



**Fearless**

Sarah Black

(c) 2007

# **Fearless**

Sarah Black

Published 2007

ISBN 978-1-59578-401-8

Published by Liquid Silver Books, imprint of Atlantic Bridge Publishing, 10509 Sedgegrass Dr, Indianapolis, Indiana 46235. Copyright © 2007, Sarah Black. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books  
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:  
[raven@LSbooks.com](mailto:raven@LSbooks.com)

Editor  
Lynne Anderson

Cover Artist  
April Martinez

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

## Chapter One

Colton passed his service revolver to the security officer behind the front desk at the hospital. The guard was tall and very dark, with a full black beard and faint traces of Ethiopia in his voice. He put the revolver in the lockbox and handed Colton the receipt.

"You got some pretty nurse upstairs, right, Lieutenant? Every day at lunchtime, you get you something good to eat, my friend?"

Colton smiled at him, his jaw stiff. Every day, this same backslapping, big stud routine. "Not me, man. I'm just getting my blood pressure checked." He slapped his hard belly. "You know you can't be too careful with your health."

He cut through the cafeteria, picked up a couple of salads, then walked through the indoor healing garden to the professional building. The University of Arizona hospital was a gorgeous, glass-walled sanctuary of air-conditioned quiet in the middle of Tucson's gritty downtown. The professional building was still, the staff at lunch or behind closed office doors, with their shoes off and their ties loose.

The surgical residents had a suite of small offices behind the radiology wing. Diego's door was closed, but the surgical nurse was behind the desk. "Hi, Lieutenant Wheeler."

"Ma'am. Does he have a patient?"

She shook her head. "Those salads look good. He's gonna have to eat fast, though. He's got to be in surgery in an hour."

Colton knocked quietly on the door, then pushed it open. Diego was sitting at his desk in a pair of green surgical scrubs, initialing a stack of lab reports. His hair was pulled back in a slick black ponytail, and there was a faint line of annoyance between strong dark eyebrows. He smiled when he saw Colton standing there, stood up and came around the desk. "Hey. I thought you couldn't get away for lunch!"

"I just arrested the dumb fucker. He was taking up too much time. You hungry?"

"Yeah, I am." Diego turned back to the desk, shoved the stack of papers and medical journals to the side.

Colton set the salads down on the desk and pulled another chair up. "You want blue cheese or Italian?"

"I think Italian," Diego said, opening the plastic containers. The little chef's salads were pretty, dark green lettuce and cherry tomatoes, ham and cheese and half a boiled egg each. Diego slipped his egg onto Colton's salad, then poured dressing from the little plastic pouch. "What are you doing? You're just standing there."

Colton smiled and picked up the blue cheese. "I was just looking at you, baby. You all right? You looked like you had a headache when I came in."

Diego shook his head. "Bad mood. I'm getting spoiled, having you around so much. I think I like your undivided attention. I've been acting like an asshole since you told me you couldn't come for lunch." He shoved a forkful of salad into his mouth. Noon, and Diego's jaw was already dark with whiskers. Colton could see a little patch of black chest hair in the V of the scrub top. It looked like the V of dark hair below his belly.

Diego stared at Colton's hand, suspended halfway to his mouth. Laughter lit his eyes, and his voice turned honey-sweet, melting a bit into the rhythm of Spanish, his

native tongue. He leaned forward, and Colton could see himself, double reflections in Diego's dark eyes. "You bring the handcuffs?"

Colton laughed out loud and swiped at his head. "You're like a boner on two legs, man. I ought to tie you up and leave you for one of the nurses to find. But I don't know if they'd let you up. One of those girls might just climb on board, take a ride on the love train, you know what I'm saying?"

Diego was shoveling salad in like he might not get another chance to eat this week. Or like he wanted to finish quick, have time for some... Colton put the plastic lid back down on his salad. He could eat later. Diego probably wouldn't have another free minute until tonight. "You got duty tonight, baby?" Colton stood up and started unbuckling the black leather belt from around his waist.

Diego stared up at him. "Nope. You?"  
"Nope."

Diego was eating faster. "Hold on, Colton. I'm coming, just wait for me. Wait..."

Colton shook his head, reached behind him, and locked the office door. "You just finish your lunch without choking, and I'll take care of you." He unbuttoned his uniform shirt, draped it over the back of the chair, unsnapped the waistband of his uniform trousers. He reached for Diego's hair, pulled the ponytail loose and slid his fingers through it until the tumbled, silky black mass of hair fell forward to his shoulders, across his face.

Diego's eyes were as black as his hair, dark like the night sky, huge now as he stared up at Colton. He stood up, tossed the plastic container of salad toward the trash.

Then Colton had him, jerked him roughly into his arms. Diego was amazing. His body fit perfectly into the circle of Colton's big arms. He was slender and lean as a dancer, elegant, and Colton felt something in his heart crack open. He gave a little prayer of thanks. He did it every time, almost without meaning to, or thinking about it: *Thank you for this man. Thank you for letting me feel this way right now.* All the magic in the universe was spinning in Diego's dark eyes.

Colton pulled him forward, kissed him hard, hands moving through Diego's hair to hold him still, and he tasted olive oil and parmesan cheese on his tongue. "Yum. I love eating Italian."

It was a miracle, the low noise Diego was making in his throat. His elegant long surgeon's hands were sliding around Colton's ass, pressing into his skin and holding them together, their cocks filling and turning toward each other, like a couple of flowers turning their heads to the sun.

Colton moved his hands down Diego's slender back, still kissing him, kissing the long, slender line of his neck, the faint trace of some expensive department store aftershave on his skin. Diego's dresser looked like a boy model lived in his bedroom, heavy glass bottles of smell-good with French names cluttering the top.

"Your neck smells like that Polo, but I like the way your balls smell better. That's the real you." He untied the scrubs from around Diego's waist, pushed them down over his hips and then stopped. "I believe you were wearing underwear when you left the house this morning." He could hear a change in his voice, the cop sneaking in.

Diego went still. "Was I? I wonder where I could have left them." He had a little smart-ass grin on his mouth.

Colton touched a long finger to the dent in Diego's chin. "You better watch it, boy.

You walk on thin ice with me sometimes.”

“Yeah?” Diego stepped closer, took Colton’s big hand and pressed it between his legs, hot skin, wiry hair, a cock bouncing gently against his belly. “And what are you going to do? What are you gonna do, if I’m walking on this ice, and I break through?”

Colton found Diego’s balls, rolled them between his fingers, then he put his hand up to his face and smelled. “I’ll save you.” His voice was a whisper, and Diego shivered and moved closer, pressed himself against Colton’s chest.

Colton licked down his finger, that warm, spicy smell of Diego’s balls like liquid heat in his belly. “I’ll save you.” He wrapped his fingers around Diego’s cock. “Now bend over.” He pushed the scrubs the rest of the way down, and they puddled at Diego’s feet.

Diego had a slim, pretty little butt. Colton pulled the chair out of the way, bent over Diego until his forearms rested on the desk. Diego looked up at the clock. “Surgery in forty minutes.”

Colton stopped moving, his hands on Diego’s hips.

“It’s just a hernia repair. Don’t worry. I can do it with my eyes closed, Colton.”

“Okay, then.” He reached into the top drawer for the lube. Diego had little individual packets of flavored lube from the STD clinic across the street. Colton pulled a couple out. “We got bubble gum and passion fruit. Jesus, don’t they make any of these for grown men?”

“I’ve been telling them to make a tequila-flavored one.” Diego looked over his shoulder. “So just spit on your hand, cowboy.”

Colton shook his head. “I don’t want to hurt my boy’s sweet little ass. You’re gonna be sore, botch the hernia, get sued, then you’ll end up passing out condoms in a Mexfam clinic in Sonoyta.”

“Holy Mary! Save me.” Diego made a quick sign of the cross. “Okay, passion fruit.”

Colton tore open the plastic, dribbled lube on his fingers, slid them down the cleft of Diego’s ass. “Oh, you’re pretty down here, just like a flower. Did I tell you that before, baby?” He pushed the tip of a finger inside, felt the tiny mouth open, then squeeze shut against him.

Diego’s voice was husky. “Yeah, Colton. You told me.”

Pushing in, the gentle skin closing around his fingertip, and Colton could feel passion ignite in his balls. He kept his fingers in place, and pushed his uniform trousers and boxers down.

It felt so tender. That’s what always got him. The most tender, fragile skin, open to him, warm and hungry, and Diego pulled one knee up on the desk, opened wider. “Colton, I’m ready.”

He slid his fingers out, and his cock found its place. The head of his cock was always wet and sticky under the foreskin, purple and fat as a plum. He didn’t know what it was that had made Diego’s eyes go dark and wide the first time he’d ever seen Colton undressed, but the fascination hadn’t waned. Diego loved to slide Colton’s foreskin back, hear the wet sucking sound it made, lean forward and taste him with the tip of his tongue.

Diego took a breath, opened himself and pushed back, until the head of Colton’s cock had slipped inside. It never went in easy; it was too fat. Colton knew he had hurt a few men over the years, but Diego was in love with his cock, loved the dark plum head, and he knew how to use it.

“Tell me when you’re ready.” Diego’s ass was velvet around his cock. He pressed back.

“Come on, then.”

Colton’s hands tightened on his hips, one thrust, gentle and sweet as honey on his tongue, then another, and Diego was moaning, clutching the edges of the desk, pushing back against him.

“Harder, Colton.” So he rammed the last couple inches home, the way Diego liked it, started pumping, fucking him hard, the way he liked it, and Diego was nearly standing on his head, murmuring in Spanish, louder and louder until Colton buried himself in his body, reached around and cupped the head of Diego’s cock, squeezed hard.

“Colton.” Diego bit down on Colton’s forearm, and Colton reached for his nipple, flicked it with a rough finger.

When Diego started to come, his ass contracted around Colton’s iron-hard cock. Colton thought he would be swallowed whole, sucked into Diego’s velvet heat. He could feel his balls clench, the sensation so strong it was almost painful. He exploded deep inside Diego’s body, felt like he would empty his soul.

Diego reached for his arm, kissed the place he had bit, then slipped Colton’s finger in his mouth and sucked on it while Colton finished emptying inside him.

Diego looked over his shoulder, black hair wild across his face. The color was deep honey and rose across his cheekbones. Colton reached forward, ran a rough thumb under Diego’s eyes.

“Did I hurt you?”

Diego shook his head, closed his eyes. “It’s getting better, Colton. Stronger.”

“Yeah, I know.” Colton glanced up at the clock, then sighed and started to pull out.

Diego jumped into the shower in the office bathroom, and Colton got dressed, then finished eating his salad. When Diego came out on the bathroom, toweling his hair dry, Colton tossed the rest of the salad in the can and picked up the comb and elastic band. He pushed Diego into the chair behind his desk. “I’ll do it.”

He combed Diego’s hair straight back from his forehead, and pulled it into a tight ponytail at the nape of his neck. Then he bent forward to look at one piece of dark hair falling across Diego’s cheek.

“You look hot, baby. Come on, let’s get you all ready for the world.”

Diego folded a piece of cinnamon gum into his mouth, ran a hand across his chin, and looked at the clock. “No time. I’m wearing clean scrubs. That will have to do.” Colton held out a neatly pressed white lab coat that had been hanging from a coat hanger on the back of the office door. Diego slipped his arms in, and Colton buttoned up the front, adjusted the name tag.

“Dr. Diego Del Rio, Senior Surgical Resident.” Diego was looking like himself again, his public self. Composed, formidably bright, elegant, and in charge. This was a man you would give your hernia to fix without a moment’s doubt. Colton tucked the single piece of loose black hair behind Diego’s ear. “That one is just for me. We’ll leave it tucked away for now.”

“I got an interesting call this morning. There’s a fellowship, cardiovascular surgery.”

“That’s heart surgery, right? That’s what you’ve been wanting to do?”

“Yeah. Another long year of residency, though.”

“Aren’t you feeling tired, bud?”

“Yeah, maybe. And I’m not making any money.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m only after your ass. We got enough. You can do whatever you want, Diego. I make enough. I’ll take care of us.”

Diego reached for his face, traced his mouth with tender fingers. “You coming home tonight?” Diego’s eyes were serious, and the question was serious too, their only big issue. Were they going to live together? Diego didn’t pass up a chance to call his place home, remind Colton to come home. To come home to him. Colton was not a man to get pushed without pushing back, but sweetness and this man’s eyes might be his undoing.

“Yeah. I’ll see you at home.” He reached for Diego’s hand, pressed it against his chest, over his heart. “You can cut on my heart anytime you want, Diego. You’re the life I’ve been waiting to live.”

Diego closed his eyes, lifted Colton’s hand and pressed a kiss into his palm. Then he was out the door and gone.

## Chapter Two

It was ninety-six in the shade. Downtown Tucson had a gritty, burned smell, not the clean, fresh heat of the desert. Colton could feel the prickle of sweat on his scalp seconds after he left the glassed-in cool of the hospital behind. In truth, he liked the heat. He'd grown up down here, out on his grandfather's ranch in the desert outside Nogales, grown up playing rough-and-tumble with boys with black hair. When he was sixteen, his grandfather died, and he'd moved to Tucson to live with his uncle.

He still had the ranch. It sprawled over southern Arizona and into Mexico. The land was older than the borders, and the animals didn't know when they were on American land or Mexican land. Neither did Colton. As far as he was concerned, that land belonged to the Sonoran Desert and to him. He spent as much time as he could roaming around at night, listening to the desert cool and the raptors come out to hunt. It was his real home, the home of his heart. But in other ways he felt like he'd never left his uncle's house.

Jeremiah Wheeler was a huge man, with a bulldog face and hard hands and a belly that hung over his gun belt. He'd been sheriff of Pima County for over twenty years. The people down on the border, the ones who voted for him, liked his black-and-white world view—right and wrong, laws and lawbreakers. He didn't believe in the gray areas and he never questioned himself.

