's neck, took hold of the bridle.

"I've got a letter for you. From Diego. You either read it and do what it says or I'm going to have you arrested."

Rodrigo laughed, then he turned to the boy, and sent him back to the stables with a gesture. He looked down at Colton and held out his hand. Colton reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the letter. He knew what it said. Diego had written it in front of him and told him to read it.

Rodrigo, I am asking you to not contact me again. I feel very uncomfortable with the things you've been saying in your letters. There seems to be a misunderstanding. I am already with the man I love. He and I are going to be together for life. I have told you this many times. I do not plan on ever seeing you again, and I'm asking you to leave me alone. Please, for the friendship we shared in the past, I'm asking you to leave me be. Diego.

Rodrigo read the letter, balled the paper up and threw it into the dirt. "You think some letter you forced him to write means anything to me? You don't know..."

Manuel spoke up. "I'm here to make sure you understand that nobody is forcing Diego to do anything. What he says is true and you need to stay away from him. Stay away from my family. Stay away from the Del Rios, you fucking *cabron*." His voice was a low growl in his throat. "You can always go to the mines, you need a boy to fuck."

Two of the men from the Jeep pulled Manuel's arms tightly behind his back. Manuel turned to look at one of them. "I think I knew your old man. Your face looks familiar."

"You put my father in prison. He got a shank in his heart the year I was eight. I always said I wanted to put a bullet into you. This must be my lucky day." Just that fast, and a shiny automatic was shoved under Manuel's chin.

Manuel made that little spitting noise between his teeth.

Colton felt himself go very still. He turned to the man holding Manuel. "Don't make a mistake today that's gonna get you killed."

Rodrigo climbed down from his horse. Colton stepped closer to him so he could speak into his ear, could smell the Polo on his neck. "I know what you did to him. I promise I'm gonna put a bullet in your pretty face one day. But that's just between you and me. You understand this. You can live a little bit longer if you stay very far away from him. Any contact, any letters, any fucking date rape drugs in his drinks, I'm coming for you in the night. You understand me?"

Rodrigo turned his head, his wide black eyes staring into Colton's, pupils dilated. They were close enough to kiss. Rodrigo put his mouth up to Colton's ear. "I'll be fucking him on top of your grave." Colton reached for him, one hand closing with a snap around his slender throat.

Colton felt the cold steel of a gun barrel pressed against his own temple. "The old man's dead if you don't let go."

It was the man who had been driving the Jeep, the one Colton thought looked like a cop.

Colton let go of Rodrigo's neck, pleased to see some red marks lingering on the white skin. Rodrigo stepped back, then he slashed across Colton's face with the horsewhip he'd been carrying in his hand. Before he could move, Rodrigo hit him again, the pain like a snakebite, burning and cold at the same time.

"Get down on your knees." It was the man with the gun. Colton looked over at Manuel, who nodded slightly. Colton dropped to his knees, and Rodrigo reached down, ran his fingers through the dirt, reached up and rubbed the dirt into the bloody whip marks across Colton's face.

It was all he could do not to scream out loud. Worse than salt, and the pain wasn't as bad as the look of pleasure on Rodrigo's face as he rubbed his bloody, muddy fingers across the thigh of his white riding trousers.

Colton bit down on the pain, smiled up at him. "You've made a mistake. You think I came out here alone?"

Rodrigo stepped back, his eyes narrowing. The cop lowered the gun, pulled the ringing cell phone out of his pocket.

"They're at the gate. Consul Esmeralda Del Rio. And ... your uncle." Rodrigo's head snapped up, and Colton pushed himself up off his knees, went over to Manuel and shoved the man with the gun away from him.

"Get the fuck away from him, unless you want to get shanked in prison like your old man."

Esmeralda's Mercedes limo pulled up, and the driver got out and opened the back door. Esmeralda climbed out, elegant in Chanel black, waited next to the limo for Vincenzo Valdez, Supreme Court Justice and head of the Valdez clan. He was well known for being a tough-love sort of judge, and he ruled his great family with the same iron hand. Esmeralda really knew how to call in the favors.

He was tall, with a great lumpy bald head and small, cold eyes. He looked at Colton's bloody face with little interest, then he stared at Rodrigo's white pants, smeared with mud and blood. His face got tighter. He turned to Esmeralda. "Come inside, my dear. We have something to discuss with young Rodrigo." Esmeralda reached down, picked up Diego's letter that had been balled up and thrown into the dirt. She gave Colton a long, cool look, then nodded at Manuel.

Valdez looked over at Rodrigo. "Maybe you should get cleaned up, and meet us in the library." It wasn't a request. He walked over and shook hands with Manuel, and there seemed to be some grudging respect on both sides. Old friends, or old adversaries. Colton was ignored, and that was fine with him, because he was reeling on his feet, blood dripping down his face and neck, and all he wanted in the

world was to not pass out and fall on his hands and knees in front of everyone.

"Manuel. My old friend, do you need to join in this discussion?"

"I need to take this boy into the hospital, I think. Diego will not be happy if he's hurt." He paused. "He's a good boy. Diego cares about him."

"What made him want to come down to Mexico? It seems foolhardy."

"You can talk to me." Colton looked up at him. "I had something important to protect."

The man looked at him for the first time, let the surprise on his face that Colton spoke Spanish be enough of a compliment. "We wonder why young Diego has not come home. Mexico can use good surgeons."

"He knows I'd come to Mexico in a heartbeat. Sonora's my home." He jerked his chin toward the big front door, where Rodrigo had just disappeared. "Maybe there's something else keeping him from coming home."

The old man looked at Manuel. "Manuel, is it true?"

Manuel nodded. "Yes. I think so, too."

Colton was starting to see stars in front of his eyes, and he could feel himself weaving. Manuel reached over, put an arm around Colton's shoulder. "Don't pass out, boy. You done good so far."

The judge started laughing. "Your name's Wheeler? I knew your grandfather! When Manuel was holding you up, like you were about to fall down drunk, you looked just like him. He always had a bottle of mescal in his fist, though, and some

pretty girl on his arm. That was a long time ago, Manuel. When we were all so much younger."

Colton didn't remember later how Manuel got him into the truck and got them both back across the border and to the ranch. Antonio helped get him out of the truck and into bed, and one of the women gave him something bitter to drink that must have kept him passed out until Diego came. He heard the sound of a ridiculous Mini-Morris trying to drive across the rough ranch roads of the Sonoran desert, Diego grinding the gears, and he was able to relax for the first time since they'd crossed into Mexico.

Diego was royally pissed off. "Uncle, you were supposed to watch him, make sure he was safe!" Diego jerked the curtains open at the window, came over to the bed and stared down at Colton's face. Colton could see him take a long, deep breath in, his face dead white.

"Settle down, Big D. I just need a Band-aid and some morphine."

Diego's teeth were clenched. He turned to Manuel.

"Here." Manuel shoved a glass and a bottle of gold tequila into his hand. Diego poured a couple of inches, then threw it down his throat like a real *vaquero*.

"That was for him, not you!" Manuel was trying not to laugh, and Diego could see it and was just getting madder.

"If it was for him, why'd you give me a glass? He drinks out of the bottle. Out, out. I need to work."

Manuel winked at him, headed out the door, and Colton reached for the tequila. "Give it here, then."

"Just a little bit, Colton. I need to get you over to the clinic, give you a couple of shots."

"Shots? Why?"

"Why? Why? Let me fucking tell you why. Tetanus. Tetanus can kill you. Do you understand the germs that live in dirt? No, you do not. And do you understand that he rubbed that dirt into your face, and if I don't get it out, it's going to mark your face? Forever? You've got a black X cut into your face, and I am not going to look at you scarred up for life, do you understand me? So get up and get your boots on and let's go to the clinic."

Colton rolled out of bed, stuck his feet in his boots. "Don't yell at me, Diego. I don't feel good."

Diego stopped, poured an inch of tequila into the glass and handed it to him. Colton threw it back. "I can't talk about this right now. Let me just get you taken care of."

"Okay." Colton stood up, his hand on Diego's shoulder for balance, and nearly reeled backwards when he caught sight of his face in the dresser mirror. The whip marks were angry red and black where the dirt had caught, a big X right across his face. "You think it was a lucky hit, he knew how to do it this good? Or has the fucker been practicing?"

"Come on."

In the clinic Diego put him down on the exam table, pulled his shirt off. "You know when your last tetanus shot was? Did you get a pertussis booster, anything like that?"

"What?"

"Never mind."

His biceps was being swabbed with alcohol, then the cold sting of an injection.

"You're not allergic to any antibiotics, are you?"

"I don't think so."

The other arm was swabbed, then another sting and burn. Luckily the tequila was starting to kick in. Diego turned on the big overhead light and angled it down. He studied the marks for a moment, then he went to the cabinet and started pulling out instruments.

It took him nearly an hour to pick the nearly microscopic pieces of dirt and gravel out of Colton's face. Colton thought the numbing job could have been a little stronger. Diego scrubbed the cuts over and over, using rough gauze and some sort of harsh surgical soap that burned Colton's nose. He was denied a second shot of tequila and ugly words might have passed between them if the littlest Juan's mother hadn't come in. Her name was Pilar, and she had a small glass bowl from the kitchen. It was pale green and thick, and she told Diego in her quiet voice that she had made it from cucumber and mint leaves and cream. She gestured toward Colton's face. "It will help the pain and the scarring."

"I need something for pain," Colton said, "anything would help," and he gave Diego a dirty look. His face was throbbing like a rotten tooth.

After she left, Diego cleaned the rest of the soap off his face by pouring sterile water all over him. Colton wondered if Diego was trying to drown him. Then he dried the wounds carefully with gauze. Diego dabbed the cream on the cuts with a tongue depressor. It felt cool and tingly, and Colton

sighed with relief. Diego stood over him, hands on his hips. "You look ridiculous."

"Who cares? You still love me no matter what I look like."

Diego sighed, too, and sat down next to the exam table. "I care." He reached for Colton, let his hand slide through his hair, and Colton closed his eyes, relieved that he had been forgiven for being so stupid that he let Rodrigo Valdez hurt him.

He had been put to bed in their room over his protests when Filene came in, holding something in a steaming wet washcloth. She studied his face. The green whipped cream felt wonderful, but she did not seem satisfied. "Where I come from, we use boiled orange leaves over the wound. It pulls the poison out. We only have grapefruit leaves out here, but I found the small ones. I think that will work." She opened the washcloth, started laying tiny green leaves over the cream on his face. "That should do it. Are you getting hungry? We've got *posole* for supper, and tortillas."

"I could eat some *posole*."

"You have to stay lying down for an hour, though, let the leaves do their work. We'll wait for you to eat."

Naturally that was how Esmeralda found him, splayed out on the bed with tiny green leaves and whipped cream making an X across his face. She was still in the Chanel suit. He hoped she hadn't come straight from the Valdez place in the limo. That driver looked like he could put some *posole* away. She sat down next to his bed, stared at his face, laughing and crying at once, tears tracking down her cheeks.