Colton respected him, but he'd never liked him, never loved him, not like he'd loved his scatterbrained, mescal-drinking grandpa who used to litter the ranch with pretty whores every couple of months. The girls never stayed, though, not once they got a look at Maria, the housekeeper, who kept the crucifixes dusted and had hips so wide they knew she was a cook of extraordinary powers. No pretty girls in pink hot pants could compete with the twin powers of the Virgin and good Mexican food.

Jeremiah Wheeler had no truck with pretty whores, and none with pretty boys, either. Colton had never told his uncle he was gay. Sheriff Wheeler would have simply not accepted it, would have turned him out. He'd told Colton when he was eighteen that homosexual trash made him want to vomit, and that was all they had ever needed to say on the subject.

And Colton loved his work down on the border enough that he could put up with working for his uncle. He was one of four lieutenants in the department, and he was right where he wanted to be.

The sheriff only saw black-and-white, but Colton was all about the gray areas. His unit was the one to handle the sticky, messy, human stuff that wasn't covered under the rules. No one wanted the trouble his department handled, and that was the way he liked it. He was the man people came to see when the niece of a woman who had known his grandpa had been beat up in a whorehouse in Nogales, and her baby stolen, and rumor was the baby, Juan, was being smuggled into Texas and sold on the black market because he was light, his daddy probably white, and the person telling him this story had crossed the border somewhere on Tohono O'odham land, he wasn't really sure, he'd meant to go through a border crossing but he got lost, and he'd lost his papers, too.

But what he had to do, to keep peace in the law and order sheriff's department, was to keep his head down and not embarrass anyone. And it probably helped that his Aunt



Margaret loved him and prayed for him not to make his uncle mad. But on some days, like today, when Diego's beautiful smell lingered on his skin, and his strong eyes had asked those questions, *move in with me, live with me, start a life with me*, Colton wondered if it would be so bad, to come out, to be cast out, to be himself. But then who would chase after baby Juan and steal him back out of a tar paper shack in El Paso where he was crying and cold and hungry? And put him back in his mommy's arms, in her tiny room in Nogales, where she had to whore for six more months to pay for her passage north?

\* \* \* \*

Chan and Sanchez looked up when he came in, and Chan jerked his chin toward Colton's office. He nodded, and the two detectives followed him in. Sanchez closed the door. "*El Patron* was in, looking for you. Twice."

"He say what he wanted?" Sanchez shook his head. "Okay, what have you got?"

"We got those pawn shop break-ins. Tilly and Bryan are down interviewing the owner."

"How'd we get stuck with those?"

"Nothing was reported stolen, but the gun racks are all empty. Just some ugly spray paint. Graffiti..."

"*Pencil dick*," Chan supplied. "In red enamel. But then they smashed the glass cabinets. And somebody helped themselves to some guns. Maybe the artist, maybe not."

"There seems to be an ugly divorce," Sanchez said. "There's a pissed-off wife, a pissed-off girlfriend, a girlfriend's husband. But then I hear this little rumor there's new guns on the street. I got feelers out."

"Yeah, okay. What else?"

Sanchez hesitated, and Chan looked over at him. "This kid came in, looked like a baby queen from down over the border. Wanted to file a complaint of kidnapping and sexual assault. Against Dr. Diego Del Rio. When he came in he asked for you, Colton."

Colton stared at Chan, his mouth dropping open. "No fucking way."

Chan nodded, handed over a copy of the statement.

"What was your take?"

"It was bullshit," Chan said without hesitation. "I thought it was bullshit."

Sanchez stroked his mustache slowly. "It was like it was scripted, you know? A bad actor reading a role. But there was something else. He looked around, then he relaxed, like there was somebody he *didn't* want to see. But he'd asked for you, so it must have been somebody else." He shrugged. "I don't know. The whole thing was off." He passed a picture to Colton. "I got Edwards to snap a picture of him with the cell phone. You know him, boss? He said his name was Jesus Martinez, but we could call him Marti."

"Marti?" Colton looked at the picture. The boy was slender, effeminate, Mexican or part Mexican with a narrow face and black hair, and a very red, shiny mouth. Colton frowned down at him and shook his head. "I don't know him. Did he really come into a cop shop wearing drag queen lipstick?"

Chan grinned. "Yeah, and lots of cheap drugstore perfume. Not your type, Colton." Colton eyed him. "But the handsome Dr. Del Rio sure is."

Colton raised his eyebrows, sat back in his chair and waited. His unit, his men, he thought they probably knew he was gay, but it wasn't something that had ever come up

publicly, at work. Sanchez was stroking his mustache again. "After we took the complaint, we went up to the hospital to see Dr. Diego, but the pretty nurse said he was having lunch with his *partner*, Lieutenant Wheeler. Near as I can guess, the baby queen was sent to set you up, boss, not your good-looking surgeon. Or maybe to out you to your unit. But we already know you're a pansy-ass, so that didn't work. Or maybe he just wanted to cause a little trouble. But I think some *cabron* sent him."

Colton leaned back in his chair, put his hands behind his head, thought about all this. Chan stared off into space, and Sanchez leaned against the wall. Sanchez had silvered hair and a silvering mustache against dark brown skin, and Chan had a pockmarked Asian face with a Cajun accent. They had a bunch of informants, like the Baker Street Irregulars, working girls, young men on both sides of the border, kids who lived in the hard, dangerous places. They were Colton's favorite detectives, his most trusted cops. They lived in the gray areas, like him.

Colton sat up. "Let's see if we can get a line on Marti. See what the street says about him. Then I guess we better wait and see what happens next."

"What about the complaint? You want us to take a statement?"

Colton ran a finger down the statement and shook his head. "I'll ask him if he knows the kid." He looked at the office calendar, noted the dates. "For now I can give Dr. Del Rio an alibi for the weekend in question."

Chan and Sanchez looked at each other, then back at him. "He went with you to El Paso to snatch the baby back?" His voice was mild.

"You can trust me."

"Yeah, okay, boss."

When they left the office, Colton picked up the phone and dialed the sheriff's line. His admin picked up. "Lieutenant Wheeler? He's out of the office, but he asked me to pass on to you if you called that you were invited to dinner tonight at his house, seven-thirty. Your aunt is expecting you."

"Okay, thanks, April. Tell him I can't make it. I've already got plans I can't change. I'll call my aunt and tell her."

Aunt Margaret had a sweet, breathless voice, and she still hugged him when she saw him like she had when he was sixteen, like she didn't get enough hugs and she didn't know when the next one might come. He and Diego had taken her out to lunch for her birthday a couple of weeks before, and Diego had been at his most charming, so handsome and attentive that Aunt Margaret had become even more flustered than usual.

Colton had never talked to Aunt Margaret about being gay, and he never would, because Aunt Margaret was fragile, her world divided into increments of four hours, the times between her doses of medication. Diego understood after having lunch with her, how impossible it all was, and he hadn't said a word about meeting the rest of the family since then.

"Dinner, Colton dear? Were you coming to dinner?"

"I thought so. Do I have the day wrong?"

"I don't know. I get so mixed up, I'm sure it's me. Did I ask you to dinner?"

"No. The sheriff said something. I probably have it wrong, Aunt Margaret. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, about the same, dear. My medicine, it seems to be mixed up, I don't know. I wish I could go see that handsome doctor for these headaches. Is he that kind of doctor,

Colton?”

“No, he’s a surgeon. I’m not sure what kind of doctor you go to for headaches. I’ll ask him if you want.”

“Oh, thank you, Colton. I’m so stupid sometimes! I can’t believe I forgot about dinner.”

“No, it was me.”

After work Colton drove toward Diego’s loft, downtown near the hospital, let the creeping disquiet he’d felt the last few hours crawl up and out of his belly. The complaint felt bogus, but who else besides the cops knew he’d been gone that weekend? Was somebody trying to set up Diego, or him? And why?

And what had Diego done while he’d been gone? Had he ever met Marti? Colton seemed to remember that Diego had been on duty at the hospital that weekend, but they didn’t keep each other on a tight rein. If he had moved in, like Diego had been pushing him to do, he’d know, wouldn’t he?

Diego had been a wild child, his body some sort of thrill ride open to the world. Until he met Colton. The first time Colton had ever seen him, he was half-tanked, dancing in a club downtown, his shirt off and his jeans low around his hips, that black hair flying across his face. He’d been dirty dancing with some poor kid who had a boner so big Colton had his doubts that sucker would ever go down.

Colton had been drinking, too, just a bit to take off the edge, gold tequila, and he’d gone out on the dance floor, pushed between all the bodies, men smelling like sweat and semen. He’d taken Diego by the wrist, pulled him away from the kid he was dancing with.

“Sorry. He’s with me.” And the kid took one look at his tough face and big shoulders and backed down.

Colton pulled him over to his abandoned bar stool, still miraculously empty, sat down and pulled Diego into his arms. He looked smart, that’s what Colton thought, staring down into Diego’s black eyes, smart and wild and half-crazy, his eyes reckless with drink. Colton sipped from the glass of tequila he’d left on the bar, then gave the glass to Diego. He took a tiny sip, just enough to wet his tongue, then they leaned toward each other, mouths already open, tongues burning. Diego shivered, moved closer into his arms. The sweat was drying on his skin, and Colton pulled him close, wrapped his legs and arms around him to keep him warm and they made out like a couple of horny teenagers without saying a word.

Eventually Colton stood up and threw some money on the bar. “You need to find the rest of your clothes?” He reached for him again, ran his tongue up Diego’s salty neck.

“You’re just gonna take them off, right?”

“Yeah. I’m going to take them off. Every fucking thing. And I may never let you get dressed again.” And for the first time, looking down into a man’s face, Colton thought, *this is for me. He’s the one.*

A blast sounded behind him, and Colton looked up to see the light had changed. He put his truck in gear. No, Diego was wild, but he was also a third-year surgical resident. The residency programs worked them like slaves, especially the senior guys. He was more likely to stagger home and drop like a log across the bed with exhaustion after a thirty-six hour shift than to stagger home smelling like tequila and spunk. Colton wasn’t worried. He knew who Diego was. He was the one, just like he had thought that first

night. And every night since had just convinced him more strongly.

Something was going on, some ugly trouble bubbling up, but it was his kind of trouble. This felt like his world, not Diego's.

He stopped by the deli, picked up a couple of bagels and a piece of salmon for breakfast, and a half-pint of those Greek olives Diego liked. Diego was home early, his ridiculous blue Mini Cooper sitting like a toy in the big boys' parking lot. Colton pulled his truck into the parking space next to the Mini Cooper and then climbed the stairs to the loft.

The door wasn't locked again. He pushed it open. "Baby, why don't you ever..."

The loft was covered in blood splatter, and a man was tied to a brick column in the living room, bloody handcuffs, battered face, blood matting his black hair. It wasn't Diego. He was younger, skinnier. *Marti*? Colton, gun in hand, reached for Marti's neck and checked for a pulse. Nothing. His throat had been cut, his chest drenched with blood.

"Diego? Where..." He was shouting, his voice hoarse.

There was a scream from the bedroom. "Colton, no! Get..."

Then something slammed hard into the back of his head, a brick, a rock, and he fell forward. Black on the edges of his vision, stars, and he tried to crawl toward Diego's voice, Diego was screaming, screaming, and he was crawling through blood, blood on his hands and on his knees, then someone hit him again, and the floor came up and kissed his cheek.

### Chapter Three

He woke up in the hospital, the hollow throb in his head so strong he couldn't bear to open his eyes. He wanted to vomit but he couldn't move, he was tied down, he couldn't move his head. He heard something, a hoarse scream, Diego's name. It must have been him.

They told him his neck was broken. He was in a Stryker frame, his head and neck immobilized until they could fuse the bones. He could move his eyes, that was about it.

Chan and Sanchez came by to give him a thirty-second report. Sanchez leaned over the bed. "Your uncle assigned Gilbert and Robbins." Colton closed his eyes. Those two were dirty and lazy, a deadly combination in cops. "No one can find him, boss. There was some blood in the bedroom, didn't belong to the kid. Just a little, though. Like he was hurt, not dead. We'll keep looking. *El Patron* told us to back off, leave it alone. Let his people investigate."

"Did he? Find him, Sanchez. He's hurt. I heard them ... hurting him."

"Yeah, okay, boss."

"Look for his car, that Mini Cooper."

"It's still at the loft. Maybe they have him, Colton. If he left on his own, he didn't take the car."

The nurse came into the room then, gave him a shot that knocked him out. He was in the OR a couple of hours later. The surgeon fused the broken bones in his neck together.

Three weeks later he walked out of the hospital, more or less in one piece.

Aunt Margaret had been to the hospital a couple of times to see him, crying and praying, and the last time, the night of his surgery, she'd become hysterical, the whole thing was her fault, her tears making a mess through her makeup, and Colton couldn't calm her down. Aunt Margaret had never been good in hospitals. He asked her not to come again, but to wait, and he'd come see her when he got out of the hospital.

His uncle had come to see him once, in his uniform, had stared down at Colton with cold eyes. "Thought you were gonna go have dinner with your Aunt Margaret. Too bad. Seems like you walked into quite a mess, some freak murdering another freak, and your fingerprints all over the place. Your shaving gear in the bathroom. Your clothes in the bedroom. I get this mess cleaned up, Colton, you better not shit in the nest again."

Chan came very late one night, told him they'd been given a pile of BS cases and the sheriff was watching them real close. There was a warrant out for Diego's arrest, murder, attempted murder, assault and battery, kidnapping, sodomy.

"Attempted murder?"

"You, Colton. They said he attempted to murder you. They got a nice little pile of evidence and a nice little report, A connects to B, C connects to D. It fucking stinks. They think we're stupid?"

Colton's mouth was so dry, it was driving him crazy. The drugs were making his mouth dry, his skin itch. "Why? What's behind it? What's the endpoint they're looking for?"

Chan shrugged. "Maybe this *is* the endpoint. He's gone. We don't know where. Best case, he's on the run, or in hiding. You're down and out. Maybe you can't think of

anything else, not with him gone. That's our current endpoint."

"Maybe you're right. But that is a serious fucking miscalculation on somebody's part, isn't it?"

\* \* \* \*

Colton tore down the crime scene tape and used his key to open Diego's door. The old blood smell wasn't as bad as he'd been thinking it would be. Tucson was dry, and the air conditioning was turned low. He and Diego both liked the heat. The blood had dried on the hardwood floors, across the walls. The brick column where Marti had been handcuffed was one of the original building features that Diego had loved in the loft, sandblasted brick walls and arched brick columns, faded, soft rose. The old brick was porous, and had soaked up the blood. They'd never get it out now.

In the bedroom Colton studied the mess. The far wall had a couple of smears like a handprint, and a couple of smears about where his face or head would be, if he was held or thrown up against the wall. There were some smears on the golden wood floor next to the wall as well. Then the duvet on the end of the bed—had they thrown him up against the wall? How did the blood get on the bed? Was it his, or had he managed to hurt somebody?

There was a soft tap at the door, and Chan and Sanchez stepped inside. "We had a boy watching the door. Maybe they do, too, boss."

"Good. Let's make somebody nervous."

"You sure you want to do that? You're not back up to your fighting weight yet, Colton." Chan walked over to the wall, studied the blood smears. "Seems like somebody's already nervous."

"I won't let him come back until it's safe."

"We don't even know if he's alive."

Colton turned to Sanchez, ignored what Chan had said. "I've got to make sure it's safe before he comes back. You two, see if you can find the lockbox. He had a fireproof box with his important papers—his will, the student visa, and I think his green card just came through. We need to know if that stuff is gone. If it is, maybe he took it with him."

"'Cause he's a doctor? That's why he got a green card?" Sanchez knelt down and looked under the bed, then moved to the closet.

"Yeah. He's in that category, special occupations or whatever they call it."

Colton left them in the bedroom, went through to the answering machine attached to the phone. Blood smears on the table. Whose? They didn't look like they'd been sampled by Crime Scene. "Hey, Chan. Come look at this." They studied the blood, four smears the size of fingerprints, nearly invisible on the dark wood. Somebody had held the table, but there was no blood on the phone. Or it had been wiped up.

A message had come in a couple of hours earlier. He pushed the play button, and a woman's voice he didn't recognize spoke to him. "He's alive, and safe. He says don't look for him." Then a dial tone.

Colton felt his throat closing, the salty burn of tears in the back of his mouth. Then he was breathing again, grinning and looking like a fool, and Chan was pushing him down into a chair.

"Colton, you're just out of the hospital with a broken neck. Aren't you supposed to be on bed rest or something? You're gonna have to go a little slower."

“No time,” Colton said, wiping hard across his face with the heels of his hands. “I got no time to go slow.”

He spent the evening scrubbing blood off Diego’s floors with bleach and water. He shoved the duvet into a plastic trash bag, hauled it down to the dumpster, along with all the spoiled food from the refrigerator. He wanted to have the place clean and good-smelling when Diego came back. Diego loved the loft, and Colton wasn’t gonna let that get spoiled. And he was moving in, better late than never, do it while Diego was in hiding, and safe.

What he was going to do was flush out that sick fucker, turn over some rocks and see what was hiding. Because what he had figured out, lying in a hospital bed for three weeks, with nothing to do but think, was that this was a hate crime. This was a hate crime directed against the two of them, because they were in love, and happy, and hate crimes were against the law. And he was the fucking law.

He slept late the next morning, kept Diego’s pillow pressed against his face. Chan was right. He needed to go easy. He almost couldn’t move his head, and his shoulder muscles were in spasm. The surgeon who had fused his neck bones had told him he shouldn’t drive, shouldn’t work, shouldn’t use a computer. He could sleep, walk, eat. Right.

Who was the woman who had called? Her voice sounded familiar, but not like someone he knew well. Would it have killed her to give him just a tiny bit more information? *He’s alive*, very dramatic, but not nearly as satisfying as *He’s alive and well*. *He’s fine*. *He’s not hurt*. Diego’s screams echoed in his memory. She wasn’t going to lie. That’s why she didn’t say anything else. Because clearly he was hurt. But at least they didn’t have him, whoever *they* were.

Colton wandered into the kitchen, put on a pot of coffee. Maybe he’d walk down to the deli, get a bagel and some lox. That deli had an Internet café in the back... Oh, shit...

He was out the door in eight seconds. The girl behind the counter stared at him with huge eyes. “I...”

“I need a computer.”

“Sure,” she said. “Take number three. You want coffee, Lieutenant?”

“Yeah. Bring it to me, okay?”

“I don’t believe it. What they say he did. Dr. Del Rio, I mean. He wasn’t...”

“No, of course he didn’t do it. He was set up.” He watched her take that in, then went back to the computer and logged onto his e-mail. There it was. He had a message from DrDangerous77.

*I must have screwed up the hernia repair. One of the nurses told me you’re okay, Colton. Are you?*

*Yes. How about you?*

The girl set the coffee at his elbow, and he picked it up, sat back to wait.

*I’m okay. Be careful, Colton. I don’t understand what’s going on. Are you safe? What’s this about?*

What was he talking about, *I must have screwed up the hernia repair*? Did Diego think this was some sort of revenge deal, a dissatisfied patient with a screwed-up surgery or something? That didn’t make sense. People didn’t go after doctors like that any more. They just sued them, took all their money.

*I don’t know what it’s about. Let me come to you.*

*No. Too dangerous, Colton. I love you.*  
*I love you, too. I'll make it all right, Diego, I promise.*  
Nothing else, though Colton sat there for an hour, just in case.

\* \* \* \*

*I must have screwed up the hernia repair.* And who was that woman? Something was niggling at the back of his brain, and he lay in Diego's bed, not sleeping, got up and stood in the shower, looked through drawers full of boxers and T-shirts, waiting for the answer. Nothing. Diego's green card and student visa weren't in the loft. He needed to go get his laptop, plug in here.

But when he woke up the next morning he knew. *One of the nurses told me you're okay.* And his own voice, *You're gonna be sore, botch the hernia, get sued, then you'll end up passing out condoms in a Mexfam clinic in Sonoyta.* That nurse, Diego's surgical nurse.

Nothing on the e-mail. He scouted the hospital for a couple of hours, didn't see any watchers. At lunchtime, he made his way to the professional building through a side door. In old jeans and a faded T-shirt, with the livid scar down the back of his neck, he didn't look like Lieutenant Wheeler at all.

The residents' offices were quiet, and she was there, behind the desk. Colton pulled a piece of paper from his wallet. "Ma'am? I'm not sure where I need to go to give blood."

"Oh, sure, I can give you directions," she said, her voice a bit louder than it needed to be. She bent her head close to Colton's, pointed down the hall. "Down two doors to the right, then go to the end of that hall." Her voice dropped to a whisper, lips barely moving. "I don't know if they're watching. Strangers, men, are still coming around, looking for him. There's a warrant out for his arrest." She spoke up again. "If you're going to the lab, maybe you can take this specimen for me." She went into the back room, and he heard a refrigerator door open and close. Then she handed him a tiny Styrofoam cooler sealed with red plastic tape labeled "Medical Supplies. Rush. Keep Cold." The address on the label said "Clinica Mexfam, Sonoyta, Avenida Colonia Centro, #61."

The Styrofoam cooler was empty. Colton peeled off the red medical tape, shoved it into a trash can at McDonald's. He lifted the Mexfam label, stuck it down into his pocket, then broke the Styrofoam into pieces and left them in a dumpster.

When he got back to his place, he thought he felt a watcher. He stayed inside for an hour, then left with nothing more than the clothes he was wearing, his passport stuck in his pocket. He stopped by Subway, had a six-inch Italian, and while he was there he got three hundred bucks out of his credit union account from the ATM.

Colton drove to the grocery store next. There was a small Wells Fargo branch inside. He roamed the aisles a bit, picked up a couple of sodas, then went to the teller and got six hundred dollars out of his savings. He took it in cash, left it in his pocket. He called Sanchez on his cell, and they met at the Wal-Mart down on Highway 86. Colton left his truck in the parking lot, climbed in with Sanchez.

"Where we going, boss?"

"Gringo Pass."

"You're going across the border. Are you coming back?"

"Yeah. I'll call you when I'm coming."

"I got a boy, he knew Marti. Said he liked smoking his glass. Was using more and



more all the time, getting desperate for it. He was from Nogales, moved back and forth across the border. My guess is some law caught him with a pocket full of meth, and then he was a little blackbird ripe for the picking... *Mierda*."

\* \* \* \*

The border crossing at Lukeville, south of Ajo. The locals called it Gringo Pass. Colton bought a bottle of Excedrin Migraine and a cheap straw Stetson at the store, then sent Sanchez back to Tucson. Chan was going to stay in his place, and Sanchez in the loft, to try to confuse the watchers into thinking he was still in town.

Colton sat down on a bench outside the Stop-N-Ride, and waited for a van to Puerto Penasco. The vans made a stop in Sonoyta at the bus depot to pick up more passengers, the woman told him. He could get off there and find a cab.

Colton was too big, a beefy blond Americano. No way was he going to slip into Mexico unnoticed. But he'd grown up speaking Spanish, and anybody could sit in the shade on a wooden bench with a hangover, their hat tilted over their eyes. Maybe if he was quiet enough, people would forget about him, or just ignore him a bit.

He wished he had a hangover. The dull, hollow thump from inside his skull was as bad as the first few days after he'd been cracked over the head. The doctor had warned him, said everybody was so busy trying to repair his broken neck, they might forget he had a concussion. But the neck and concussion together were giving him some monster headaches.

He chewed three Excedrin Migraine, then washed the bitter powder down with a bottle of water. He could take the headache as long as he didn't get dizzy, start staggering around and black out. They'd throw him in a Mexican drunk tank, which actually was a more civil place than an American drunk tank, if he remembered correctly from a wild weekend when he'd been nineteen. But you definitely wanted to stay on your feet in a drunk tank, either side of the border.

Colton pushed his hat up, tried to squeeze his head a little. That didn't help much, but when he looked up, he saw a Mexican man watching him with narrowed eyes, talking on a cell phone. He had a small mustache and he was wearing a D-backs ball cap. That wasn't anything, he told himself, trying to control the flare of hope. Lots of men besides Diego were crazed Diamondback fans. But not all of them could have been his lover's little brother, a face so like Diego's... Colton squeezed his eyes shut. It was just wishful thinking, dreaming or something.

He kept his eyes closed when he felt someone sit down next to him. "Man, you look like shit."

Colton opened his eyes and looked over at him. "I feel like shit, too. I'm going down to Sonoyta. Get me some medicine or something. Maybe I need to see a doctor."

"Yeah, looks like you do. This is some fucking rescue mission, man."

Colton felt his stomach clench down into a hard knot of ice. "He's hurt? Don't worry, I'll take care of it. I'll take care of him."

The man made the softest possible hissing noise between his front teeth. "Yeah, right. You took real good care of him already, man."

Colton turned his head, stared down at him until the other man dropped his gaze. "Sorry, man. It's just... Well, you'll see."

"Who are you? He doesn't have a little brother."

“I’m his cousin, man. We close as brothers. We...”

“Oh, wait. Wait a minute. You’re Ramon, right? Yeah, Ramon. I know about you.”

“You do? What you know? What he say, man?”

Colton didn’t say anything else, just leaned back and tilted the hat back over his eyes. What had Diego said? *My cousin Ramon, he’s just young. He’s screwed up but he’s okay. His mama loves him.*

“Ramon, just remember this. I may feel like shit, but I can still snap you like a twig, boy, so don’t even think about fucking with me.”

The kid was quiet. “You don’t have to be like that, Colton. I’m just supposed to...”

“What?”

“Show you where to go. He said help you, ’cause you’d been hurt.”

“What happened to him, Ramon? And you better tell me the truth.”

“His eye, man.”

“What, his eye’s hurt?”

“It’s *gone*. Those fuckers, they cut out one of his eyes.”

Thinking about it later, Colton couldn’t remember much about the trip into Mexico. He must have gone through the border crossing, climbed on board one of those vans, but all he could remember was the pain, the way every bump in the pothole-filled road felt like a spike of pain into his eye, his stomach twisting and filled with acid. And what had it felt like for Diego?

Ramon had his elbow when they stepped out of the van into the ferocious sun of Sonoyta, and Colton leaned against a mud brick wall and tried to empty his guts. He couldn’t see, his vision tunneling to black—was he going blind? No, that was Diego. He’d lost an eye, they’d cut out one of his eyes, and Colton could feel it, it felt like it was happening to him, something sharp and cold digging into his eye, then the tearing, the hot spurt of blood, over and over, so when Ramon pulled him through a doorway into a cool dark room, he could see nothing. He stretched his hands out in front of him and fell hard to his knees. But it was okay. He was okay. He could hear Diego’s voice.

“Shit, Ramon, what did you do to him? I told you not to tell...”

“What? He was like this when I found him!” Then Colton’s face was pressed against the cool dark concrete floor and he reached out and touched Diego’s foot, wrapped his hand around his ankle. Diego knelt down, his quick doctor’s hands feeling Colton’s face, his neck. His fingers stopped, traced the scar.

“I’m getting up. Don’t worry, baby. I’m here now. I’ll take care of everything.”

Diego’s low laugh, tears in his voice, but laughter, too. “I know you will, Colton. I never had any doubt.”

\* \* \* \*

“My tears, I think they come out on my tongue now. Everything tastes a little salty.”