"You don't have to say it."

She reached for his hand. "Colton. Why do you have leaves on your face? Oh, wait, are they orange leaves?"

"Grapefruit."

She bit down on her bottom lip. "Colton, I am so sorry this has happened. I ... I don't know what to say to you."

"I know I'm not what you wanted for him."

She sat back in the chair, but she didn't let go of his hand. "I really just wanted him to be happy. I thought I knew what would be best, what would make him happy, but it seems I was wrong. He has found the life he wanted, so I am happy for him, and proud of him. And happy for you." She turned her face away, and he saw the pain in the tears making their way down her smooth cheeks.

Colton thought about what Manuel had told him about Diego's father. What must that have been like for her, to have her husband assassinated? To be the widow of a great martyr? "We have *posole* for supper. Maybe if you're here Diego will stop yelling at me and the women will stop putting leaves on my face."

Esmeralda wiped her cheeks carefully. "I can stay for supper. After that, you're on your own."

* * * *

Colton was sprawled across their bed, reading *Showdown at Pecos Falls*, waiting for Diego to get out of the shower and start talking to him. He came out of the bathroom, toweling his hair dry, slid into a pair of old Levi's. The cell on the dresser started ringing, and Diego picked it up.

"Samuel? Everything okay?"

He listened for a long time, a grin on his face, and Colton heard squeaks of excitement coming from the phone. "Yeah, you're probably right. Are you sure, Samuel?" He turned and looked at Colton. "Um, maybe tomorrow or the next day."

"Tomorrow," Colton said.

"We'll come tomorrow, Samuel. What? Yeah, we'll bring more food. Okay. We'll see you then."

Diego closed the phone, grinning down at it in his hand. Then the smile slid off his face, and he opened the phone back up, started punching buttons. "You just pushed me too far, you fucker." Colton had never heard his voice sound like this, and he knew who Diego was talking to. He sat up on the side of the bed. "No, you listen to me. You put your hands on him? You marked him? You get near us again, I will burn you to the ground. You hurt him again, I will come find you and put a bullet in your wasted fucking heart."

Colton was up and across the room, wrapped his hand around Diego's, pulled the phone away from his ear in time to hear Rodrigo Valdez. "Diego! How can you say that? You sound ill, my young lover, disturbed. What has he told you? Have you been drinking? You know that you can't handle..."

Colton punched the button to end the call, and Diego turned and threw the little phone as hard as he could against the wall.

Colton reached out and grabbed Diego by the shoulders, gave him a shake. "You need to calm way the fuck down. I'm tired. I want to go to sleep. With somebody soft and cuddly. Not with somebody ticking away like a damn time bomb!"

Diego let himself get pulled close to Colton's chest, and he reached out for a handful of chest hair, gave it a tug. "Soft and cuddly? I know a three-legged dog who would be happy to share his corner of the stables."

Colton rested his chin in Diego's hair, still damp and smelling like juniper and sage. "Hey, your hair smells good. What is it?"

"Shampoo soap from some Native soapmakers at Mesa Verde. Don't ask me how much it cost."

"No problemo there, buddy. I'll just enjoy it." He moved down, nestled into Diego's neck. "Don't send me out to the stables to sleep with the dog and the pony. I'll be so lonely for you."

"I don't understand how you can be so calm about this whole thing." He tried to pull away. "Unless you meant..."

"Unless I meant to make him attack me? I'm a cop, Diego. I'm smarter than he is. I didn't plan on the horsewhip," Colton said, "or the fricking dirt. He's a sadist. But, yeah, I intended to provoke him into showing how crazy he was in front of your mother. My talking was not going to get us anywhere. I wanted her to see, because she can do what needs to be done legally, from Mexico, to keep him off your back. I didn't know she would bring Big Daddy Valdez along with her. That ball's rolling on down the hill now."

"What did he say to you?"

"Diego, why do..."

"Are we partners or not? Am I an adult, or a child you need to protect?"

"I told him I was going to shoot him in the face, and if he messed with you again, I would be coming for him in the night. And then he said he would be fucking you on top of my grave. So I grabbed him by the throat and tried to choke him and one of his bent cops stuck a pistol in my ear. Manuel already had a gun under his chin so he couldn't help."

"Did you mean it, Colton? About shooting him? Coming for him in the night?"

Colton looked down into his beautiful face, so hurt and troubled, and couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice.

"Yeah. I meant it. Of course I meant it."

"I did, too." His voice was a whisper.

"I know you did. But we are going to handle this problem without anyone having to shoot Rodrigo Valdez. Other than me. So. What did Samuel say?"

Diego laughed, gave him a quick, fierce hug around the waist. "The strange and elusive Johnny Bravo brought the third goat back. Samuel found her in the pen when he got up this morning."

Colton shook his head. "What a pain in the ass that kid is. He needs to go to drama school."

"Samuel has an idea how to bring him in. He wants to stay out with Weaver another week. He's requested more food and the stuff for hamburgers and a charcoal grill. And beans and cole slaw."

"He's going to capture Johnny Bravo by cooking hamburgers over a charcoal grill?" Colton rubbed the small part of his chin he could still touch, then he shrugged. "That may be the best damn idea any of us have come up with yet."

* * * *

In the morning Colton studied the whip marks on his face in the dresser mirror while Diego was still curled up in their bed. They didn't look too bad. The cuts were shallow, bright pink and raw with a few spots that had bled during the night. He thought the cucumber-mint stuff might be working pretty good, even though Diego had rolled his eyes when he put it on. Colton climbed into the shower, scrubbed his face down with Diego's Mesa Verde shampoo soap and rinsed his face by sticking it under the hot shower. That should keep him from having to endure another torture session in Diego's clinic.

When he climbed out of the shower, he pulled on some jeans and a denim shirt and went to the kitchen to find some more cream. The women crowded around him, studying him with the calm faces of women who had seen lots of wounds. Pilar pulled a bowl out of the fridge, began dabbing the cream on his face.

"It feels good," he said.

"Maybe it will help the wounds heal quietly."

Colton thought that was a funny way of putting it, but she was a strange woman, beautiful, but with a gone look in her eyes. When she finished, he poured a couple of cups of coffee and made his way back to their room. Diego was still asleep, so he pulled the covers back, ran his hand down his sleek flank. "Want some coffee? We need to get on the road if we're gonna drive into Nogales and get the stuff for Samuel."

Diego groaned, buried his face in the pillow, then he rolled over and sighed. "Come over here. Let me see your face."

"My face is fine," Colton said, bringing him a cup of coffee. "I didn't shave, though. You're gonna get rubbed raw, we do any French kissing."

Diego took the cup, ignoring the invitation. "You've already been into the cucumbers and mint! I guess you don't need me at all. Unless you want me to run out and pick you some grapefruit leaves?"

"I'll pass on the leaves, but I am looking forward to your company today, so I hope you aren't going to act like an asshole all damn day long."

Diego climbed out of bed, took his coffee and went into the bathroom without another word.

* * * *

Colton had an idea on the way into Nogales. "Diego, we still need to get Samuel his new jeans, right?"

Diego stirred, turned to face him. "Yeah. He may need thirty-four waist before the year's up. I think he's really underweight. As soon as he gets fed up some, gets to his proper weight, he'll need bigger jeans. Some new T-shirts, too."

"There's that new JCPenney store in Nogales. Why don't you run in there and buy Samuel some clothes, and I'll go across the street to the grocery and buy what we need for burgers and dogs."

"Okay." Diego was looking at him, eyes narrowed. "What's up with this? Why do you want me to go to Penney's?"

"Jesus, Diego, I'm not trying to get rid of you. It's just you always seem happy when you've been shopping. I thought it might cheer you up. You know, help you snap out of it."

"You ... you..." Diego turned to look out the truck window, but Colton could tell by the line of his neck that he was grinning. Diego scooted across the bench seat until his thigh was pressed against Colton's. "You need to develop some tolerance, Colton. You fell in love with a Mexican, but you're a pussy when it comes to scenes. You don't even know how to yell at me. You don't know how to have a fight. You just keep saying 'snap out of it'. What if I don't want to snap out of it?"

"Why the fuck would I want to yell at you? What are you talking about, Diego?"

"See, this is what I mean. We have a cultural disconnect here. It's healthy for a relationship to have a few stormy waters, but you just want everything lovely and nice all the time."

"Bullshit. You're just being a drama queen."

"A drama queen? I ought to kick your ass."

"Go ahead and try, my friend."

Diego sighed. "Okay, I'll go shopping for Samuel. But it's because he needs his clothes, Colton, not because I need to go shopping. And I'm not a drama queen."

Colton felt a little justified when he saw Diego's cheerful face waiting for him outside Penney's, loaded down with bags. He pulled the truck to the curb, and Diego climbed in and scooted close, dumping all the bags on the floorboard. "Holy shit, what did you get? I thought we were talking about a pair of Wranglers."

"Underwear, T-shirts, socks, a couple of pairs of jeans. A denim jacket. Just the essentials, Colton. It's cold at night and Samuel doesn't have a jacket. Oh, and a pair of good leather gloves." He turned around and looked in the back of the truck, then gave Colton a smart-ass grin. The barbeque pit back there was half of a fifty gallon drum with welded legs and a grill on top. They would be able to cook a good fifty burgers on that monster at a time. "Did we need a barbeque pit big enough for a small town?"

"Well, we need a decent-sized barbeque pit out at the ranch," Colton explained. "I knew this old man used to make these. Turns out his son is still making them in the same workshop. How lucky was that?"

"Did he say anything about your face?"

Colton shook his head. "I don't think anybody noticed it."

Diego looked at him. "Really."

Samuel noticed. When they pulled up at Weaver's ranch, Samuel came running from the stables. When he pulled open Colton's truck door, he stepped back, looking distressed. "Colton, what happened to your face? It wasn't El Tigre, was it? I heard what you were saying before about the rope, about him having a rope."

Colton caught him up in a hug. "No, I ran into the wrong end of a horsewhip. Can you believe that shit?"

Diego climbed down from the truck. "Samuel, you've grown another inch in the last week! What's Mr. Weaver been feeding you?"

Samuel ducked his head down, his cheeks stained red.

Diego and Colton walked up to the porch, and Joshua stirred a bit on his couch, woke up blinking and sat up, reaching next to his foot for the bottle.

"Mr. Weaver, how are you?"

"I'm good. That sure is a nice boy you sent out here to help me. He's a hard worker and he knows how to listen to a story without interrupting. Not everybody knows how to do that these days, especially the teenagers."

Colton grinned over at Samuel. "What's the status on young Johnny Bravo?"

"He's wandering around at night with his horse all over the ranch. I don't know what he's waiting for, tell you the truth. He brought the goat back. Did Samuel tell you?"

"Yes, he did. Well, we'll know when we know."

Diego moved the whiskey bottle over just a bit with his foot. "We brought you some fruit juice."