Colton was lying on a bed, an old-fashioned iron bed with a feather mattress and soft linen sheets. The shutters were closed, but the windows were open, so the room was cool and dark. Diego was bathing his face with a wet washcloth. Colton turned his head a bit. Diego was lying next to him, propped up on an elbow. He looked thinner, gaunt, and he had a black eye patch over one eye. But he was alive.

“Did you give me an Excedrin? The headache’s better.”

Diego’s laughter bubbled up. “I gave you a shot of morphine, Colton. Can you see

now?”

“Yeah, it’s better. Thanks, baby.”

“There was a reason they told you to go home from the hospital and go to bed.”

“Yeah? And who gives a shit what that reason might be?”

Diego sighed. “Not now, Colton. Not yet. Just a day, okay? One day. Or a few hours. An hour. Can we please just have an hour, please? To lie here together? I don’t want to talk yet.”

He reached over, and Diego crawled into his arms, curled up with his head in the hollow of Colton’s shoulder. They held each other, tighter and tighter until they couldn’t move, couldn’t get any closer, and their tears were wetting the pillow. When Colton kissed him, he tasted the same, just like Diego, with a tiny bit of extra salt, like he’d said. “I’ll never give this up, Diego. I’ll never give you up. Whatever’s going on, I’ll figure it out, don’t worry, and I’ll make sure it’s safe for you to come back. Don’t worry, baby. I’ll take care of this. I don’t know what’s going on yet, but I think this is about me, not you, Diego. This is my fault. My work, I mean, best I can figure.”

“Seven minutes, Colton. Can’t you just relax for seven minutes?”

“No. Diego, I know you left me. I know you left me and ran. It was the right thing to do. They might have killed you. I’m not gonna have you feeling bad, or feeling guilty or...”

Diego was shaking in his arms, sobs wracking his chest, and Colton pulled him over until he could wrap his arms and legs around him.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. You were breathing, Colton. I didn’t know about your neck. I heard them say they were gonna call 911 for you. You weren’t supposed to be there. They all talked together, then they went downstairs to get...” He started choking, the breath wheezing in his throat.

Colton put his mouth over Diego’s mouth. “Hush, baby. Hush. Go slow. I’ve got you.”

Diego rushed on. “I think they went to get plastic bags. To put my body in. They weren’t expecting you. They were just gonna beat me up, I guess, beat me up and leave me there with that boy. They weren’t expecting you, and they didn’t know what you’d seen. So I ran and left you there. I was afraid, Colton. I was so fucking afraid I couldn’t breathe.”

Colton put both hands on Diego’s face, held him still. “Thank you.”

“What?”

“Thank you for being smart enough to run. So I can hold you right now, and next year, and twenty years from now. Diego. You’re my life. And I won’t ever give you up. I’ll figure it out, I promise.”

Diego was crawling up his body until he could reach his mouth, and Colton couldn’t remember ever tasting anything so sweet. “Diego, did you know them? Who were they?”

“No. Not now.”

“Baby ... I’ve got to know what you know. So I can investigate. So I can bring the fuckers down. Diego, what’s...”

“Colton, you can’t investigate. All you’re gonna do is make things worse.”

“Make things worse? Diego, the fuckers cut out your eye. They broke my neck. Don’t you think we need to figure out why, and put them in a shallow grave out in the fucking desert?”

“You’re gonna do something stupid and reckless and end up running, and I’m gonna be alone, I’ll be alone, Colton, and then I’ll never be safe, and...”

“Diego, Jesus Christ! What are you talking about? What did you see?”

“They were cops, two of them.”

“Cops? What? You sure? Which one took your eye?”

He was silent then, and his hand crept over until Colton reached for it, twined their fingers together. “Not those two. It was him, Colton. The sheriff. Your uncle. He did it with his pocket knife. It was quick, so fast, I thought, *he’s done that before*. He said something, about I shouldn’t have got near his family, then he just put the knife in my eye, and I must have fallen, I guess, because I was against the wall. He spit on me. That’s when I heard you come in.”

\* \* \* \*

Colton stared up at the ivory plaster ceiling. Diego was curled up, warm and sleepy, next to him. The emotional firestorm had worn them both out. But Colton couldn’t sleep. He couldn’t stop picturing it in his head, that fucking bastard taking a knife to Diego’s face. “I’m going to shoot that stupid, twisted fuck in the eye,” he promised the ceiling, and the Virgin of Guadalupe looked down on him from the wall next to the bed, her calm face and sweet gaze seeing everything, accepting everything. “I’m going to press a Glock machine pistol into his eye, hold it there long enough and hard enough that he has time to feel it, know what cold steel shoved against a tender eyeball feels like. Then I’m going to put a bullet through his wasted fucking head, and...”

“And what?” Diego’s voice was sleepy. He curled closer, slid a hand across Colton’s chest. “I hate to interrupt. You’re enjoying your fantasies of revenge so much. But what are you going to do then? Run for the border? Hide out? Then keep running?” His voice turned bitter. “I can see you living like that, like some stupid Western movie. You expect me to climb on a horse and follow you into Sonora? Live out with the rocks and the snakes and the scorpions?”

Colton wouldn’t have minded some camping out in the desert. It was clean and real and simple, and he understood that land. But it probably wasn’t Diego’s thing. “What I’m going to do then is come get you and take you home. Let you get back to work, finish your residency. Go do that heart thing you were talking about. What we’re going to do after I kill the fucker who maimed you is live the life we were going to live before it happened. That’s my plan.”

“That’s your plan?” Diego’s voice was a little tired, disbelieving. “Okay, Colton. I don’t want to argue. And I’m not maimed.”

“Okay, baby.”

Diego’s slender body was thinner. Colton stroked a hard hand down over his rib cage, felt the winged bone of his hip.

“Are you frisking me? I don’t have any hidden weapons.”

“You sure about that?”

Diego let his hand slide down Colton’s chest, over his flat belly. Colton could feel his cock start to fill and rise, and Diego’s fingers slid through his curly hair, wrapped around the base of his cock.

“I’m happy to see this boy still got his groove on,” Diego said. “This little cowboy looks ready to ride. You were in a Stryker frame, huh? What was that like?”

“Fucking miserable. And I think the nurses were watching how many times I got hard. I couldn’t help it, it was like this spontaneous deal. But it was so fucking obvious, Diego. Plus a couple of times...”

“What?”

“A couple of times I had dreams about you.”

“What, like sex dreams?”

“Yeah. Your mouth on me, like velvet heat on my skin. A wet tongue, rough, licking me like a cat, then you’d hold my balls in your fingertips. Work your tongue into that little slit. And you’d suck me down when I came.”

“Maybe one of the nurses was giving you a blow job in your sleep.” Diego was trailing a line of kisses down Colton’s chest, stopped to suck a nipple between his lips. “You got that big sexy body, Colton, and you act like such a badass all the time, walk around like your dick’s twelve inches long, and there they got you tied up in a Stryker frame and you can’t move. That would be nearly irresistible to most of the nurses I know.”

Colton was torn between the rush of feeling lifting his cock, his skin flushed hot and sweet, and the desire to...

Diego raised his head. “What? What did you do?”

Colton raised both hands. “I did nothing! But this one crazy broad, she must have caught me at a weak moment. I mean, she didn’t say anything, she just went down on me and it was the best fucking head I ever got, ever, except you, baby. I thought my cock had blown off and was lodged in the fucking wall.”

Diego shook his head, laughing. “Are you kidding me? A girl?”

“I think it actually could be considered sexual assault, but this is one of those gray areas. I’m just grateful she got called away to a car wreck before she got out the latex gloves and lube, man.”

“Jesus, I can’t leave you alone for a minute.”

“So don’t leave me alone.”

Diego sighed, let his head settle on Colton’s belly. “Not now, Colton, okay? We’ll talk later about what we’re gonna do.”

And Colton could taste sorrow, could feel the sorrow coming through Diego’s lips, through his tongue, the tenderness, and sweetness, it was nice, but it wasn’t Diego, who liked rocking sweaty fun, but who, right now, tasted like he was kissing his lover good-bye.

“I won’t let you do it,” Colton said, leaning up on his elbows and looking down at Diego’s black hair spread across his ivory belly. A rough tongue, scrape of teeth down the shaft, and he arched up and thrust into Diego’s mouth. “I’ll never let you go. You belong to me.”

An hour later and Colton was drifting, asleep in a cool dark room like the ones he’d grown up in on his granddad’s ranch. It was only cool compared to the temperature outside in the sun, but eighty-five degrees on a fine, summer afternoon, in a room built of thick adobe walls and mud plaster, was as close to heaven as Colton planned to get.

He and Diego were stretched out on their backs, not touching, letting the drowsy ticking fan cool their skin, drifting into sleep. This minute, they were okay. They were together. He wanted some revenge, that was true. He was going to take some revenge, too, but not so he would feel better. That was a dead-end road. He would do it so Diego

would feel safe again. So everyone who had been hurt, or threatened, would feel safe. Not from every bully in the world, but from *this* bully.

Revenge would never make it easier to look into Diego's beautiful eye, dark as the night sky over the Sonoran desert, bright as the stars, to look into one eye and not the other. That would never be okay. But Colton would make sure he felt safe in the world again.

"Can you still be a heart surgeon with one eye, Diego?"

Diego was quiet, then he reached over and linked his small finger with Colton's. "I don't know. But I don't think so, Colton. My depth perception isn't right. It should get better, though. They say most of the time it gets better. Or good enough, anyway. Hey, I got a job offer if I stay down here." Colton could hear something in his voice, something fine and brittle he'd never heard from Diego before. "The women's clinic. They need a doctor to do abortions. Somebody's been hurting the girls."

They lay silently after that, stared at the Virgin on the wall, traced the fine network of cracks in ancient plaster on the ceiling above them. Late afternoon the clouds boiled up from the southwest, rumbled and spit a little rain into the dust of the compound. Colton drifted, resting for the first time in weeks, smelling the rain, rain water on a clay tile roof, then later, as the sky softened, he could smell beans cooking, a wood fire and meat on the grill, hear the soft voices of women speaking Spanish, and he felt like he was home again. "You wait down here for me, where it's safe, Diego. I'll take care of everything, and come get you when you can come home. Or I'll just stay with you now. That would be fine with me."

Diego curled against his side, sighed, and put a hand over Colton's chest, over his heart. But when the noises changed outside, and they could hear the clatter of an old pickup, men's voices raised, he was up and digging into the table next to the bed for a gun. Colton stared at him in astonishment. Just for a moment Diego looked like a stranger, his face thin and hard, the eye patch giving him a guarded, hostile look. *And he had a gun?*

Colton was off the bed and across the room in two steps. "Give me that. What do you think you're doing?"

"You might have forgotten that there's a warrant out for my arrest. For murder, Colton."

"I haven't forgotten. I'm lying right here, you're gonna pull out a gun and shoot the bad guys yourself? Don't you think I can take care of you? You don't trust me to keep you safe?"

Colton looked at Diego's eye patch, at the long, elegant hands that were never meant to hold a weapon.

"I'll tell you what I think. I think you're gonna do something stupid, take some goddamn revenge, and then you'll be on the run forever and I'll be alone. That's what I think. You're gonna leave me alone. I might as well get used to it now."

"Diego, what the hell are you talking about?"

The wooden door burst open, and he had Diego shoved behind him and the weapon out and leveled.

The light was behind him, so the man in the doorway appeared huge and dark. "Very tough, *muy* macho. It don't mean dick to me, boy."

Diego started to move, but Colton grabbed his sleeve, kept him still. The man

stepped into the room, hands open to show he didn't have a weapon.

"Uncle." Diego stepped away from Colton, came to the man and hugged him.

"Uncle, this is Lieutenant Colton Wheeler, Pima County Sheriff's Department. Colton, this is my great-uncle Manuel Del Rio. Captain Del Rio, retired Mexican Highway Patrol. Don't shoot him, okay?"

Manuel was old, seventy maybe, and huge, even bigger than Colton, with a white mustache and hard dark eyes and a slight limp when he walked, like his knee was sore.

"I've heard of you, Lieutenant Wheeler." He offered a hand, and Colton shook it. It was hard, the palm rough, and Colton thought the old man could have crushed his fingers to powder if he'd wanted to. "You play a reckless, dangerous game with your badge back and forth across the border. You break the rules so you can save all the boys and girls in trouble, huh?"

"It isn't a reckless game to me." Colton held his eyes, so the man knew he meant what he said.

"My nephew has told me what happened to you both. What is it that makes Americans hate so much? When they have so much?"

"I don't really care," Colton said. "Hating is a choice, but what he did to Diego, what he has probably done to other men, that's a choice that's going to cost him his life."

The old man nodded. "Yeah, boy, you're very tough, very strong. But you don't strike me as being very smart. And this situation is going to need somebody a little bit smarter than you; you don't want to end up in the desert living alone with a horse and a tent, with bounty hunters tracking your ass."

"That doesn't sound so bad." And the old man laughed and told him to stop acting like a fool. His granddad had done that, too, shut him up and straightened him out with just a few words. He grinned. "I don't need to be that smart. Diego will handle the thinking for both of us."

That got another bark of laughter, and Manuel studied his nephew, shaking his head. "Then you better think hard, Diego. Think why you want to go back. Mexico needs a good surgeon more than America. We can keep you safe here, you and your big dumb American, too."

Colton nodded. "Fine with me. Whatever you want to do. We can go to the ranch if you want, Diego. Or I'll sell it if you want. We can buy some land down here. Anything."

"You'd sell your granddad's ranch?" Manuel was stroking his chin, staring at Colton with narrowed eyes.

Colton felt a wallop of regret, something sharp and deep down in his belly. "Yes, of course." His voice sounded strangled, and the old man laughed at him.

"I knew your granddad, that tough old bastard. Sonora was in his blood. Is it in your blood, too?"