"Fruit juice? What the hell for?"

"Vitamins. Remember I talked to you about vitamins?" Diego stood up. "I'll go get the bottle."

They watched him walk back down to the truck, and old man Weaver turned to Colton. "I don't believe I remember him saying a word about vitamins. It's gonna play up hell with my stomach."

"If I could make a suggestion," Colton said, "because he's kind of in a mood today, I would just drink the juice and like it, you know what I'm saying?"

"Yes, I believe I do," Weaver said, rubbing the bristles on his chin.

* * * *

Late afternoon in Arizona, and the light turned the landscape a strange, brilliant gold, making the tumbled sandstone and scrubby brush beautiful, just for a moment. Colton was feeling the light warm his face, happy to be in this peaceful valley with Diego, who was finally in a good mood. He'd taken all the tags off Samuel's new clothes, folded them and put them in the trailer, drank a beer and made burger patties, studied the goat in the pen and sat on the porch steps, watching Colton wrestle with the barbeque pit.

Colton nearly singed his eyebrows off with an excess of lighter fluid when he lit the charcoal, but then he sat down next to Diego on the steps, felt his warm thigh snug against his. Diego handed him a beer and they sat together in the golden afternoon light. This was good. They were okay.

"You're the one gets happy when you go shopping, not me. You've been happy since you bought that monster barbeque pit."

"Well, we'll see the proof in the burgers, if the pit is as good as the old man's barbeque pits. I'll tell you what I think. I think you bought enough new clothes for two boys. You just guessing they're the same size?" Diego nodded, and Colton reached for his thigh, ran his hand up and down, let it rest on his knee. "Some days I wish we could just stay out here. This seems a peaceful life, but ranching is hard. A hard life. At least it was for my granddad. Seemed like things were always on the edge of disaster."

"That's the truth of it." Old man Weaver was behind them on his sofa. "One bad storm, one bad infection in the herd,

and your taxes for that year are gone. Long as I've been working this land, I never really got ahead. I think the best I can say is I wrestled it to a draw. That's not bad, for a lifetime's work."

"No, it's not." Diego was quiet, his face thoughtful. Colton knew he had plans for his life that included doing more than wrestling his world to a draw. But what control did they really have? Maybe not as much as they thought they did, when they were young as Samuel.

"It's worth the hard work," Samuel said. "See how beautiful this land is, Colton?" Samuel gestured toward the mountains, where the little valley opened up. "I just want to get to know land like this. To learn it in all the seasons. To find a way to take care of it, and let it take care of me. That's the best life, I think."

Colton turned around and looked at Joshua, who was leaned back on his sofa, rocking a little. Joshua nodded his head. Colton could see it in his face. This boy, Samuel, he was a man like them, a man with a passion for the land.

Diego stood up, went to the barbeque pit and stared down. "How can you tell if the coals are ready?"

Colton stood up and studied the coals. "They're ready when somebody wants to put their beer down and throw the burgers on, Big D. I would say right about now."

Diego put the burgers on the grill, stood over them with a spatula while the smell of cooking beef spread out across the valley. Colton looked around. "Now, Samuel, this is a fine idea, but don't get discouraged if he don't come in tonight. We can always go look in the mine in the morning."

Samuel shook his head. "He's not in the mine. He's with his horse, and he wouldn't put the horse down there."

"Colton." Diego gestured with his chin. The boy was walking in from the east, leading his horse, the setting sun full on his face. He looked like something out of an old western movie, dusty jeans, long, black hair spilling over his shoulder, leading a beautiful horse the color of caramel, with a soft ivory mane.

"Joshua, this your boy?"

Joshua struggled up from the sofa, looked hard across the pasture to where the boy was walking in. "Yeah, that's him. Where the hell's he been?"

"The hot springs are up that way." Samuel blushed when Colton turned and studied his face. "I just thought ... that might be where I would camp out, if I had to camp somewhere on the ranch. And I did see some tracks up there. I left him a note, you know, just in case, telling him we were having burgers if he wanted to join us."

Diego was grinning. "You did good, Samuel. Well, Mr. Weaver, he looks just like you described him."

Johnny Bravo gave them all a nod and bypassed the group without a word, leading his horse back to the stable. Samuel walked back and joined him. Colton studied his retreating back, then turned to look at Diego. "Why do I get the feeling Samuel..."

Diego shook his head, flipped the burgers. "Leave it, Colton. Let him settle a bit first."

"He looks Apache. You think a face like that belongs on one of those old timey photographs, those sepia-colored

pictures from 1870, buckskins and Navajo saddle blankets on the horses and a boy with that proud face."

"He's too proud," Joshua said. "That kind of pride just leads to trouble."

"He's just sixteen. He needs some work to do, settle him a bit. You think he's a ranchman, like you?"

The old man shook his head. "I don't know. I can't recall I ever met a dreamer knew how to do a lick of real work."

Johnny and Samuel came back from the stables, and Johnny climbed the steps up to the porch and stood in front of Joshua, his arms crossed over his chest and his chin nearly pointing at the sky. They stared at each other for a long moment, and Colton was reminded that Joshua had known this boy since he was born.

"Go throw your stuff in the house if you want."

"Samuel said there's another bunk in the horse trailer. I'll stay out there."

"Fine. Do whatever you want." Joshua reached for the bottle next to his foot, just came up with tropical fruit juice. "Goddamnit! Where's my whiskey?"

Johnny turned and marched back down the porch steps. He held out his hand to Colton. "I'm Johnny Bravo. I heard you were looking for me."

Colton shook his hand. "I'm the law, if that's what you mean. And I was investigating a crime and your name came up."

Johnny looked surprised at his tough voice. He looked over at Samuel, then straightened his back and faced Colton again.

Colton nodded down at him. "In the old westerns, we used to call it cattle rustling, like it was something romantic. Nowadays we call it grand theft. And if you do it again I am going to throw your sorry ass in jail. I don't care your reason for doing it. Do you understand me, Johnny?"

"Yes." He was speaking through clenched teeth. Colton looked over at Diego. *Oh, very proud.*

Johnny was holding his hand out to Diego now, obviously hoping for a warmer welcome. "I'm Diego Del Rio. I hope you're hungry, Johnny. I put three burgers on the grill for you."

Johnny looked over the food. "I could eat three burgers."

Colton felt a bit irritated that he had been so worried about this kid, and he came strolling in with his horse, ready for supper. No blood, no wounds, he didn't look tired or miserable or in any way needing to be rescued. He wasn't even very dirty. Samuel must have been right, and Johnny was camping at the hot springs. Weaver seemed to share Colton's feelings of irritation, and Johnny, with perfect teenage intuition, stayed very far away from them both, tucked up safely between Diego and Samuel.

Colton listened in while Diego got Johnny talking. "A film maker? That's interesting, Johnny. What kind of films?"

"Westerns. I want to make films that tell the truth about how things are in the West. How things really are for Natives, and for Mexicans. And for the people who live on the land, like him." He gestured toward Joshua on the porch. "It's deadly out here, but people don't see. And it's been exploited so much, the minerals, the uranium. I think it'll take a Native

filmmaker to tell the truth about this place. You want to see some film?"

"I sure would."

Diego was being so nurturing and kind, Colton made a gagging gesture, a finger down his throat. Diego ignored him. Johnny climbed up the porch steps and stopped in front of Joshua again. "Can I borrow the TV? I can hook a cable up from my video camera and show you some of the footage I've been shooting."

Joshua waved a hand. "Sure, boy. You go on ahead."

Johnny ran out to the horse trailer, got his video camera from the backpack he'd tossed in there earlier. He went back up the steps and into the house, and a minute later he was back out on the porch, standing in front of Joshua. "You don't have a TV."

Joshua rubbed his chin. "Well, now, let me think. You know, I meant to buy a TV. I was thinking about selling a calf and buying one down at the Sears. But then something happened. You stole that calf, so I couldn't sell him."

They stared at each other for another long moment. Johnny's cheeks were flushed red, but he didn't know if it was mad or sorry. Joshua looked like he was thinking about breaking into tears, he was hurt so bad. Johnny dropped down to one knee in front of the old man. "I'm sorry I stole your cows and goats."

"That's all you had to say, boy. I was just waiting for you to say it like you meant it."

"I mean it." Johnny had his face turned a bit away, studying the dusty porch. "I bought the video camera with

some of the money, and I bought some food, but I have the rest."

"You can turn it over, then. We gonna live together, we got to have straight dealing between us, you understand? Otherwise this won't work."

"I'm not living with you if you're gonna drink yourself into a stupor every night."

"What the hell's a stupor?" Joshua waved this away. "Never mind. I know what you mean." He gestured toward Diego with his chin. "My doctor has got me on fruit juice. And if you are as smart as you like to think you are, you'll be working hard to convince Samuel to stay out here with us. Maybe if he's here, we won't get to scrapping too much. Besides, he works harder than me and you put together."

Before he and Diego left, Colton pulled the two boys aside. "There's been some weird shit happening just across the border from our land. Johnny, you know where my ranch is? Samuel told you?" Johnny nodded. "Somebody is using those old masks to scare people in the villages, but we don't know why."

"Smuggling? Drugs or something?"

"That would be the most likely guess, Johnny, but there are plenty of ways to smuggle across the border already without all the playacting. When you were roaming around down there, you ever see anything made you think something was off?"

Johnny stared out across the pasture, thinking hard. "I saw lots of things that were off, Colton. The poverty in

Mexican border towns makes the reservation look like Shangri-La. I didn't know what to think. So I just filmed..."

"I want you to think about any places you might have seen that should have been deserted, but weren't. My guess is all this playacting is designed to keep people away from him. So he's got a place somewhere, maybe in one of the abandoned villages."

"What's he doing, Colton?" Samuel sounded worried.

"I don't know yet. My best guess is he's opening a drug processing lab, meth, real close to the border, and my land. And he's gonna try to take me out so he won't have to worry about me and my people standing in his way, once he gets his business going." He shrugged. "Could be slaves—plenty of girls still caught up in that traffic. But I don't know yet. Johnny, if you can think of anyplace that seemed like that, someplace you might have seen people living where they shouldn't have, signs of cars or horses, you let Samuel know or you call me on the cell. And in the meantime, try not to aggravate that old man too much."

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Chapter Seven

Colton shifted the truck into fourth and eased back in his seat, the night sky and the empty road home filling him with happiness. "I'll tell you what I think."

Diego turned his head, his eyes already sleepy. "What do you think?"

"You can come on over here and lean your head against me." Diego must have decided to take him up on this offer, because he scooted over and leaned his head against Colton's shoulder. Colton smelled the new shampoo, sage and juniper, desert smells coming from the silky dark head on his shoulder, and he thought that was the kind of thing could drive a man mad.

"You've been a good little mama to all these teenage boys," Colton said. Diego lifted his head, but Colton ignored this warning. "What I think is I better take you out drinking and dancing and fucking before you turn into a middle aged woman! That's what I think."

"A what?" The look that shot out of Diego's black eye and across the seat was enough to set his hair on fire.

"Let's go to that place where I picked you up. We haven't been out in so long I can't even remember the last time. Jesus, you were hot that night."

Diego grinned at him. "You didn't pick me up. I seduced you right into my arms."

"What? No, you didn't. You must be thinking about your last boyfriend."

The grin faltered for a moment, and Colton could have bit his tongue in two for reminding Diego of Rodrigo Valdez. Then Diego reached over and gave the head of his cock a pinch right through his jeans. "You are as clueless now as you were then. I wanted you and I took you. You walked into that place looking like the big dog on the block, is that how you say it? Like your dick was ten inches long and chiseled out of stainless steel. I looked at you and I thought, he's the one for me. So I pulled my shirt off and pulled some nice young kid out to the dance floor, and you just leaned against the bar, drinking tequila and looking around. I could feel your eyes when you looked at me. I sent a psychic message from my brain to yours. *Come and get me if you want me.* And next thing I know you had me by the wrist, pulled me right off the dance floor and into your arms. That's the way it went down—just the way I planned it."

Colton stared at him. "Fine, you want to believe that little work of fiction, go ahead. I know what I know. And what I know is I miss you. I miss you being the way you used to be. Like your soul was some kind of bird. I want you to feel free like that again."

"Yeah?" Diego stared out through the windshield, his face sad. "We all have to grow up, Colton."

"I like you just fine grown up. I'm talking about something different. I want to taste tequila on your mouth and see that reckless look in your eyes, like you're ready to climb up on the bar and fuck me in front of everybody, you're so horny."

"That's you looks like that, not me. I'll go dancing with you, Colton." Diego sat up, looking a bit more interested.

"Care to sweeten the deal just a bit? I bet I can make you go down on me."

"I'll go down on you anytime you want."

"Climb up on the bar and do it. That place where I picked you up."

"Yeah? I think there's some kind of Pima County Personnel Manual rule that says the sheriff's department can't engage in public sex on top of bars. What if I make you go down on me? In the bar where *I* picked *you* up?"

"I'll get rid of the comforter and get a Pendleton blanket for the bed."

"Diego, you will use any reason at all to go shopping. You are incorrigible. We're not getting rid of the comforter, not after what you paid for it. What about if you win? What do you want? Not that you're gonna win."

Diego started to speak, then bit his lower lip, grinning. "I'll tell you what I want when my cock's sliding down your pretty throat."

"Agreed."

* * * *

Diego refused to go out dancing until Colton's face was healed up. The cuts were shallow, and they healed with no problem, the new skin just a bit pinker than usual. None of the dirt was left. Diego claimed credit for this last, but Colton secretly suspected it was the cream that Pilar made for him.

But Saturday night rolled around, and by then Diego had riled him to a fever pitch. "You are the most competitive son of a bitch I have ever met," Colton said through the bathroom

door. "We didn't say anything about cutting me off. I don't know where you get the idea that I don't have any self-control where you're concerned."

Diego came strolling out of the bathroom, wearing some water droplets and nothing else, running the towel over his head. "Wear your new shirt, okay? The silk and linen one."

"I have a silk and linen shirt?"

"The blue one, Colton. Or you can just stand there like an ox and I'll dress you."

"Jesus." He stomped into the shower, was out and dried and dressed before Diego had finished blow-drying his hair. Levis, his crocodile cowboy boots, and the blue shirt. He decided to leave it mostly unbuttoned in case Diego needed to grab for some chest hair, hold on, anything like that.

Diego took another hour to get ready. Colton was used to it, and Diego had always made it worth his while. He came out of the bedroom in a cloud of Armani, and Colton felt the weakness down in his belly. Jesus, Diego knew how to push his buttons. He was wearing his button-front Levis, the old ones, and a black silk shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Looked like he had on a new eye patch, too. This one was as silky as his shirt. Diego had an eye patch made out of silk? Then they had the good snakeskin boots and the hat, that cowboy hat with the snakeskin hatband, and Diego looked likely to cause a riot. "Come here." He rubbed his cheek against the smoothest shave he'd ever felt, tasted a mouth sweet as a peach. "You know you want me."

"I always want you." Diego whipped out a tiny green tube and tried to slather some lip gloss on Colton's bottom lip. It was shiny and smelled like cinnamon.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"It's just like Chapstick, Colton."

"No, it sure as hell is not. You wear lipstick if you want. I think I'll pass."

"It's Burt's Bees. Voted most kissable."

"We are not going to get through this night without somebody getting his ass kicked. That's what I think."

The bar was packed, and Colton thought that most of the boys were younger than he remembered. It was oldies night, songs from the sixties and seventies, Steppenwolf and CCR and the Stones, and the dance floor was already crowded, with lots of grinding and shaking and wandering hands squeezing tight asses. Well, John Fogerty could make a stone statue want to dance and fuck, so it was no surprise the effect his rough sweet voice was having on the susceptible. Diego plunged into the crowd. "Colton, get me something to drink. Whatever you're having."

Colton walked up to the bar. The dark wood was already sticky with spilled beer and whiskey, and men crowded together a little closer than they needed to. The barkeep wiped the bar down in front of him. "Hey, Lieutenant. Long time no see. You want tequila?" He looked out at the dance floor. "You bring Diego with you?"

"Yeah, he's here somewhere." *Yeah, he's still mine.* "Give me a couple of Patron." Colton and Diego had become too well known the year before, beautiful, romantic gay martyrs,

and Colton secretly suspected half the world was in love with Diego and trying to steal him away. How could anyone look at him and not want him?

Diego had found some old friends, and there was lots of hugging going on. Colton brought him his drink. Some boy wearing a tight pink tank top was talking, his hands flying around like a couple of butterflies.

"Diego! You look *fabulous*! Tell me where you got that hat. You're so *hot*! Where have you been? It's been, like, *years*!"

Diego reached back for his drink, and Colton got one glimpse of his laughing black eye before he turned away again. Colton made his way back up to the bar, found a place to lean an elbow. He knew Diego. What was his strategy going to be? A pair of boys with orange and blue streaked hair and muscle shirts showing off matching dragon tattoos pulled him by the hand out to the dance floor. Diego still had his tequila in his hand, sipped it and let his hips start moving to the music. "Fortunate Son". The boys had their hands full of black silk shirt. Yeah, that was his plan, to drive Colton insane with jealousy. Well, Diego would be surprised how much control he had.

Colton was on his third tequila, busy ignoring Diego, who was down to just his jeans, boots, and hat. Colton thought he had actually seen a kid drop to his knees in front of Diego on the dance floor, offering either marriage or a blow job, and Diego kept dancing, his rolling hips inches from the poor kid's face. When he reached a hand down and ran his fingers over the kid's mouth, the poor bastard fell over in a faint. Colton

met Diego's eyes. *You gonna have to do better than that, Big D.*

The man who leaned up next to him at the bar was good-looking, an Anglo, with golden-brown hair curling over his collar and a cowboy mustache. Colton thought he looked familiar. He stuck out his hand. "Colton Wheeler."

"Hi, Colton. I'm Devin Macallister. DA's office?"

"Yeah, that's right. What are you drinking, Devin?"

He looked over at Colton's glass. "That looks good."

The barkeep was between them. "Jeff, can we have a couple of Patron. Wait, better give me three. Diego's looking a little dry." He was slow-dancing, letting some twit with a beard nuzzle into his neck.

Diego looked like a teenaged boy's wet dream, or the love of a grown man's life. Jeff slid the tequila across the wooden bar.

"Who is that guy? He's on fire for somebody tonight. That hat is fucking awesome."

Colton turned and looked at him. He had warm brown eyes, dark honey. Diego would like him. "He's mine."

Jeff leaned over the bar. "You two have a fight or something?"

Colton sighed. "No, he's just trying to drive me mad. I thought I'd let him."

"Well, if you're an old married man, I'll go roam around." Devin gestured with his glass. "I'll stand you a drink some other time. Good to see you, Colton."

"Yeah, man, you too." An old married man. That's what he wanted to be.

He took Diego's new drink and walked out to the dance floor. Colton put the tequila in his hand, then wrapped his fingers around Diego's slender wrist and pulled him gently out of the arms of the kid he was dancing with. "Sorry, big guy. He's with me." Diego moved into his arms, breathed a sigh of relief against his neck.

"Thanks for the dance, Charlie. You know my man? Colton Wheeler." Colton nodded at him, pulled Diego so tightly against his chest they were breathing in unison. The kid stood there for a moment, looking forlorn, hands on his hips, then he wandered back to the table and slumped down in his chair.

Neil Young came over the speakers, "Heart of Gold". Colton felt Diego's hand run through the hair on his chest, grab a bit and hang on. "Searching for a heart of gold. All my life that's what I've been looking for. That's what I found with you, Diego." Colton reached for him, tasted the sweat rolling down his neck.

Diego looked up at him, mouth swollen and damp, and his dark eye was shiny, like it was full of stars, or tears. Colton leaned down and kissed him, tasted forever on his mouth.

Colton could never resist Santana, and whoever was running the music put "Supernatural" on the CD player. First time he'd ever jerked off, he's been watching Carlos Santana's hands moving over a guitar. "You're the love of my life." Colton sang the lyrics into Diego's ear. He felt his cock rising sure and true between his legs, and Diego slid a hand down between them. He didn't reach for Colton, though. He unbuttoned the top button of his Levi's, then the next one, and then the next. The head of his cock stuck out, no

underwear, and slid into the hair on Colton's belly. They were pressed so tightly together that no one could see, but Colton's belly twisted with lust, his resolve crumbled into dust. His lover. The love of his life.

And Diego wrapped a leg around his waist, pressed a snakeskin cowboy boot into his ass, thrust his hips against Colton in rhythm to Carlos Santana's guitar. "You know how much I love Santana! Damnit, Diego, did you tell them to play this?"

"Come on, Colton, do it. Do it. You're already a legend, man, and I know you got the balls for it. I'll tell you what I want most in the world. Don't you want to know? What I want most in the world?"

And that was it for him. He lifted Diego into his arms, carried him from the dance floor with his legs wrapped around Colton's waist, set him down on the wooden bar, buried his face in the sweaty black curls between Diego's legs. The men around them pulled back for a moment, then crowded in close, and Colton heard laughing and wolf-whistles. He reached up and jerked the last couple of buttons open, slid Diego's cock into his mouth, down deep in his throat, swallowed and let his teeth scrape the place underneath that always made Diego start howling like a dog.

"Colton!" He was thrusting his hips up, his thighs wrapped around Colton's head, and Colton felt him quiver, taut as a wire, and Diego was shouting in Spanish, his come splashing against the back of Colton's throat. "I want a ring, and I want you. I want a gold ring on your finger and a bigger gold ring on your cock. Colton..."