Colton nodded his head. "Yeah, it is. But Diego is more important. His career, I mean. His life."

Diego sighed. "Well, why don't you two big strong lawmen go sit outside, get some mescal and pass the bottle and spit in the dirt and figure everything out?"

Colton flipped the safety on the gun, stuck it down in his pocket. Manuel ran a hand over his chin. "Actually, that's a good idea. Come on, boy."

Colton followed the old man out the door, turned back to Diego. "You got any more guns hidden?"

Diego shook his head.

"Fine. You can take this one off me after I'm dead if you need a gun. But otherwise don't pick one up again."

Diego took a deep breath, hands on his hips as if trying to calm himself.

"That's right, Diego. Listen to him. You'll just shoot yourself and your mother will kill us all." Manuel waved across the compound, where the women were cooking. "Hey, bring us a bottle of tequila! What kind you like?"

"Gold," Colton said. "But anything tastes good when a man's thirsty."

Manuel nodded at him, eyes narrow. "That's right. And what you thirsty for, Lieutenant Wheeler? Revenge? Blood?"

Colton looked behind him at Diego leaning against the door frame of his room. "I'm thirsty for the life we were going to have. The good he's going to do in this world. I have to shoot that sick fucker in the head to get our life back, then that's just an extra little treat for me, isn't it?" He sighed, and Diego's dark face looked like a rock. "Shit. I'll probably just end up doing what he wants me to do. He's mad and scared and he doesn't trust me to fix this. Thinks my way isn't the right way."

"He knows you pretty good, then."

Diego's family compound was a sprawling, dusty cluster of ochre and terra-cotta colored buildings, space for four generations to eat and talk and drink tequila in the central courtyard. The whole was enclosed by a thick, mud brick wall as high as a man's head.

The walls of the small casitas were eighteen inches of mud brick, with deep window seats and cool, dark interiors, and they had lovely plumbed bathrooms because the women of the Del Rio clan were particular in the extreme.

Diego and the old man stayed close to Colton as the courtyard filled with relatives, perhaps with more strong and willing young men than normally spent a hot summer night under the Sonoran stars. Colton was starting to feel a low rumble of panic in his gut, because Diego was still not talking to him about what they needed to talk about. But there was no time. They were surrounded by his family, and it was clear Diego was their darling, their shining star. And it was also clear to Colton that everyone, though they were trying not to show it, blamed him for Diego's terrible injury. How could they not, when he was standing here with his big blond American face?

The old man didn't. He had been around criminals, and crime, for all his long years. He knew evil flared up out of the desert, throwing grit in the eye, filling the mouth with sand.

Diego didn't blame him either, but what he felt was worse, and Colton didn't know what to do about it except get him off alone somewhere, and love him, and after a long, quiet, peaceful time, his guilt over leaving, and his fear that it could happen again, his fear that Colton would leave him alone, would melt away in the wind. That's what he hoped, anyway. Because he could feel Diego's fear, feel how angry he was at being made to run.

"We ought to go down to the coast when everything settles down, do some fishing."

Diego looked at him, smiling. They were standing as close to each other as two men could in public, in Mexico.

"Yeah, that sounds good. Hit the beach for a couple of days. Where do you want to go, Colton?"



He shrugged. He didn't know much about Mexico's famous beach resorts. "Acapulco?"

Diego shook his head. "No, too many gringo tourists. Cabo, man. Someplace quiet and Mexican. Tortillas, tequila, sunshine, and sand. That's all we need."

Diego's mother walked over and shook Colton's hand. He had met her before he had ever known Diego. She was the Mexican counsel for his stretch of the border, a woman of fierce pride and beauty, a fighter who appreciated that gray areas existed, but didn't embrace them the way Colton did.

She was an attorney, believed in the law as a tool of social order and social justice. Colton wasn't really sure what this meant, but she had told him this as if it was her credo the first time they had met, and he turned it over in his mind sometimes, thinking about her.

She had a strong, elegant face, and her black hair was drawn back from a center part into a bun at the nape of her neck. She wore combs in it. Colton didn't know much about women's hair doodads, but he recognized ancient ivory.

They had met over the case of a young woman found in the desert with a newborn, some hours after the baby's birth. She claimed the baby had been born in America, and Colton had been inclined to believe her, even give her credit for a few miles, given the state of her bloody wet skirts, but Esmeralda Del Rio had seen something he had not. At the hospital the young woman proved to have not just given birth. The Border Patrol never found the real mother's body.

But after that first meeting, they had seen each other occasionally in the course of their work, and she had assumed the dignified, carefully instructive attitude of a stern and patient godmother when she was around him.

He had started to notice the combs. She didn't wear much other jewelry, but she always had these beautiful combs securing her bun. The carved ivory ones were very old, Spanish, Diego told him, and she had some with pearls and some with different stones and jewels—heavy silver, mostly. Diego told him she had always collected vintage hair combs, and that he thought his mother was unique because she actually used the beautiful old combs in her hair, didn't collect them and then lock them away in a vault.

When they had met in a different capacity, when he stood up and shook her hand as her precious only son's lover, Esmeralda couldn't hide the wince and the disappointment. Colton was pretty sure it wasn't him, personally. He thought she liked and respected him, as far as that went, but when Esmeralda was raising Diego and thought about sitting across the dining table from her daughter-in-law, she never pictured a six-foot tall blond gringo cop. Even when she understood that Diego was gay, Colton suspected that Esmeralda dreamed of someone else for Diego, someone cultured, an artist or musician of good family, someone handsome and elegant and well-connected and rich.

She had a character with a core of steel. Colton recognized it, because he had one himself. He never said as much to Diego, but he secretly suspected she would have preferred all the boys around her to be gentle and kind and loving, like Diego, so she could take care of them, and keep the harsh world at bay.

Colton could see that it took a great effort of will for her to meet his eyes, to shake his hand civilly. He felt his heart drop to his toes. "Esmeralda. I'm sorry."

She sighed, took her hand away. What a stupid thing to say. But what could he say? I'll make it right? It could never be right. "I will do whatever I can do, Esmeralda, I

promise...”

“Colton, I’ll be in touch with you, okay? Later, next week. Just let me handle this. Don’t do anything, don’t let your men start to investigate, and just let me take care of this. You are recovered from your injury?” Her question was polite, nothing more.

“No, he isn’t,” Diego said. “The concussion on top of the spinal fracture, that’s very bad, very dangerous. He still needs...”

“It doesn’t matter,” Colton said, and he could see Esmeralda agreed with him, since he was standing there on two legs, looking at her with two good eyes.

She rubbed across her forehead, and Diego leaned forward and kissed her cheek. One of Diego’s young girl cousins brought them a couple of plates of food, and Diego pulled Colton away from the group. They sat down on a heavy carved wooden bench against the compound wall, balanced plates on their laps—strips of *cabrito* from the grill, tortillas cooked over a wood fire, pintos, and *pico de gallo*. Diego asked his cousin to grab them a couple of sodas, and she did, casting her big dark eyes over Colton and Diego, both looking so much like the romantic heroes of fairy tales, she wasn’t sure who to fall in love with first.

“No more tequila,” Diego said, rolling the *cabrito* inside his tortilla. “Didn’t the doctors tell you?”

“They might have. I thought I better come check with you. You want to kiss my scar, make it better?” Diego ignored this. Colton scooped up a spoonful of beans. “I brought you some cash, some money. I was worried you were stuck somewhere, you know, without...”

Colton looked around the courtyard. He was thinking like an American, like money meant safety. But Diego knew something he didn’t know. Safety was family, people around who you could depend on, people you could trust.

Diego studied his face. “Thanks, Colton. Yeah, I could use some cash.”

“You have your other papers? You need me to get anything?”

Diego shook his head. “I brought them, but I can hardly use them, can I? I’d be arrested at the border. I think I’m safe down here.”

“I’ll come back, then. Once I take care of ... business.”

“Colton, why are you being so stubborn? You can’t take care of this business. You shoot him, you end up on death row? That’s not a good outcome. And he has plenty of clout, plenty of friends. Plenty of people who might not like that he’s gonna get caught, but understand what he’s doing.”

“Understand what he’s doing? He’s a freak. American’s aren’t like that. And I’m not gonna end up on death row. There are ways. This is *my* business, Diego, and I’m good at it. Why don’t you trust me to take care of us? I know what I’m doing.”

“Your gray areas. I don’t think so, Colton. I think it’s too risky. I don’t want you to take the chance. I’m asking you to leave it alone, play by the rules and let Mom do her thing.”

*Leave it alone? When the stars fall out of the night sky, lover.* This was the one thing Diego could ask of him that he couldn’t do. If he was in a coma, maybe, he’d let it go. Or dead.

An aunt came this time, gave Colton another tortilla and a pile of grilled *cabrito*. After she left, Colton rolled the meat up with some *pico de gallo* and took a big bite. “They all gonna come over here and get a look at me?”

“Probably,” Diego said, grinning a bit. “They don’t believe you speak Spanish, and they want to check out your manners. You’re already a big strong boy, a good eater. You know how to get in good with the cooks.”

“Your mom’s mad at me.”

“Yeah. She’s mad at the world right now. She has some ideas. Things to do.”

Colton raised his eyebrows. “Legal things, you mean? She’s going to seek legal redress?”

Diego shrugged. “I haven’t been ... keeping up with what she had planned. But that would be my guess. She’s an attorney, and she has contacts. She believes in the system.”

“What’s your great-uncle Manuel say?”

Diego gave him a bitter smile. “He’s like you. He thinks justice is best served with lead, out of the barrel of a gun.”

“Justice? Maybe not. But ... balance. Deed for deed.”

The headache started creeping up the back of Colton’s skull, a line of muscle cramps moving down into his shoulders. Diego looked at him carefully and took his plate. “You need to be more careful, Colton. Don’t let yourself get dehydrated. Don’t push yourself so much. Who are you trying to impress?”

Colton just grinned at him.

“Go on back to the room. I’ll be there. I just need to talk to some people.”

## Chapter Four

Colton got undressed, stood under the cool shower for a long time, hoping Diego would join him. But he didn't come. Finally he dried off, slid naked between the sheets. His head felt hollow, his neck weak somehow, weaker than it needed to be. Maybe from now on, every time he felt afraid, he'd feel it like weakness in his neck. He drifted into sleep, was tangled up and lost in some sad dream when Diego kissed him sweetly on the mouth, slid into bed with him and touched his belly with gentle fingers.

He rolled over. Diego was still wearing the eye patch, black hair falling over his forehead, his skin the rich color of café au lait. "Don't you need to take it off?"

Diego shook his head. "Not yet."

They looked at each other for a long moment, then Diego rolled onto his back with a long sigh.

"You don't have to go, baby." Colton wasn't a genius, but even a thick-headed cop with dust in his boots could understand that Diego was leaving, he was getting ready to run again. This wasn't Diego's world. The rough desert, Sonora, the outlaw way, that was Colton's world. Somebody torched his life? He'd burn down the fucking world.

But that wasn't Diego's way. Intellectual, brilliant, beautiful, with a powerful family behind him? Diego wasn't going to hang around a dusty border town, waiting for some shit-heel bounty hunter to put him in handcuffs and drag him off to jail. It was unthinkable. But there was more.

"Diego, listen to me. I'm afraid, too."

Diego sat up and pushed the hair back from his face, sighing. "No, you're not."

"Okay, I'm not. But I'm afraid of one thing. That when I wake up in the morning, you'll be gone. And I won't be able to find you, and I won't know if you're..."

"Colton, stop it. I've got to go see a surgeon in Mexico City about my eye. That's all. And I'm too close to the border." He spit the words out. "And I'm too close to the fucking sheriff of Pima County."

Colton felt helplessness creeping up on him like the tide, could almost taste cold, salty water lapping at his mouth. "I'm afraid for you to go. I won't be looking out for you. I won't be with you. Anything could happen."

"Just leave it."

He started to speak, and Diego put a hand over his mouth. "I said leave it."

*Fuck!* Colton bit down on one of Diego's fingers. "So what do you want me to do? Pick up your mail? Yeah, go ahead. Give me a dirty look, tough guy."

Diego grinned, clearly against his will, but it didn't last. "Colton, there is something I want you to do for me. But I already asked you. To let it go. To use the system, do this the right way. Not your way, your gray areas. To not do anything that will make things worse, land you in prison, or dead. Because then I'll be alone, and I'll ... never feel safe again. *Ever.* Colton, please."

Colton felt his face stiffen with disbelief. "Diego..."

"Don't say anything. I can hear it already: 'No fucking way.' That's not your way. That's not the cowboy way."

They stared at the ceiling for a bit. Diego wouldn't stay, and trust him to take care of

them. He reached down between them, took Diego's hand in his. "I'll never let you go. I don't know what the fuck you're thinking. This has got your head really screwed up, baby."

Diego rolled over, pressed himself against Colton's big body. "Uh-huh. You remember the first night we met? God, my cock was like stainless steel. You were so hot, Colton. So fucking arrogant. You kissed me like you'd been waiting your whole life to kiss me, like you'd been saving it up. You still kiss me like that."

"It's the only way I know to tell you..." And he tugged Diego closer, open mouths and hungry tongues, tender and furious and full of sorrow, telling each other good-bye. Because Colton knew when he woke up in the morning, he'd be alone, and Diego would be gone.

\* \* \* \*

Colton stayed in bed until the morning cool had almost burned off, his head on Diego's pillow. When he couldn't stand the quiet another minute, he got up and pulled on yesterday's jeans, threw his dirty underwear in the trash, and walked outside to the courtyard. The old man was there, sitting in the shade, along with one grumpy old woman with thick glasses who was cooking at the outdoor stove and Ramon, who gave Colton a sour look and pointedly looked away.