Colton started laughing, nearly choked on the mouthful. He put his hands up to cover him, let Diego's cock slide out of his mouth. "You want to buy rings? Jesus, Diego, you will use any excuse to go shopping!"

Diego was laughing now, too, reached for his face, until the light from fifteen cell phones, taking their picture, brought Colton to his senses. "Oh, shit!"

* * * *

Colton made slow, sweet love to Diego in the silvery light of early morning, then he fell back asleep under the comforter, didn't wake up until the sun was filling the bedroom with the bright golden light of high noon in southern Arizona. Diego was in the kitchen, wearing a red apron with chickens on it, singing along to the Dixie Chicks.

"Hey, baby."

He handed Colton a cup of coffee. "You hungry? How about some eggs?"

Colton looked over to the stovetop. Some kind of yellow sauce was bubbling in the pot. "I'll eat whatever you give me."

"Just what I wanted to hear." He pulled a plate from the cabinet, cracked a couple of eggs into a pot of boiling water.

Colton leaned against the counter, sipping his coffee. "Did you mean it? Last night?"

Diego looked at him, stirring the boiling water in a circle. "I meant it. If you want to."

Colton nodded. Diego lifted the poached eggs out, slid them on the plate. He dished up the Hollandaise, then put a

couple of pieces of whole wheat bread on the plate and passed it over.

"Come eat with me. You're not going to make me wear a ring in my nose, are you? That's what I thought about when you said ring. You'd stick a ring in my nose and lead me around like I was your bull." Diego was laughing. "You gonna make me wear a tux?"

Diego propped his chin in his hand and a happy smile lit up his face. "Absolutely."

They spent a lazy Sunday on the couch. Diego read some of the stack of medical journals on the dining room floor, and Colton read the rest of *Showdown at Pecos Falls*. Happy endings all around. They walked down the street for pizza for supper and turned in early. Neither one was quite used to the bar scene anymore, and they were tired. Neither one of them thought to turn on the computer and check their email, so it was something of a surprise when Colton walked into his office to find Chan and Sanchez at the printer, giggling, pulling off one more picture of him giving Diego a blow job on top of the bar, with the caption in bright red: *Police Brutality? Arrest Me, Please!*

He looked toward his office door. The glass was plastered over with printed copies. He could see one with the caption, *Bring on the cuffs!* and somebody, Chan probably, had dressed up a few of the pictures with thought bubbles. In bright blue: *Five more seconds of this, and he'll confess to anything!*

"Oh, boss, you got to see the video! Diego was praying to the Virgin de Guadalupe just before..."

"Jesus!"

Colton went into his office, shut the door with a bang, and turned on his computer. Most of the emails were links to video at YouTube. Those cells were getting out of hand. Diego's voice was clearly heard screaming his name during what could only have been a mammoth orgasm. Colton felt himself getting hard watching it, could almost taste Diego's cock in his mouth. They were identified by name, occupation, hometown, and personal history. He picked up the phone.

"Diego? You checked your email yet this morning?"

"No, I haven't had time. I'm on my way into the OR. What is it?"

"I'll tell you later, baby. Nothing urgent. Call me when you got a free minute. We can talk about our china pattern."

Diego was laughing when he hung up. Colton couldn't say anything. Some poor bastard was sitting on an OR table, already stripped and shaved and scrubbed down with that brown stuff they used. He didn't need his surgeon thinking about anything else but the cutting. Colton shot off a few emails to the guys at YouTube, demanding they pull the film, but he already knew it wouldn't do any good. The pictures were everywhere.

He opened up an email from Devin Macallister, the attorney from the DA's office he'd met in the bar. "Hey, Colton, you're a movie star! Nice pics. Your man got a brother? We can double date."

He clicked on reply. "No brothers, but I'll check the Del Rio cousins."

He got a message back a few minutes later. "He isn't *that* Dr. Diego Del Rio, is he? Son of the late, great? Jesus, Colton, you must have balls of stainless steel."

"Not really. I'm just dumb as a rock."

* * * *

He had Sanchez and Chan, Brewster and Monelli, Blackthorn and Madison for a team meeting. He pulled out his seat at the conference table in time to hear Monelli ask Lydia, in a loud whisper, "Are you telling me he's *gay*?"

"Okay, our complaint about the Apache cattle rustling has been resolved. A family dispute. Any new ideas about what El Tigre is doing in the border villages? Any new reports?"

Chan opened a file folder. "I wondered about the land, Colton. What if he was running the villagers off the land, and buying it up cheap?"

Colton thought about it. "Cheap would be right. That land has been overgrazed for generations. It's worthless for making a living on. Nobody lives in most of those villages now if they have any place else to go. But let me talk to Consul Del Rio and see how we can find out if the land has been sold recently. No other reports of people getting hurt?"

Sanchez stirred a bit in his seat. "We're gonna take a little trip down across the border, check out something we heard. About an old couple. One of the kids who talks to me, he said this old couple who used to raise horses down on the border, their house got wrecked. Like, a bunch of guys came with sledge hammers and knocked down the adobe, made great holes in the walls, kicked out the windows. I've never heard

anything so crazy. Then he said the old couple, they had to walk out with just what they could carry on their backs, and El Tigre was there, wearing the mask, watching them walk away."

"What the fuck is going on? What could this guy possibly want? I mean, there is nothing down there."

Chan shook his head. "Colton. The border. The border is there."

"Yeah? So what? It's been there since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo."

"Um, actually, boss, it was the Gadsden Purchase. That was after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Before that the border was at the Gila River."

"Thanks, Monelli."

Chan was still talking. "Something. I don't know. The border is changing, Colton. It's not like it used to be. It's gonna be an armed camp in another twenty years. But I don't know if that has anything to do with El Tigre acting like a fucking pig down in the border villages."

Lydia propped her chin in her hand. "Is there any way for money to be made, if you controlled the Mexican side of the border?"

Colton looked at her. "What, you mean the whole thing? The entire Mexican border?"

Lydia shrugged. "Say you bought up all the land that butts up against the US border, a mile deep and five, six hundred miles across Arizona and New Mexico. Could you..." She stopped speaking, and they all thought about this. What if someone controlled the entire Mexican side, a thin slice of the

no-man's land that every illegal, every smuggler who came north had to pass through? What if you shut down the border from the Mexico side, and everybody who passed had to pay you to move north?

Colton felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. "My land straddles the border. It's the biggest ranch that still sits in Mexico and in America. If that's what they're doing, they can't do it without my land."

She studied his face. "Colton, what happens to your ranch? You know, if..."

Colton felt like icy fingers had gripped his spine, right up close to where his neck had been broken. "It goes to Diego."

Back in his office, Colton considered calling Esmeralda and asking her to do a little investigating—was anyone buying up worthless tracts of land on the Mexican side of the border? But he couldn't bear to talk to her, in case she had been notified by a kind friend about the videos of her precious son—pornographic videos that were speeding around the internet like an influenza pandemic. Two weeks she had liked him, and this was going to blow their chance for a decent mother-in-law, son-in-law relationship. He took the coward's way out and sent her an email.

When the phone rang, Colton thought it was probably Sheriff Miriam Boxlighter, calling to chew his ass or drop some administrative bird shit on his head for—what would you call it? Public lewdness, type: blowjob? Injuring the dignity of Pima County? Colton was sure there was something in the Pima County Personnel Manual, somewhere in the three hundred and twenty eight pages that specifically addressed

this misconduct. And he was also sure he would soon become aware of the very statute he had violated. His head was starting to ache. He picked up the phone.

"Colton? This is Antonio. We've got some trouble out here."

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Chapter Eight

"Maria told me this morning that she got another phone call from that man said he was a cousin of Pilar's. He was going to come see her, so she said come on ahead. When he got here, he had a couple of friends in a pickup. He tried to take her, Colton, and the boy, too. They had guns."

Colton's chest turned to ice, his belly hollow. "Was anyone hurt?"

"No. Manuel and I took the weapons off the unfriendlies, but they took off. I didn't get the chance to question anybody. Manuel and I want to go after them. They left tire tracks right into the desert. How fast can you get here?"

"I'm leaving now. Listen, tell the woman and the boy, little Juan, to get their stuff together. I'm going to take them to a safe place. I'll bring some deputies with me. Antonio, be careful. Manuel, he's seventy-six..."

"Yeah, I know, Colton."

Colton called the hospital, but Diego was in the OR. He left a message on the machine that he was going out to the ranch to take care of a problem, Diego was not to worry. When he left the office, he pulled Lydia aside. "Somebody tried to take one of the women off the ranch. They came with guns. I need you and Monelli down there to provide protection. Antonio and Manuel are going after them into Mexico, and I want to go get the woman and the boy and take them someplace safe. You okay if we run late? I don't know how long it'll take me to get back."

"Sure, Colton, I'm good." She turned, whistled for Monelli. "Gas in the cruiser, and step on it, Monelli." She pulled her cell out of her pocket, started punching in numbers. "Go, Colton. We'll be right behind you."

Colton drove his Sheriff's Department vehicle so he didn't have to even pretend to drive the speed limit. He called Samuel from the car. "Samuel? This is Colton. Put Mr. Weaver on the phone. Hurry now, it's important."

The old man picked up the cell. "This is Weaver."

"Joshua, this is Colton Wheeler. I need a big favor."

When he got to the ranch, everyone was in the kitchen except the three Juans. The women looked rattled, but tougher than Colton expected. Pilar had that blank look back on her face, and she was sitting at the kitchen table. Someone had packed a brown paper bag, and another, smaller plastic bag from Wal-Mart with a little boy's T-shirts sticking out of the top. Colton looked around at them. Tyra Shakira's mother, what was her name? Filene? She came forward and handed him a gun.

"Colton, here's one of the weapons. Antonio has one, and he left two here."

"He left two here? Where's the other one?"

She lifted the edge of her T-shirt. The pistol was shoved into the waistband of her jeans.

"Jesus! You guys have been watching too much Law and Order." He checked the pistol for bullets. "I've got two deputies coming. Lydia Brewster—you remember her? She came last time. And her partner, Joey Monelli. I'm going to take Pilar and Juan to a safe place for a few days."

Maria shook her head. "Colton, no! They're already scared! To be with strangers, that's..."

"Maria, don't argue with me. I know what I'm doing."

The women nodded, though Colton could see that Maria was still unhappy. "Where are the boys?"

"Out in the stables with the dog."

Colton walked out there, found the boys in the last stall, huddled in a circle with the puppy. The oldest Juan was instructing the others. "This is what Grandfather said we have to do if the ranch is overtaken by drug dealers or criminals. We have to hide in the hay so they can't take us hostage."

"He's right," Colton said. He squatted down with them. "When I was about your age, he nearly arrested me. Did I ever tell you that story?"

The boys shook their heads, their eyes huge.

"It was a horse thief and drifter from Sasabe came to steal my foal. I tried to shoot him, but I didn't know anything about guns, so I got knocked to my ass. He nearly cut me with this ugly pigsticker he pulled out from underneath his shirt. I was lucky I had friends to stand for me. But Grandfather, he said what we should have done was tie the horse thief up with some strong ropes. Then we could deliver him to the Mexican police."