Manuel tilted the ancient straw Stetson back on his head and waved his coffee cup at Colton. "All the women and ladyboys have gone back to Mexico City. That just leaves the dumb, ugly boys and the old men." The woman cooking glared at him from across the top of a frying pan full of chorizo.

Colton scratched his bare stomach. "You sound like my granddad." He went over to the coffee pot and poured himself a cup.

"I knew your granddad a long time. I met you before, too, but you don't remember it. When you was just a skinny, dirty little runt running wild with all the other little Mexican boys. It was that paint, remember? That little colt?"

Colton thought back. It was the year he was seven, maybe eight, that he'd found a newborn colt out in the desert, the mother dead from a lightning strike. He'd hid the colt in an old stone ruin, and soon every boy within ten miles knew about the colt and was taking turns feeding it. Nothing stays secret in Sonora, though, and it wasn't long before men started showing up to his granddad's place, trying to put a claim on the mother.

Colton's granddad sent them packing, but the most persistent, a known horse thief and drifter from Sasabe, waited until the old man had gone into town for a bottle of tequila and some company to share it with. When he broke into the ruins to steal the horse, twelve boys armed with shotguns were waiting for him. Colton lifted an old Smith and Wesson horse pistol nearly big as he was and shot the man. He didn't hit anything, but the kick threw him down in the dirt and the man pulled out a knife and the rest of the boys stepped up and raised their shotguns. The horse thief ran.

Colton remembered now the tall, handsome Mexican policeman who had come out the next day, talked to his granddad and admired his colt. He talked to all the boys about shooting horse thieves. He said next time they should capture the thief and tie him up with strong ropes and deliver him to the Mexican police. They had spent years after that practicing, in case the horse thief ever came back. The little colt wasn't anything special as horses went, just a scrubby paint, but Colton had felt the fierce burn and sting of love

for the first time, with his face buried in that coarse mane.

“That was you?”

The old man nodded, handed Colton his empty cup. When Colton brought it back full, he sat down next to him, and the shade felt like bliss on his eyes. “Why don’t you come back with me? Stay out at the ranch.”

Manuel looked at him for a long time. “How come?”

“Place don’t seem right without an old man roaming around. Besides, part of that ranch is in Mexico. And you got jurisdiction in Mexico, even if you’re retired.”

Manuel leaned back, hat tipped over his eyes. “You gonna tie him up, haul him into Mexico and turn him over? I don’t know if that’ll work, Colton.”

“Diego wants me to do it legal. Jesus, what a fucking mess that’ll be. I got some work to do first. Come stay with me. I can always hold you for ransom, make Diego come back.”

“It’ll be like ‘The Ransom of Red Chief.’” “They were both pleased with the deal, stared off in different directions so they wouldn’t catch each other’s eyes and start grinning.

Breakfast was a huge pile of potatoes and chorizo, cooked with peppers and onions, grilled until it was nearly black. Colton tried to talk the old woman into coming with them, but she said she was too afraid of America, after what had happened to Diego.

He climbed into Manuel’s beat-up Silverado and they made their leisurely way across Sonora to the border. There was a large detachment of the PFP on the Mexican side of the border, cops in fatigues carrying automatic weapons. “Manuel, were you in the Policia Federal Preventiva?”

“No, I retired a couple of years before they merged the services. I was Highway Patrol. This land,” he spread a heavy, gnarled hand out to indicate the desert out the truck window, “this was all my territory, from here across to Nogales. There’re a couple of other ranches besides your granddad’s that straddle the border.”

“You think things have changed down here?”

“Maybe. More people coming across, but there’re more people everywhere. The desert, it’s too fragile for so much foot traffic. Lots of drugs, all moving north. The North, it’s like a hungry dragon, eating all the drugs, eating all the children...”

Colton stared out the window. He understood why the old man thought that way, but he felt a pang of hurt pride. His country, he should be so proud of it. But Manuel was right—greed, hunger, hate—that’s what he could see, if he were looking at things truthfully. “Everything seems so turned around. Like the things I thought I could believe in, every one of them is turning out to be wrong. Am I really that fucking naive? I think the only thing I have to count on, to really believe in, is me and Diego. I can’t doubt that. But the rest of the world seems like it ... can’t be trusted.”

Manuel gave him a sharp glance, but didn’t say anything else.

Colton was afraid they were going to be hassled at the Lukeville Border Crossing. A young Anglo man in an old Mexican truck, that would smell like a drug smuggler to him, if he was standing watch in his uniform. But the customs and immigration officers were respectful to Manuel and gave the truck a thorough search.

“Those are good boys,” Manuel said, as he put the truck in gear and rolled out of Gringo Pass, heading to Ajo.

Colton grinned at him. “Half those boys were girls! Didn’t you notice?”

Manuel nodded, tipped his hat. "Yes, I did. I see a lot more women in uniform, down in the hard places. It's a good idea. Everybody acts a little nicer, you got a woman watching." Manuel turned and looked at him. "Except maybe you. So what's your plan?"

"There must be others. I'm going to try and find the others. We get legal affidavits, depositions, I can have him arrested. At least removed from office. But that's gonna be slow. I was thinking I could come out. In big, bold rainbow colors. Make a big show of being gay, you know, proud and out. Maybe he'd attack me. I could get it on camera." He sighed. "Or I could just shoot the fucker in the head, problem solved, leave him out in the wastelands and let the birds pick his bones. That's my favorite solution, quick and easy, but Diego doesn't... Esmeralda gave me a copy of Diego's deposition. I'll go to the assistant DA with it. Swear I saw him there, too. Or heard him. With two of us, maybe they'll believe it."

Manuel sucked on his teeth, then reached for a toothpick from the ashtray. "You saw him there?"

Colton shook his head. "All I remember is hearing Diego screaming."

"You'd lie, boy? Like that, in a legal way?"

Colton took a toothpick, too, and wondered if they could stop in Ajo so he could get a toothbrush. "I believe Diego, no question. I've never known the sheriff to cross the line, not like this, but I stay away from him, you know? We've never liked each other much, so we just keep our distance. But I've known that mean bastard a long time, and I believe he would cut out Diego's eye. To punish him for being Mexican. Or gay. Or whatever the fuck he wants to hate someone for. So I don't really have any problem with lying. Or I thought I didn't. Because it wouldn't really feel like a lie." Colton stared out the window, the cactus in Organ Pipe looking almost lush after the Mexican border country, acre after acre of fuzzy cholla, tumbled sandstone, saguaro cactus. "But actually it does seem like a lie and I find myself strangely reluctant."

Manuel grinned at him. "Goddamn, boy! You have to stop and think everything through like this? It's easier you just follow the fucking law!"

"You understand about the gray areas. I know you do."

"Yeah, I do. But here's what you don't understand, Colton. You talk about gray areas? I call them *special circumstances*. A special circumstance is a bunch of little boys with their granddaddies' guns, trying to shoot a horse thief. You save your special circumstances. One in a hundred. One in a thousand. Not every one. Not every time. The law is good enough, most of the time. And I think it better be good enough this time, too. Diego thinks you're strong enough to back away, let the law handle this." He sighed deeply. "I don't know. You've always been one to reach for your guns."

\* \* \* \*

The ranch looked like it always did, adobe block buildings needing some patch work, fences with the wire coming loose, dust and cactus and a tire swing in the big palo verde tree. Colton had to make his face tough and stomp off to look at fences to hide his usual reaction. Every time he came back to his land after being away, he wanted to drop to his knees and weep tears of gratitude and promise to never ever leave again.

Maria had died a couple of months after his granddad, but her niece, also Maria, had come to take her place, as if it had all been arranged between them. Colton always thought of her as Maria Goretti. His kindergarten nun had been Sister Maria Goretti, and

while his Maria wasn't a nun, she was pretty damn close. She had explained to him early on that she would be bringing people out to the ranch who needed help, young girls with babies, mostly, and that she was doing this for his sake, because it wasn't good for a ranch to be empty of people.

So over the years there had been a string of young, pregnant women, and some of them had stayed. Three little boys were chasing a loose chicken across the hard-packed dirt of the courtyard. A woman was yelling at them from the clothesline, and sheets were drying fast in the wind. The kitchen had a low roof and adobe walls, *ristras* of chilies and garlic hanging from nails in the adobe, and a big pot of pintos on the stove. There was a tiny, birdlike old woman sitting asleep in the rocking chair in the corner of the kitchen Colton had never seen before. She had been crocheting an afghan in bright colors that covered her lap, and the crochet hook had fallen to the floor. Colton picked it up and put it back in her lap, then stirred the pot of beans on the stove.

No beer in the fridge, so he got his bottle of gold tequila and a couple of glasses and joined Manuel in the shade on the bench under the palo verde tree. They drank, watched the boys run the chicken in hysterical circles, and eventually Maria Goretti bustled up to hug him, exclaim over his scar, to report she suspected he would come when he got out of the hospital and they had been waiting for him—where had he been? They had just this minute put clean sheets on his bed so he could rest. She must have spotted Manuel when they got out of the truck, because of course his casita was also ready.

"We're getting crowded, Colton," she said, striding across the courtyard. "Since Detective Chan brought that boy out here."

"Is Chan here? What boy?"

Maria was pleased to have this news. "Yes, he's here, and he's hasn't left the boy alone, Colton. Drugs. I think the boy has been in some trouble with drugs. That must be how he lost his eye."

\* \* \* \*

Chan was asleep in one of the casitas. Twin beds in a dark room, and a young boy with dyed blond hair, damp with sweat, asleep in the other. He had a scar down through his lid, and a missing eye in the socket. It was old, though, at least a year. The boy had jailyard tattoos and scabs on his skinny arms from shooting junk. And he was Mexican, despite the surfer hair. Colton ducked back out the door.

"Siesta, Colton." Manuel slung an arm over his shoulder. "Go lie down, give your bossy Maria time to get the girls cooking. I bet she's gonna have more than beans for supper, now *El Patron's* home."

"That's not me. Otherwise she wouldn't push me around."

"You don't worry about it. We get this fucking mess cleaned up, your ladyboy will come down here, take care of making sure the ranch is running like it should."

Colton look at him, tipped the Stetson back on his head. "Diego know you call him ladyboy?"

"Been calling him that since he was a kid. He used to want to be one of those ballet dancers, you know? He'd put on the little costume and dance around. His mother took him to see some ballet show at Christmas when he was little. When he was about the age you were, when you tried to shoot a horse thief for the first time."

"Last Christmas, we were gonna go into Phoenix and see *The Nutcracker*. I bet that's



what it was. He was so excited, had his tux pressed at the dry cleaners. I didn't even know he had a tux. I wasn't really looking forward to it, tell you the truth. So we had a double homicide, and I couldn't go. He stayed home, too. He never said anything. I was busy with the DBs, and he got busy at the hospital again."

"Guess you better try harder next Christmas, boy."

\* \* \* \*

The little plastic oscillating fan was new since the last time he had slept in his bed, but it felt like heaven in the hot room. He would have to thank Maria Goretti.

*Ladyboy.* Colton grinned to himself, imagining the pained look on Diego's face. Naturally, he loved and respected his great-uncle, but Diego was not a lady and he was not a boy and he did not like labels. He wasn't even a gay man, not to hear him tell it. He was a man and a doctor and those were the only labels he wanted. Fuck the world that wanted to stick a label on him. He defined himself. It only mattered to him, and was no one else's business. He had explained all of this carefully to Colton the second time they spent the night together, when Colton had asked him if he just did men, or if he did women, too.

There was quite a bit more, too, an entire theoretical model, but Colton had been distracted by watching Diego's hands, flying around like little birds as he made his point. Colton thought Diego was more like a panther than a man, one of those sleek and deadly black panthers from the jungles down south.

"Are you listening to me, Colton?"

He focused again on Diego's face. "Yeah."

"So what about you? What label do you embrace, my sexy friend?"

"I don't embrace dick," he said, reaching for Diego's slender body with rough hands. "That thing you said? Me, too. Fuckin' A."

And Diego had rolled his eyes and let Colton pull him over and drape him across his big body. His eyes were gentle, though, when he looked down into Colton's face. "Why don't you say what you really want to say?"

"Yeah, okay. I want you to sleep with me, nobody else. And I'm only gonna sleep with you. We'll see how it goes."

"Yes, we'll see how it goes," Diego agreed, and that was a done deal.

\* \* \* \*

The women must have been cooking all that hot afternoon, because when Colton woke, the table was being set, piles of homemade tortillas, roast chickens, a big bowl of fresh *pico de gallo*, the bright green tang of the cilantro and lime juice tickling Colton's nose when he held the bowl up to take a smell. The pot of pinto beans was simmering on the stove, with a big pot of rice, and there were twelve chairs set at the table.

Colton studied the chairs, and the women studied him in that way women do, brief glances from under dark lashes while they did their work. He was in the way, though, so he walked over to Manuel's casita. The old man was up from his nap, sitting in a straight back chair with his little plastic fan blowing on him. The bottle of tequila was on the dresser, and Colton rinsed out their glasses in the bathroom sink.

"We got twelve chairs at the dinner table," Colton announced.

Manuel grinned at him. “Last count, how many people you have living out here, *Patron?*”

“Four. It’s okay, I guess.” Manuel wasn’t moving. He’d put socks on, but Colton guessed his back was stiff from napping on a too soft mattress. “We’ll tell her you need a board or something if the bed’s too soft.”

Manuel waved this away. “I’m just getting too fucking old.”

Colton put the glasses down, knelt at his feet, and helped him tug the boots on. They were old, but the leather was like butter. Manuel must buff them every day, keep them clean and soft with the saddle soap. That was the old way. One pair of boots that fit good, and you took care of them and they lasted as long as your feet. His granddad took care of his boots this way. They wandered outside, sat in the shade next to a couple of citrus trees.