"Antonio's Mexican police!"

"That's right, he is. Boys, is everyone okay?"

They all nodded, but Colton could see the littlest Juan's eyes were damp.

"I need to take Juan and his mother to a safe place." The little boy gulped back a sob, then another, then he climbed into Colton's arms and clung to his neck.

"I don't want to go!"

"I know, buddy." Colton stroked his back, and now the other two Juans were crying, too. "I'll come get you and bring you back home, I promise, Juan. Samuel will be there, so you won't be scared. Now, we all need to be brave, so your mom isn't more upset, Juan. You understand?"

He nodded, his face hidden against Colton's neck, and Colton thought that he'd never felt a little boy's tears against his neck before. Something about it made him feel like he'd been slugged in the gut. "Okay. Juan, you need to stay with me, now." The other boys crowded in, their arms around him, too, until he stood up, and the other two pulled away, crying. One ran to hug the foal, the other picked up the puppy, wet his fur with his tears.

Colton carried the boy into the kitchen. "We got any food packed up? Maybe we can send something with them." He heard a car pull up outside, and he looked out the window to see Lydia climbing out of the cruiser. Monelli was taking a minute to look around, but Lydia came straight into the kitchen.

"Okay, let's go," Colton said.

Maria was pulling a pot of beans out of the refrigerator. "You want to wait for the food?"

"No time now. Let's just get gone." Monelli came in the front door, and Colton introduced him. "Lydia, Filene has a weapon. Antonio and Manuel went into the desert in Antonio's

truck. Watch out for it. I don't know if they have a cell, or any way to communicate."

"Filene?" Monelli was looking around. "What a cool name. You mean like in that old Marty Robbins song? I remember that..."

Lydia interrupted him. "She's armed, Monelli. Didn't you hear the Lieutenant?"

Filene tucked a short curl behind her ear, studied him with narrowed eyes.

"Nobody kill my deputy, please. The paperwork would take me until the next century. Pilar, let's go."

She nodded, picked up the bags with their clothes and followed him out to his cruiser.

Once in the car, Juan climbed into his mother's arms. He was so small that she could fit the seat belt around them both, his chest pressed against hers, little stick arms wrapped around her neck.

"Pilar, the old man who lives out here is pretty old, and a bit unsteady on his feet, but he's got a big heart. I think it'll be kind of rough—the two boys are staying out in the horse trailer, but nobody will think to look for you there. I want you two to just stay out there, out of harm's way, until I figure what the fuck is going on."

She turned her head and looked at him. He was struck again by the unearthly beauty in her face. "He's dead."

"Who's dead?"

"The man who hurt me before." She had her arms around her son, gave him a squeeze. Colton thought she didn't want to say his name in front of Juan. "My cousin, I don't know him

well. I don't have any idea what he's talking about, wanting to take me. No one in Mexico wants me. They put him in jail, and he died. I told Maria, but she didn't listen to me."

Colton thought about this, watching the late afternoon sun turn the sandstone cliffs to vermillion and gold. "Did they try to take both of you?" She nodded. "You didn't get hurt?" She raised her hand, and he could see the red marks around the wrist, like someone had grabbed her, and she'd had to twist to get away.

"I'm fine. They kept asking for Juan." She was stroking Juan's back now, and Colton could see he was falling asleep, his face exhausted and drawn. "We're both fine."

"Samuel has a cell phone. Make sure he keeps it charged, Pilar. You call me if anything happens, or even if you just get scared."

She turned that blank face to him again, stared at him as if she was trying to remember his name. Then she nodded.

Old Man Weaver had made them two bedrolls in the corner of the living room with some of the blankets and sheets Diego had packed in the horse trailer. Colton carried Juan in, lay him down on the smaller bedroll. Pilar sank to the floor next to him. Joshua looked at them, stuck his hands in his pockets, walked in a circle, then followed Colton back out to the porch.

"Thanks, old man. Just let them stay safe out here. Nobody will know to look for them. I don't think there's any danger, but something is going on down at my ranch. I think some fucker tried to take that boy, knowing I would go ballistic."

Joshua rummaged around on the porch, handed Colton the bottle. He took a swig. "Boy, you still look like you might go ballistic."

"I'm thinking about it. I'm thinking that twist has pushed me too far this time. But if that's the case, Joshua, nobody's gonna come after them, try anything out here. You just let those boys keep an eye, make sure nobody's coming around shouldn't be here."

"I've got a rifle says they better not try. I killed a mountain lion with that rifle when I was sixteen—she was trying to eat one of my calves. Maybe I better start teaching those boys how to shoot. With something besides a little camera."

Johnny and Samuel crowded up on the porch. "Colton, look at this film." Johnny had his video camera out.

"Johnny, this isn't a good time. I've got to get back..."

"I think I found it. You know, a place like you told me about, where somebody's living and shouldn't be." Johnny held up the camera so he could see the tiny screen. "Samuel told me where your ranch is. If you ride down from there, it's pretty close. I rode down the western edge of your place, down into the badlands outside of Sasabe. Look." Colton was looking at the ruins of a small adobe church with some outbuildings. The roof was mostly gone, and the property looked abandoned. He studied the small picture, and Johnny pressed some buttons, magnifying one section of the screen. Tire tracks. Tire tracks in the desert lasted a long time, but these looked new. "And here's something else." The water pump out behind the old church was set with a stone slab underneath the spout, to hold the buckets. In Johnny's

picture, the stone was splashed wet. Someone had been getting water.

"The western edge of my ranch?"

Johnny nodded. "I think twenty, twenty-five miles southwest. Samuel knows where it is. One of us will go with you, and one will stay here to protect the woman and child."

Colton nodded, put his hand on the boy's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. Weaver was right about him. He was a cowboy at heart, looking for good deeds to do and someone to defend. "Johnny, I need you both here. Listen, good communications are critical. One of you keep the phone. And I need my people protected. I want you boys to stick together, ride the fence line. Keep the perimeter secured, so you'll know if anyone tries to come onto your ranch. Sometimes the most important jobs are not the exciting ones. You understand?"

Samuel followed him out to the cruiser, and he handed over the bags of clothes. "Colton, can't I come with you? I know I can help."

He shook his head. "You help me here. Tell Johnny that was good work. I know I've seen that place before." Colton wrapped him up in a bruising hug. "Watch out for little Juan. He was crying before."

Colton belted back down the highway, pushing his luck with the tires on the old roads, and thought about Johnny's pictures. He remembered something about that place, but in his memory it looked different, like before it had been abandoned. Maybe he'd seen it as a kid? He was only about five minutes from the ranch when the cell rang. It was Diego.

"Colton, how close are you to the ranch?" Diego's voice was tight.

"Nearly there. What's happened?"

"Antonio and Uncle Manuel. Antonio drove them back, but he's been shot, Colton. In the arm and shoulder. He's lost some blood, but he's okay. I can take care of him here. Uncle's been ... he's hurt. He's not conscious, Colton."

"What happened, Diego? What is the nature of the injuries?" Colton's back teeth were grinding together.

"He was beaten. With a whip."

He went straight to the clinic. Diego was in scrubs, probing Antonio's bloody bullet wound with a metal instrument. He had a bag of IV fluids hooked into the good arm, and seemed mostly unconscious. The bed was scatted with pieces of blood soaked gauze. Manuel was in the second bed, another bag of IV fluids going into his vein. His shirt was off, and Colton saw the torn skin, the bloody abrasions and bruises on his face and chest. His chest was covered in gray hair, matted and tangled with blood and dirt, but it was still rising and falling with each breath. Diego had a small oxygen tank, and there was a green plastic cannula running under Manuel's nose.

He turned back to Antonio. Diego gave him a report. "I've got an ambulance on the way for Uncle Manuel. He's got a traumatic injury to the back of his head. I would guess he fell and landed on a rock. Or a rock was used to ... I've removed the bullet from the muscles in Antonio's shoulder and in the upper arm. He lost a good bit of blood when he was driving them back up here, but he's young and in good health. He should be okay."

"I need to talk to him, Diego."

"I gave him some morphine while I took the bullets out. You should be able to wake him up."

Maria pushed open the door to the clinic. She was holding an armful of clean sheets. Colton reached for Antonio's good shoulder, gave it a shake. He groaned, tried to pull away.

"Colton, he's just had two bullets removed! Can't you wait a bit? I wish you hadn't taken Pilar away. We could have used her to help with these two. She's had some training as a nurse."

Colton wheeled around, his furious face an inch from Maria's nose. "Get packed and get off my ranch." She gasped, a hand over her mouth. He turned back around, gave Antonio another shake. "Antonio. Was it El Tigre?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Sorry, Colton. We walked into a trap."

"An old mission church? About twenty miles southwest of the ranch?"

Antonio nodded. "Mission de Corpus Christi. There were six or seven of them, Colton. Armed and waiting for us. But it was the guy in the mask that gave the orders. They shot me, had me tied to a tree. Then he did Manuel himself. Made me watch."

"I'm going now. I'll take care of this."

Lydia met him outside the clinic doors. "You need backup. Let me come with you."

"No. I need you here. Listen, I want you to find out who Maria's been talking to. She's been giving information, even if she doesn't know it. It has to be her. A priest, a relative,

someone she's been talking to. About me and Diego. About the kids, the women."

"We're coming after you, as soon as Sanchez and Chan get here."

"Antonio knows where I'll be."

Diego ran out of the clinic, caught him when he was almost at his cruiser. "Colton, wait. Wait! He said it was a trap..."

Colton turned on him, grabbed him by both shoulders and shook him. "Don't you let that old man die, do you understand me?"

Diego nodded, tears running down his face. "Yes. I understand." His voice was a whisper.

"I love you." Colton pulled him into his arms, buried his face in the warm damp skin of his neck. "Diego." And then he was gone, driving out across the coarse desert lands, going after a maniac.

* * * *

He had a rough idea where he was going. There was an old farm road that ran parallel to the western edge of the ranch, and his plan was to follow it until he was about a mile from the ruins of the old mission church. He'd go the rest of the way on foot, try to see what was waiting for him. They may have packed up and gone, but he didn't think so. He should have asked Antonio how he and Manuel got away, but he thought it probably didn't matter. El Tigre was pointing his whip directly at Colton, and he had an idea why.

He should have brought some water, a blanket in case he had to camp out tonight. A picture flashed into his mind—

Manuel's bloody chest, the gray hair matted, skin torn. A great crushing weight of regret gripped his chest. Why hadn't he reached down and kissed that old man good-bye? He came onto the sign suddenly, an old white wooden sign for Mission de Corpus Christi, and the tire tracks he'd been following, the ones that belonged to Antonio's truck, turned off the main road and followed the sign.