“Looks like you got you a couple of limes, maybe a grapefruit,” Manuel said, studying the leaves. There was a drip irrigation system running from the little building where the washing machine lived. “Gray water recycling,” Manuel said. “I guess with twelve living here, you got you enough washing going on to grow some limes! Where’ve the women got the garden?”

“Around back of the stables.”

They took their glasses, walked back there, and Colton could see that the garden was rich black dirt, in raised beds to protect it from the sere wind. The boys, free from their chicken-chasing duties, were hauling big flowerpots of water into the garden gate. They stopped when they saw him and Manuel, but the men ignored the boys, and after a minute they continued to the far fence, and watered the row of scraggly sunflowers growing there.

“You and Diego don’t need to worry about not having kids, I guess. There’s always plenty of little Mexican kids running around.”

Colton slugged back the rest of his tequila.

They cut through the stables. It was dark and cool and clean, with a big pile of sweet-smelling composted manure in the corner, probably destined for the garden. The stalls were fronted by wooden Dutch doors, their paint faded now. Each was a different primary color, sunshine yellow, cobalt blue, forest green, poppy red. He’d painted these doors when he was fourteen or fifteen, he couldn’t remember.

“We don’t have any horses,” he said, as if this fact had only now sunk into his head, standing in the empty stables.

“Horses are expensive these days. Most people don’t have the right land for hay, and it’s expensive to buy. Then you got saddles, tack, all that.”

“Yeah, I know. It just seems funny.” The boys peeked around the stable door, quiet as mice, to see what the men were doing.

“Everywhere you go, Colton, you’re gonna have a bunch of little boys following you around, watching you. You make sure you keep your gun in the holster, boy.”

The remembrance fell back on him with more weight that he could imagine—his uncle, the blood in the loft, Diego screaming. “I won’t shoot him out here,” he promised. “I don’t want his blood on my land.”

\* \* \* \*

The blond kid with one eye was a meth addict. Manuel was already shaking his head,

watching him. The kid reeled back out of the sunlight, slapping a hand over his one good eye. His pallid skin was scored with scratches. The meth addicts, they felt like they had bugs crawling under their skin. It felt good when they scratched until they tore through the skin, let the bugs out. Colton felt his heart sink a bit. This kid was a weak reed to base a case on.

Sanchez showed up and Colton introduced Chan and Sanchez to Captain Manuel Del Rio, retired.

"Boss, I think I got a line on another one. But the deposition we took from Pinky over there," he gestured with his chin, "the assistant DA isn't paying much attention. We need Dr. Del Rio's statement, and we need a third. I think three statements from three credible witnesses that the sheriff of Pima County is gouging the eyes out of Mexicans, then we can get him relieved."

Colton looked at them both. "I've got Diego's statement. You don't seem very surprised, either of you. Why is that?"

Chan shrugged. "Why don't we try to get him extradited to Mexico? If the Mexicans prefer charges against him, they could take him into custody to stand trial in Sonora. Go to prison down there."

"Any of the incidents take place in Sonora?"

Sanchez shrugged. "Not that we've found so far. But the vics, they were Mexican citizens."

Colton rubbed at his neck. He felt weak again, headachy, like he was coming down with something. Probably the nonexistent shocks in Manuel's old truck. "Let me call Esmeralda, ask her what she wants to do."

"I'll keep the boy here until Esmeralda can come take a deposition," Manuel said. "If I have to sit on his sorry ass. That way we have a set of Mexican documents. Just in case the Americans lose the paperwork." Pinky must have heard this, because he turned and gave Manuel a slitty-eyed look. "You two can go back to town with this hardheaded boy. He'll need somebody to watch his back."

Chan nodded. "Colton, the kid, Pinky. He told us it was a 'Pima County tattoo.' That's what they call it when the sheriff of Pima County takes your eye. They got a nickname for it, there must be plenty of other victims. We find a few more, go to that assistant DA, get your uncle removed pending an investigation. Slow but steady, Colton. That's the right way to get this job done. Don't lose your cool. I don't think he knows what we're doing, not yet."

"I left a note on your desk, boss. A list of supplies for the ranch. Barbed wire, new chain for the chain saw, bucket of paint, like that. Make him think you were coming down here for awhile. I turned in that sick leave paper, too, the one from the hospital. You got another month sick leave. Actually, boss, you look like you could use it."

Colton shrugged. "Just concussion or something. I'm all right." He waved the kid over. "You want to tell me what happened?"

"Not till I see some cash, man."

Chan slapped him gently upside the head. "You in some big rush to kill yourself, idiot?"

Colton reached for his wallet, pulled out a hundred bucks, handed it to Manuel. "Captain Del Rio will hold it for you till you give that deposition, okay?"

Pinky hissed a little between his teeth.

“Kid, you want to eat with us, you got to act right. We got little kids and women living here.”

“I’m not hungry. Look, I don’t really remember a lot of it. I was stoned, I just remember getting busted, the bright lights in my fucking eyes, then he just dug it out, man, didn’t say anything, had that big fucking hand around my throat.” They were all silent, staring out across the land, or down into the dust.

“Hey, cop.” Pinky’s voice was softer. “I know your aunt.”

Colton looked up. “You mean my uncle. Yeah, you said.”

His grin got wider. “No, I mean your aunt. She’s worn a path across the border, man. She comes down and gets her medications. That’s what old white women call their dope. *Medications*. Like they aren’t fucking addicts, just like the rest of us.”

\* \* \* \*

Maria Goretti had accumulated one ancient old woman and four young women, a teenaged boy who wanted to be a *vaquero*, three little boys who were all named Juan, and a new baby improbably named Tyra Shakira Garcia. These were the people who came and went through dinner, plus a couple of Humane Borders workers who were just visiting for the day to fill up the water tanks and had been invited to supper. The kids seemed to be eating in the kitchen. Colton couldn’t keep track. His head was killing him and he felt like someone had whacked him in the back of the head with a big stick. Again.

Aunt Margaret? That was so fucking ridiculous. Aunt Margaret wore little cardigan sweaters. Maybe she was a little shaky in her nerves, scatterbrained, but the world of illegal drugs, that wasn’t her world. It had nothing to do with her. She did take a lot of medications, and a small voice in the back of his head reminded him that he had introduced her to a doctor. To Diego.

After dinner he headed back into town with Sanchez and Chan.

“The unit’s okay,” Sanchez said. “One of the uniforms, that tall redheaded kid—he’s fallen like a stone for his partner. He’s walking around like a fucking zombie.”

“Lydia?” Lydia was the most kick-ass uniform in the squad. It was a mistake to put Lydia with a male partner, ever. She would do some true-blue hero shit, take down a dirtbag, and next thing you knew she’s got somebody making moon eyes and looking for ways to impress her. “What’s that kid’s name? Timmy?”

“Jimmy. She calls him Jimmy Neutron, after some cartoon character her kid watches. But she said don’t move him. She’s got to get him toughened up a little bit, get some street grime rubbed on his shiny new cop face.”

“Some dumb fucker is going to try and take Lydia down, get him in trouble.” It was an old trick on a new cop, do something shitty to the female partner, let the rookie get carried away defending her and you have the first demerit on the permanent record for punching some scumbag in the face.

“I’ll be looking forward to how that plays out,” Colton said absently, staring out the window as they left the ranch behind. He was used to the tug, a cold ball of sorrow in his stomach whenever he had to leave. He’d felt it the first time when his uncle and Aunt Margaret had come to get him after his granddad died, made him come away with them. He’d always blamed his uncle for how utterly shitty he’d felt. That day he’d taken up his granddad’s attitude toward the man, and now, he realized with a jolt, he wouldn’t have to feel guilty about hating the sorry son of a bitch any more.

“Sanchez, why do you want me to stay home on sick leave?”

Sanchez and Chan looked at each other. Chan scratched his chin. “Colton, you can’t act for shit. You got a million feelings, and any fucking body can read them in your face. I don’t think you can look at that son of a bitch without pulling your pistol out and blowing his head off. So I think you better stay home and do the paperwork, go talk to that assistant DA, the pretty one with the blue eyes, and try to convince her to convince a judge to put him in jail without bail.”

“Yeah, right, like that’s gonna happen in this lifetime. There’s probably a ton of paperwork. The budgets are due, and quarterly evals on the rookies. I’ll work from Diego’s loft.”

“Colton, I think you better come up with a backup plan, too. If he tries to get rid of you.”

“Get rid of me? He already broke my fucking neck.”

“That didn’t hurt your credibility, though. You still got a badge. You still got people who’ll listen when you talk. He thinks you know anything, if he thinks you’ve talked to the good doctor, he’ll set you up like he set up Dr. Del Rio, with a bag of glass and a dead fancy boy chained to a post. Then you won’t be able to do anything but run. Not back to the ranch, either, Colton. That’s the first place he’d look.”

“All right, I get it.” Maybe a counterplan was a good idea. But it was too hard to think right now, when the inside of his head had turned into a bass drum, a rhythmic thrum of misery pounding against his eye. He pressed in hard over the point where the headache was centered, over the left eye. He could feel how soft and tender the eyeball was under his fingers. It wouldn’t take any pressure at all to pop it out, squeeze it until it was mush. A sudden wave of nausea, and he had to choke down the acid burning in the back of his throat. “Drop me off at the loft, okay?”

Sanchez was looking at him from the front seat. “Sure, boss. I’ll bring you some work by in the morning.”

Colton nodded, then closed his eyes against the sudden wave of pain this brought on. Jesus, it scared him. All he’d done was nod his head. What if these headaches didn’t go away, or even got worse? He’d be fucking disabled. He could barely see. He couldn’t drive like this, couldn’t work.

At the loft Colton stumbled out of the backseat without a word, made it onto the elevator and up to Diego’s door and then finally he was inside, safe, in the cool darkness, home. Their home. The headache receded a step, and he went into the kitchen and folded some ice cubes into a paper towel. With this makeshift ice pack pressed to his eye, he turned on his laptop and found an e-mail from DrDangerous77.

*How’s your head? Come chat with me.*

*My head is fucking miserable, Dr. D. I nearly puked in the elevator.* He stopped and deleted this last bit. *I need you to come rub my neck.*

*Yeah, I could do that without too much trouble.*

*And where is my lover tonight? Lonely for me, I hope. And alone.*

*No, Colton. I’ve got some Big Dog’s prick in my mouth, and I’m typing blind. Where are you?*

*Our place. I got it all cleaned up so you can come home. Hey, if I get to vote, I like the eye patch. Makes you look hot. You know I love pirates.*

*Go to your email, Colton. I’ll send you a picture.*

A few minutes later, Colton opened the attachment, felt his heart squeeze into a painful knot. It was a quick sketch in black magic marker, like a caricature. Diego as Pirate Lord, and whoever drew him with his eye patch and his hair flying across his face and his lips parted, ready to be kissed, was so fucking in love with him that Colton felt like ripping the computer apart with his bare hands.

His hands were shaking on the keyboard when he went back to the chat room. *Who the fuck drew this picture? You're only supposed to look at me like that. Am I going to have to come down there and beat the shit out of some artist? Who is he? An old boyfriend, right?*

No reply for a moment, and Colton was afraid that Diego had somehow read his mind, knew he was picturing pulling out his revolver and shooting that fucker in the head and leaving his body in the desert for the coyotes to eat.

*Colton, try not to be such a fool. An old lover, yes. My first lover, in fact, but he understands about you. About me and you.*

Oh, he does? That makes one of them. Colton stared at the screen in disbelief. Could Diego really be that fucking stupid? *Diego, listen.* What could he say? No matter what he said, he'd end up sounding like a... *Baby, I'll follow you into the fires of hell. I know how that sounds, but I'll bring us both back, too. I promise. I promise. Trust me, Diego. I'll do anything to make this right. To get our life back. Trust me. I'll figure it all out. And wait for me.*

*You're fearless, Colton. That scares me sometimes, because I think you look at me and see a coward. But I actually think I'm normal, and you're the one with super-powers. Don't be jealous. It's only flirting. It makes me feel better.*

Right. Of course Diego wasn't that stupid.

\* \* \* \*

Colton woke up with the echo of the headache behind his eye, like a threat. He'd dreamed about Diego last night, memory flooding back in the night like waters rising behind a dam. Man, he was tired.

He'd woken up this morning with salty water on his face. He couldn't seem to control anything these days, not his dreams, not his head, not his lover. How long had it been since Diego had split? He was just getting worse.

Questions without answers spilled through his mind until he detoured from the shower and tipped the bottle of tequila up to his mouth. Just a bite, a mouthful, to ease the noise in his head. Coffee was probably a better idea, but no one was fucking here to see it, so who cared? He didn't want to think anymore. He was too tired to make sense of anything, and all he really wanted to do was feel, to let his mind sink into remembering. One more, maybe, one more dream, and he'd put it away again and get back to work.

A rich, golden burn in his throat, and Colton stepped into the shower, let the tepid water slide over his skin.

Diego loved to fuck around in the shower. What was it with that guy and water and soap? A year together, and Colton had started to forget how to wash his own balls. Diego just couldn't keep his hands to himself, and Colton loved to look down at his ivory skin, see Diego's dark hands moving over him, see the lean body pressed up against his own, water sluicing over their skin.

*I grew up in the desert.* Diego's voice was liquid honey in his memory. *That's why I*

*love the shower, Colton.* His cock lurched at the memory, began to fill. He reached down and wrapped his fingers around his cock, stroked his foreskin back. He was always wet, with a thick, sticky fluid under the skin that Diego said was the beautiful reason men weren't supposed to be circumcised.

*"A quick hand job, Colton. I got to be in surgery in twenty minutes. That's enough time for you, boy. You're on a hair trigger. Don't worry,"* he'd said, reaching between Colton's legs with a wink, long fingers busy, *"it's just another hernia repair. I never get enough. I'm the hernia king of Tucson."*

Colton stuck his head under the shower, rinsed the sweat from his hair. He slid the foreskin back again, the head engorged and purple, glistening with that thick liquid.