He needed to be careful. He didn't want to come roaring up on them in a sheriff's department cruiser. He didn't know how far the Mission was from the main road. He should have talked to Antonio more, but ... He couldn't have. Not with Manuel lying there so hurt, his proud old face slack and bloodied.

His cruiser had good tires, but the rough desert track nearly defeated them. The scrubby desert brush, creosote bush and prickly pear, was growing right against the roadside, and the roadbed was littered with rocks. But it wasn't the road that caused him to stand on the brake and slam to a screaming stop. It was the man who stepped out of the brush holding a high-powered rifle and put a bullet through the windshield two inches from his nose.

Colton threw himself down across the front seat and pulled his gun out. The windshield erupted in gunfire, shattered pieces of safety glass raining down on him, but before he could turn and shoot, the cold metal of a rifle was pressed against the back of his neck. Right about where his broken neck had been fused. *Shit, shit, not the neck. Was that a lucky guess? I don't think so.*

There were five of them, and he climbed out of the cruiser with rifles aimed at his head from every direction. There was a beat up Land Cruiser in the brush just around the curve in the road. They cuffed his hands tight behind his back, pulled his wallet and badge from his pocket and tossed them into the front seat of the cruiser. Nobody was wearing masks, and they didn't put one on him, either. He wasn't surprised. The man who had summoned him here was finished with all this play-acting. Colton wouldn't be leaving alive.

They put him in the back of the Land Cruiser. He lifted his head just a bit when they passed the old mission. It looked abandoned again, and they didn't stop. They were driving east, he thought, along the same farm road, but after an interminable drive they stopped, pulled him out of the back, shoved him into a Jeep. The Jeep drove off in a different direction. Colton thought they were going north. If that was the case, they were going to end up at the back gate of his ranch. *Hey, you guys just drop me off at home.*

That was going to take some balls, to kill Colton on his own land, or just beyond. This was Manuel's land to protect, and his, and some psychotic prick was going to kill them both out here? Well, he could try, and one of them would surely die.

The Jeep drove in circles through the desert until he had no idea where he was, and the setting sun began to turn the land to gold. They pulled up to another abandoned ruin, this one the remains of an old adobe house. There was an outhouse and water pump, a small garden that looked like it had been planted, then left to overgrow. Colton wondered if

this was a homestead like the one Sanchez had heard about, the old couple who had been run off their place.

The men pulled him out of the Jeep, made a big show of raising their rifles and covering him as El Tigre walked out from the house, wearing a mask and carrying the bloody, knotted rope whip. The mask was similar to the one that Esmeralda had sent him, the one they had found buried outside Sasabe. This one was dark wood painted black with ochre colored spots. The ears and protruding tongue were leather, painted lurid red, and the mouth was full of snarling yellow teeth. Colton stared at him. "Wait, wait. Let me guess. Your name wouldn't be Valdez, would it?"

Rodrigo Valdez pulled off the mask, and Colton stared into the mad eyes and beautiful face of a fallen angel.

* * * *

The rope whip bit into his back, a harsh burn and tear that stole his breath away. One of the men had ripped his shirt down the middle of his back, kept his hands cuffed, and Rodrigo had put him on his knees. The horsewhip had been easier, a better whip altogether, Colton decided, if you had to get whipped. This rough knotted rope felt like it was breaking his bones when the knots hit, then the rough slide and tear of the hemp across his skin was nearly unbearable. The rope snapped, slashed across his cheek, and Colton gasped, bit down hard. That one had nearly taken his eye. One, two, three more deep slashes across his back, and Colton put his forehead down on the ground, closed his eyes.

Diego. Don't come after me. I don't want you near this craziness. Lydia was tough. So was Antonio, but he was out of action for awhile. Sanchez and Chan would come after him, and they knew the border as well as he did. Okay, Lydia, Sanchez, and Chan. That would be more than enough people to come after him. As long as Diego didn't have to see him hanging from a damn meat hook.

Colton hoped that the new sheriff wouldn't panic, start doing things by the book, asking permission to cross the border, all that international interdepartmental bullshit. That sort of thing would guarantee that he would be dead and his bones picked clean before anyone was actually able to step across and get him the hell out of here. Esmeralda would help, if she wasn't too pissed off that he and Diego had torn up the town and been videotaped doing it. He grinned down into the dirt. That had been fun, going out and playing together.

He bit down when he heard the rope whistling through the air, tried to tense up his back, but nothing helped, and he screamed out when this one hit. Rodrigo knelt down by his face, stroked the cheek that wasn't cut. "We better let you get some rest, my friend. Too much and you'll be dead. I don't want to ... end this too soon." He stood up. "I need to call Diego, let him know. I'm sure he will be relieved. I promised him I would take care of you."

A couple of the men hauled him upright by his arms. And a third unlocked the cuffs on his wrists, left them dangling. His shoulders were so stiff, his back so bloody and torn, that he

couldn't have lifted a hand to swat out the flames if his hair had been on fire.

"Give him what he needs," Rodrigo said. The men dragged Colton back around to the stables, threw him into the tack room and locked the door.

"How about you give me some water, you dickheads?"

"How about I piss on the floor?"

Colton stayed on his knees for a while, afraid to move too much. Breathing was torture; his back was on fire, throbbing with every breath. Chills wracked him, chills so hard and strong his teeth were rattling in his mouth. Think, think. What did he need to do? Water. Water was critical. He needed to get out, get a look around. See if he could tell where he was. If he was in walking distance to the southern end of the ranch, maybe he could hide. He knew that land, every inch of it. He would hide, then come back with backup and weapons and take this crazy fucker out. It had to be about the land, too, not just Diego. Colton closed his eyes.

He was afraid to move, and his vision shaded to gray. Maybe it was just for a few moments, but he didn't know how much time had passed. He thought of Manuel, feeling this same unbearable pain, this burning, his skin screaming.

Did you pass out, old man? I hope so, so you didn't have to feel this. So the humiliation of being beaten to your knees didn't ... I would take that beating for you, any day.

He had known Manuel as a child and as a man. The old man had stepped in when Colton needed a friend, a grandfather, and had been both. Colton thought back to the two of them sitting together in the shade of the palo verde

tree, passing a bottle and reading old Westerns, watching the vermillion and gold landscape of the borderlands, watching the sun go down on their land. Cowboy stories, Manuel called them, and he always had a couple of new ones. He talked to Manuel about everything, the same way he'd talked to his grandpa when he'd been a boy. Talked things over, and got told if he was straying too far out of line. Listened to Manuel's stories about Diego as a little boy.

Manuel, I might have screwed up. I meant for this to go a little differently.

He heard the old man's voice in his mind. *Then find some water, Colton, and get the hell out of there. Don't let him hurt you again.*

Yeah, I think you're right. Just as soon as I can stand up, I'm out of here. Nightfall. I'll wait for night.

He didn't get the chance. The men came for him soon after, took him into the abandoned house and chained him up.

They looped a length of steel chain over one of the exposed vigas, hooked it to his handcuffs. He made a small effort to fight them off, but the crooked cop he'd seen outside the Valdez house on their earlier trip into Mexico just made a noise of disgust in his throat, grabbed Colton by the upper arm, and hauled him into place. Colton thought he was lucky he was still conscious.

He could stand flat on his feet with his arms stretched above him, which he supposed was a reward for good behavior. It wouldn't be difficult to shorten the chain, haul him up to his toes or higher, let him suffocate.

Rodrigo came into the room, drying his hands on a small white towel. "I have good news. I just spoke to Diego on the phone."

"Really? That's nice."

"He sounded so young and afraid. My dear one, how I have missed him. You have much to answer for, keeping my lover from me."

"Can it, freak. It's not about Diego at all. You want my ranch. Are you working on your insanity plea? Don't bother. Nobody gives a shit."

Rodrigo narrowed his eyes, the movement of his hands in the small white towel becoming slower and slower. He walked closer, spoke into Colton's face, his breath warm and sweet, scented with cinnamon gum. "You Americans, you think you own the world. You don't see yourselves like the rest of the world sees you. Bloated and stupid, drunk on your wealth and your myths about yourself. You're like a fat, old moose, separated from the herd. And the wolves are circling, hungry. I'm a wolf. The Valdez, we are the predators for this stretch of the border. You and Manuel, the rest of the poor villagers, you are the sheep that fill our bellies. You have no right to own Mexican land. And what I am doing over on the Mexican side of the border? That, my dumb American cop, is not your business."

"Somehow I think it's going to become my business. Your family, they plan to control the smuggling? For the entire border? How can you possibly believe you have enough men to do that?"

"Not every man in Mexico has left to crawl on his knees after the mighty American dollar. You don't have anything I want."

"Oh, yes, I do. And you can kid yourself if you want, act like some obsessive freak show, but Diego is never coming back to you. You know that. Why don't you just accept it and move on? Find another pretty boy?"

Valdez picked up the whip, and Colton flinched, sucked in a deep breath. Rodrigo laughed, walked to the door of the room. "Hey, bring me a knife, scissors, something like that."

One of the men who had thrown Colton into the tack room brought a pocket knife, stood in the room watching until Rodrigo shooed him away. "All of you, outside, keep watch. We may have visitors."

He opened the knife, "This isn't very sharp, but I think it'll do." He unbuttoned the remains of Colton's shirt, sliced up the sleeves so he could pull the pieces off his arms. The cut edges of the shirt were stuck in the bloody abrasions on his back, and Rodrigo ripped them off, watching Colton's face.

He unbuttoned and unzipped his trousers next, slid them down, pulled off the socks and shoes. He cut through Colton's boxers, dropped them on top of the other clothes. "I just don't understand." He shook his head, staring at Colton's naked body, and Colton resisted the urge to spit in his face. "You're nothing. Your family has no money, no power. You aren't particularly strong, and your face and body, so coarse and ugly. I can't understand what he ever ... Of course, I know you have kept him with you this last year with threats, intimidation..."

Colton was snarling, humiliation and fury rocking his chest. "I never raped him, you fuck-head. I never drugged him and raped him. Is that how you get it up? You need them unconscious and totally in your power? You're going to have a bullet through your twisted heart before I am done with you."

Rodrigo picked up the rope whip again, his black eyes dilated and wet. He began whipping Colton again, across the chest, the belly, and Colton was glad for the pain, glad for pain that would match the fury burning a hole in his chest.

"He'll never be yours again. You're never going to get my land. Esmeralda knows what you are. She'll never let it happen." And after that, he couldn't speak, he couldn't breathe, and he hung there until black swarmed out of the shadows and filled his mind.

Colton came to in the darkness, but he wasn't alone. How long had he been out? A man was running his hands up and down his thigh. "I want to talk to you. Are you awake?"

"Yeah, I'm awake. Aren't you dead yet?"

"I was going to tell you about Diego, but I need you to wake up. You don't understand him at all, about the special connection we share. About what I meant to him, when he was just a boy. Do you know about his father?"

"I know he was assassinated."

"In the end, it was probably a good thing for Diego. He would never have had the freedom to become himself if he'd been forced to live that life, politics, power, the social scene in Mexico City. You have no idea how cutthroat that world is. But Diego was free, and he came to me, came with his face so eager and shy, dark eyes shining when he looked at me as

if the sun was rising in my face. So young, Colton, and he loved me so much, he would reach for me, his hands so eager to touch me he would shake with passion, with desire. The first time he lay with me, you should have seen how smooth the skin of his back, the lovely curve of his ass. He was scared but so excited! He touched me, you know, between my legs, just with the tips of his fingers, like seeing a man's penis erect was too shocking, too great for his eyes, but he looked up at me and smiled, and those innocent eyes, Colton, you don't know how that touched me, the way he looked at me, so innocent. And I turned him over, took him, showed him the way it was between men, and when I looked again, his eyes had changed, and his innocence was spread across my cock with his blood. It was..."

He lifted his legs and kicked Rodrigo Valdez in the mouth. He knew it was a mistake, but he had to shut him up. The man fell backward, dark blood spurting from his mouth, fell over a footstool covered in faded pink roses. Colton swung on the chains, felt blood dripping down his skin.

He watched him get up, watched him look around for the knife, felt a shudder of panic go through his belly that was almost as strong as his fury. Manuel was with him then, in his mind, in his heart, an old, gnarled hand on his shoulder. *Be strong, boy. I'm here. I'll stay with you, son, whatever comes next.*

Colton's breath was coming in great shudders, his chest heaving. *Thanks, old man. I don't mind dying if it means Diego's safe, but I don't want to look like a coward in front of this...*

Rodrigo was snarling, his face twisted and full of hate. He looked like the El Tigre masks he'd been wearing, a predator, insane. He reached between Colton's legs, brought the dirty pocket knife down. A sharp searing rip and burn, a flood of heat down his leg. Had he just pissed himself? No, it was blood.

"You won't need these in the grave, my friend. I think I won't tell Diego about this. I want you to know, before you go into the ground, that you weren't a man when you died. That I defeated you. That I took your..."

The door to the room burst open, and Diego was there, black turtleneck, black jeans, his hair flying across his face, a pistol in his hand. Lydia was behind him, covering the room with a shotgun. Rodrigo was licking his fingers, his face wet with Colton's blood, and his own. Diego walked up to him, looked at the blood between Colton's legs, looked at Rodrigo's mad face.

"Diego! My lover, I am so happy..."

Diego lifted the pistol, shoved it up against Rodrigo's heart and pulled the trigger. When Rodrigo was on the floor, blood soaking his shirt, a horrible gurgling wet sound coming from his mouth, Diego aimed carefully at his forehead and pulled the trigger again.

Colton heard the gunfire from outside now. Lydia came over to him, pulled a handcuff key out and released his hands. He fell hard, his arms paralyzed and numb, and Diego caught him, eased him gently back down onto the floor. Lydia nodded at him.

"Colton, just stay here until we secure the perimeter. Sanchez and Chan are outside."

When she was gone, he looked up at Diego. "Did that son of a bitch just castrate me?" He was trying to look between his legs, but he couldn't move his hands to lift his cock out of the way. All he could see was blood, and his vision was shading dark again.

Diego did a quick check, then started looking around for something to stop the bleeding. "I need some paper towels. Looks like he just gave you a vasectomy. Your balls are still there, big as ever."

Colton nodded, leaned back just a bit. "Good thing we already have kids, then. Diego, you look like you're trying out for Mission Impossible or something. Why don't you press the gun into my hand, let me get my fingerprints on it."

Diego knelt next to him, held his face in his hands. "Would you shut up?"

"You okay, Diego?"

He never even looked back at the bloody corpse lying on the floor. "Yes. Colton, listen..."

"I know about Manuel." Colton sucked some air in, the great crushing weight of sorrow making it hard to breathe.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Now the tears were starting. "There wasn't anything I could have done. Even if I'd been in the hospital with him, Colton, I couldn't..."

"He came to see me. I was in trouble here, Diego, and he stopped off on his way to wherever he was going to help me out."

"Come on. It's time to go."

Sanchez had a group of henchmen under his rifle, their hands cuffed together, and Chan was putting a knife in the tires of every vehicle except theirs. Lydia was helping Antonio out of her cruiser.

"Antonio, what are you doing?" Colton asked.

"He shoots me, I shoot him. That's the way it is down here in the borderlands." He turned to look at Rodrigo's men, locked eyes with the crooked cop. "Isn't that right? I got the *federales* on the way. This looks to be a federal crime, Colton. Manuel was beloved down here, and the Valdez ... they are not. I think Lydia's right about what they were doing. My old friends Sanchez and Chan are going to stay with me until the rest of the guns arrive. You two get gone. Lydia's going to drive. I'll be back down to the ranch to check on you soon as I get this mess cleaned up."

Colton nodded at him. He was pretty close to passing out, and the sheet Diego had wrapped him in was like nothing against the cold desert night. Antonio put his good arm around Diego, took the gun and slid it into his waistband, kissed him on the cheek. "Peace, brother. Go home now. This is business for Mexico."

Diego climbed into the back seat with him, and Lydia peeled out, driving too fast over the rocky desert roads. Colton knew better than to say a word. He leaned his head against Diego's shoulder, tried not to cry out when the car lurched and skidded. Diego ran his hand over his hair, sang a little song into his ear, the kind of song you would sing to soothe a fussy baby. And it must have worked to soothe him,

because he drifted off to sleep, didn't wake up until they were coming into the back gate of the ranch.

"Colton, we're home."

"How did you find me, Diego? Did you follow the tracks, or was it the cell phone signal..."

"He gave me directions."

"Oh. Well. You got there in the nick of time, as the old saying goes."

Colton lifted his head, and Samuel was there, holding the back gate open, and there was Johnny Bravo, sitting on his beautiful horse, holding a rifle. They looked like they had just ridden in from filming an old western movie.

* * * *

"I thought I left you two out with old man Weaver and Pilar and little Juan. Do not tell me you left them there alone."

Samuel stepped up. The boys had ridden up to the main house, put their horses into the stables, then reported as ordered to the clinic. Diego had unwound the sheet, given him a shot of morphine, put three stitches into his scrotum and slid a pair of loose cotton boxers up his legs.

"Colton, it wasn't us. I mean, Pilar insisted. She said you were hurt, and Dr. Del Rio would need her here. I couldn't say no, Colton. Not after she said you were ... hurt." Samuel kept his eyes to the ground, but Johnny Bravo looked Colton over with the eye of a filmmaker.

"Kid, don't even think about lifting that camera and taking a picture of me."

"It's called film, not pictures, Colton. Pictures are taken with a still camera."

"Whatever."

Johnny looked over at Diego. "You need some help getting him into the shower?"

"I might. Why don't you two..."

"Diego, I'm fine. I don't need a shower."

"Colton, you haven't seen your back. Okay, how about this. You sit in a plastic chair and let the water clean you off that way."

"I don't need a plastic chair. Give me a break. I walked over here."

Samuel looked at Diego, then he left the clinic. He came back after a couple of minutes later dragging a footstool from the kitchen. "I couldn't find a plastic chair."

"Jesus, I'm fine." Johnny took Colton's arm, and Samuel took the other. Diego picked up the footstool.

"Okay, let's go to our casita."

The cold night air hit his skin like a fist, and he was shivering again, great shudders of cold wracking his chest until he could hardly breathe. They got to the casita, and put him in the shower, and the warm water hit his back. He screamed and pitched forward, blood red spots dancing in front of his eyes. Samuel started sobbing, ran out, but Johnny and Diego stayed in the shower with him, holding him up, getting soaked with his blood.

He woke up on his belly. Diego had wrapped some gauze with Vaseline on it over the whip marks on his chest, put him

face down on their bed. He smelled something cool and green. "Pilar?"

"I am here." She was smoothing some cream on his back.

"That feels good. Why did you come back? You could have been in danger."

"I was not the one in danger. Anyone could see that."

"Well, okay, as it turned out ... How is little Juan?"

"He is anxious to see you. He is with Papa Diego now, getting rocked in the big rocking chair in the kitchen. Diego doesn't like anyone else to take care of you. But I told him, that's the way it is in families. He will have to learn to share."

Colton couldn't stand to be in exile in his casita, so when Pilar finished, she helped him slide a pair of loose shorts on. They walked over to the kitchen. Old man Weaver was playing cards with Filene and Lydia at the kitchen table, and there was a bottle of tequila and enough assorted shotguns, pistols, and rifles sitting around that Colton immediately felt at home. A pile of wooden matches sat in front of Filene, and she gave Lydia a sidelong glance out of black eyes, gaze narrow and considering. Their baby, Tyra Shakira, was in a pop-up playpen in the corner of the kitchen, trying to throw a chubby leg over the side and escape. It was starting to look like his grandpa's kitchen again, old men and babies, tequila on the table and rifles propped up in the corners.

"Who's cooking, if everybody is playing poker?" He smelled garlic, onions and bacon frying.

"I am." Diego was in the kitchen, chopping cilantro for salsa, and he had three little helpers. They ran to Colton, hugged his legs gently.

"I guess I can lean over and kiss you boys on the head," Colton said. He kissed three sweaty black heads. Every one of them needed a shower more than he did. "You helping Diego set the table? I'm hungry. Make me lots of good grub."

"We're having pinto beans!" It was little Juan. "And Mama and Mr. Weaver are going to make fry bread!"

"Yum." He leaned up next to Diego, kissed him on the head, too. Diego had put Garth on the little CD player. Colton turned it up. "Shameless" was playing. "I like that song."

"Me, too. Why'd you get out of bed? You get lonely for all your people?"

"I guess I did."

"Antonio and the rest of your crew will be back soon, Colton." Diego slid some green onions to the cutting board. "Then it will all be over."

He studied Diego's face, only one eye now, so dark and clear, so calm. Just for a moment he heard Rodrigo Valdez' voice in his head, talking about Diego's eyes. Colton shut the voice out. Diego wasn't that boy anymore.

"All right, then." Colton looked out the kitchen window. Johnny and Samuel were leaning against the door to the stables, and it looked to him like they were tipping longneck bottles up to their mouths. "Did you give Johnny and Samuel beer?"

Diego shook his head. "I don't know anything about it."

Colton stuck his head out the back door, whistled between his teeth. "You two. Get over here, now."

The End

Lawless
by Sarah Black

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About the Author

Sarah Black is a fiction writer living in the American West.

Sarah Black: The Facts

Favorite Music: Willie Nelson, Teatro; The National, Boxer;
Annie Lennox, Songs of Mass Destruction

Favorite Fast Food: Pizza with pepperoni, black olives, and
onions (just like Diego and Colton)

Favorite Perfume: Chanel Number Five. (I know, I'm so
old-fashioned. I haven't worn anything else in twenty years)

Helpful Skill: I can start a campfire in any weather

What I love: My kid, my job, dark chocolate, taking naps
on Sunday afternoon, watching Brett Favre play football.

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