"Oh, fuck the hand job," Diego had said, shoving him back against the exam table and reaching behind him to lock the door. "On the table, quick. We've got to hurry." He'd shoved Colton back on the table, pushed his knees up and apart. "Just lie back and relax." He was laughing. "Hey, stick your feet in the stirrups like the ladies do."

"No fucking way." But somehow Colton had his feet in the stirrups, and Diego was guiding his knees apart.

"Oh, yeah, that's right. Spread those legs. I'll be gentle, ma'am. I've got small hands." He reached for Colton's balls, rolled them between his fingers, and hefted his cock in the other hand. "Ma'am, your baby's growing very nicely."

Colton laughed and swiped at his head, and Diego lowered his mouth and sucked Colton's cock deep in his throat. He gave a hard suck on the shaft, let the cock slide out until the head was between his teeth.

"That's good, Colton, you're so sticky and sweet, man. I love that fruit, can't get enough. Come on, now. Hurry, I've got to go." And he lowered his mouth, sucked hard on the head, his tongue worrying the slit and Colton knew he was pumping out the juice, he always did. Then Diego surprised him, like he always did, with tenderness. He reached for Colton's hand, slid their fingers together, so they were holding hands when the passion twisted and caught, came boiling up and emptied his balls.

"Gotta go, baby." He stepped back, studied Colton lying on the exam table, feet in the stirrups and knees splayed out. "We need one of these at home." He slapped Colton on the hip. "Later," and he left him there, sprawled out and limp as a jellyfish.

Home. *Not now*, he thought, his big hand working his cock, and it wasn't as good as Diego's hand, but it would do.

## Chapter Five

Colton phoned Sanchez, asked him to meet him down at the deli on the corner. He was eating an onion bagel with smoked salmon and capers, and hoping no one could smell tequila on his breath at nine o'clock in the morning. He was gonna have to toughen up a bit. He couldn't be holding his head and moaning, jacking off in the shower when Diego needed him.

He read through Diego's deposition. He'd come home, and the door of the loft was open a bit. He pushed the door open, saw the boy chained to the post, covered in blood. Tried to check a pulse, found the boy's throat cut. Reached for the table with the phone to call 911. Two men came through the door after him. They threw a towel over his face, then each one grabbed him by an arm and dragged him into his bedroom. It was the sheriff of Pima County who pulled the towel off, wrapped a big hand around his throat, squeezed until he started to black out. Then he took his knife out.

"You made a mistake getting near my family." That was all Jeremiah Wheeler had said before he jammed the point of the knife into Diego's eye.

Colton could feel his mind wanting to shut down, collapse in on itself like a house of cards. *Okay, stop. Think.*

Sanchez came in the door of the deli with Lieutenant Miriam Boxlighter. She was the only female lieutenant in the department, and Colton thought she had never liked him much because he was a man. She was in charge of sex crimes and domestic violence. Cops who worked those fields too long started looking at all men like they were scum-sucking dogs. She was a black-and-white, by-the-book-cop too, but she understood the gray areas, and had come to him a few times for help when she didn't want to ask her own unit to do something that was a little iffy. Still, there was a reserve in her manner he had never really tried to get around.

Sanchez handed him a file folder and pulled up a chair. "Budgets, requests for new equipment, the rookie evals with statements from the trainers." Colton nodded. And whatever else was in the folder, it was for later. From the look Sanchez gave him, he wasn't sure, either, why Lieutenant Boxlighter had joined this party. She took a seat at the table, dumped a packet of Splenda into her steaming cup of chai tea.

"Colton, you look well. I just heard you were released from the hospital."

He nodded. "Yeah, I'm good, Miriam. Not really up to much yet, but I can probably do some paperwork before I have to go lie down and take my nap."

She raised an eyebrow at this, and Colton thought she might be hiding a grin. "Really? A nap?" She put her tea down, and pulled out a tiny tape recorder, and flipped open a memo book. She pushed the button without saying anything.

"Lieutenant Colton Wheeler, did you know that your statement has disappeared regarding the murder of Jesus Martinez, and your own assault?"

"No, I didn't."

"Have you seen the murder book, Lieutenant, or any of its contents?"

"No." His hand was sitting on top of a thick folder of papers, and he willed himself not to look down at it. Sanchez was staring off into space, a picture of a cop up to something.



"I can confirm that you have not signed out any materials pertinent to this investigation as of this morning. I need to take your statement again."

They went through it carefully, finding Marti, his throat already cut, hearing Diego screaming, *Colton, no!* Then just Diego screaming.

She leaned back in her chair, and Colton could see that something he had said mattered to her. She punched the off button on the recorder. "I need to remind you that you and your unit cannot be involved in this investigation." *Yeah, right. In whose lifetime?* "Since hate crimes are federal crimes, I have been asked to assist a federal task force investigating these allegations."

Colton felt his mouth drop open. "A federal task force? You're fucking kidding me." He looked at Sanchez. "Besides Diego, the rest of the victims are young Mexican meth-heads, as far as we can figure. Why is the assistant DA paying attention, getting the feds involved?"

"Maybe it's because the president of Mexico called the president of the United States this morning. He requested an immediate investigation into the maiming of a young Mexican doctor by the Pima County sheriff. A young doctor who just happens to be the nephew of the attorney general of Mexico."

Colton, who had been taking a sip of his coffee, nearly spit it across the table. "He's *what?*"

"The FBI jumped on this puppy with both hands. They're just dying to take the new hate legislation for a spin. And they are always happy to find somebody else who is screwing up more than they are."

"Is the warrant vacated? His arrest warrant?"

"Not yet, but soon," she promised. "This would be a good time to stand down, Colton. Whatever you've got your unit doing, pull them off. Don't screw things up."

He scribbled his e-mail on a napkin and handed it over. "What I care about is that he can come home safely. That's my main concern. I'm not going to fuck up anybody's case. Can you let me know right away on the personal e-mail?"

She held up the napkin, and carefully copied the info into her memo book. "You need to get some business cards, Lieutenant Wheeler. I feel like Deep Throat."

Sanchez stared after her when she shouldered her tidy briefcase and left the deli. "What'd you say that put that cop in such a good mood?"

"Let's find out," Colton said, opening the file folder. He dug under the pile of paperwork, requisitions, and written evals, and pulled out the statements given by the first two cops on the scene, Robbins and Gilbert. They claimed they had been watching the loft, waiting for Dr. Del Rio to get home from the hospital to question him about Marti's allegations of kidnapping and sexual abuse. *How did they know about the allegations?*

"Well, look at this," Colton said, scrolling down the page. "Those two geniuses claim his throat was cut when they got there, but he managed to croak out 'Diego did it.' And that I was already laid out on the floor, my neck broken. Jesus, Sanchez. These two are dumb as rocks."

Sanchez leaned forward, read where Colton was pointing. "The autopsy report is in there." He pulled it out, scanned through a couple of pages. "Must have been a miracle. But in the absence of a miracle, I believe the autopsy showed that the kid couldn't talk once his throat was cut. Which one of them broke your neck, Colton?"

"I don't even give a shit. They'll turn the sheriff over in a New York minute to cut a

deal and try to save their sorry asses.”

“You going back to the loft? I’m going into the office, listen in on the radio to the *federales* when they swoop into town and take the sheriff into custody. You don’t do anything stupid, boss.”

“Yeah, yeah. I hear that a million times a day. Hey, what’s with that woman? Do you get the feeling she doesn’t like me?”

Sanchez shook his head. “It’s probably Lydia. You know, she wants to keep things professional, since you’re Lydia’s boss.”

“Lydia? What the fuck are we talking about?”

“You know, they’re girlfriends. Boyfriends, whatever you call it.”

“What, you mean partners? Holy fucking shit. Lieutenant Boxlighter must have balls of steel, she lives with Lydia. Maybe we’ll get lucky, and she can be the next sheriff.”

\* \* \* \*

Colton had one little stop to make before he went back to the loft like a good boy, did his budgets and evals and let the big federal dicks who did not have broken necks sweat those stupid fucks until they gave up the sheriff. Things were bound to get ugly very quickly, and Colton thought he had better go see Aunt Margaret. Something she had said at the hospital, when she was having her meltdown, about it all being her fault. Pinky saying his piece about the old white ladies and their medications—that had reminded him about what she’d said. How exactly was Aunt Margaret mixed up in all this? It seemed ludicrous, but it was a loose thread, and he would have to pull it.

Colton pulled his pickup up to the curb, rang the doorbell on their small cream and brown ranch. No flowers in the flowerbeds, and the shrubs in front were looking dried out and dusty.

Aunt Margaret answered the door, her short, curly helmet of old lady hair slightly flattened on one side, the marks of the pillowcase on her cheek. “Did I wake you up, Aunt Margaret?” Colton bent and kissed her cheek, smelled her Shalimar powder.

“How are you, Colton? I can’t hardly believe you’re up and walking around! When I saw you in the hospital, strapped down in that horrible contraption...” Her hands were fluttering around, and he could see the pulse beating in her throat, thready and quick as a bird’s.

“Let’s sit down, Aunt Margaret,” he said, leading her to the couch. “I just want to talk to you for a minute before Uncle comes home for lunch. Is he coming for lunch?”

“I don’t think so, Colton, but I don’t really know, darling.”

“Aunt Margaret, you remember my friend? Dr. Del Rio? We went out for lunch for your birthday, do you remember?”

Aunt Margaret nodded, her blue eyes filling with tears. “He was so lovely, Colton. So gentle and understanding. I knew he would understand if I explained it all to him. And now look what’s happened to him!”

Colton’s stomach was twisting itself into a knot. He kept his voice soft. “Explained what, Aunt Margaret?”

“About my nerves! These doctors, they just want to take my medicine away, they don’t understand how bad my nerves get! It didn’t used to be that way, Colton.” She leaned forward, tapped his wrist to make her point. “It used to be that doctors listened and they believed their patients! That’s why I went to see that nice Dr. Del Rio. I thought he

would understand.”

Colton sat back on the couch, ice filling his chest. “And did he understand?”

“Yes! But he only gave me six pills. He said keep them for emergencies only. I’ve still got two left. Six pills.” She laughed a bit, her voice hollow. “Can you believe that?”

Colton pushed off the couch, went into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. Bottles and bottles and bottles. Librium, Paxil, Thorazine, imipramine, Haldol, Valium. He found the bottle Diego had given her, Xanax, six pills only, no refills. Most of the bottles were from pharmacies across the border in Mexico. Some of the labels were obvious forgeries. Colton closed the mirrored door, rested his forehead on the glass. When he went back into the living room, Aunt Margaret was still sitting on the couch, knees together, tears making pale tracks through the powder on her cheeks.

“Did the sheriff see the bottle? Is that what happened? Diego gave you six little tranquilizers because he wanted to help you. Because you’ve got a problem with your medication, Aunt Margaret. I don’t know why I’ve been thinking this had something to do with me.”

“I don’t give a fuck about you.” The sheriff was suddenly standing behind him, in uniform, his hand resting on his gun belt. “You make me want to vomit, you’re a perversion, but the law doesn’t let us do anything about the freaks like you and that doctor you like to fuck. So I’m doing a little prevention, my own way. Get rid of the queers and the drug pushers. Get the word out, let them know we don’t want them down here. It’s what we call working in the *gray areas*.”

He didn’t get any further. Colton wasn’t wearing a gun, and he might have had a newly healed broken neck, but he was still strong enough he could reach down and pick up the coffee table, smash it into his uncle’s face before he could move or say another word. He went down, the crack of splintering wood like gunfire.

“He was trying to help her, you stupid fuck! Don’t you know fuck-all about drug addiction?” One of the legs of the coffee table was still in his hand, and he threw it down on top of the mess on the floor. Aunt Margaret was rigid, screaming, her heels drumming against the sofa. “You *liked* it! Maybe you used her and me as your excuse, but you did it because you liked it. How many others? You had somebody follow her down across the border, then whoever she got her drugs from, you...”

Colton pushed the pieces of the broken coffee table aside, stared down at his uncle, dazed on the floor. He could kick him in the eye. He could dig his thumb into that mean bastard’s eye socket and pop it out like a skinned grape. No. No, Diego wouldn’t like it.

Six pills for emergencies only. He ought to take one himself. This felt like an emergency. When he saw Jeremiah shake his head like a bear waking up, reach down to his belt for his service revolver, Colton kicked him so hard in the nuts that he rolled in a ball, puking, his face nearly black. Colton spat on his face, stormed out of the room.

When Colton turned the corner, his hands still shaking on the steering wheel, he could see a line of black SUVs, shiny federal government vehicles coming down the block. That was fast. The sheriff wasn’t going to be in very good shape to get arrested.

\* \* \* \*

Diego wasn’t coming back. *Colton, this has nothing to do with me and you. You know how much I love you. But I can’t live in that world. I’m not living in a world with VICTIM painted in big red letters across my face.*

Colton didn't even know where he was. Esmeralda wasn't talking and Colton thought she was secretly pleased that Diego seemed to be giving him the slip.

Of course he wasn't alone, and Colton didn't want him to be, not really. He needed someone with him, somebody strong to lean on. But that was supposed to be him, not some old boyfriend. No one could take care of Diego like he could, events of the past months notwithstanding.

Who was this artist, this first lover, anyway? Colton had never heard of him, but he could picture him clearly enough: dark, suave, good manners, handsome. In his forties, probably, with some gray streaking his hair, just enough so he looked wicked. Probably a mustache. Wicked enough he would appeal to Diego, who would follow a devil into the fires of hell. Probably related to the President of Brazil. Or God himself.

Fuck it. After a couple of days of sorrowful e-mails that sounded a lot like Diego was trying to talk himself into saying good-bye, Colton threw his boots and jeans into the back of his pickup and drove out to his ranch. Everything looked like he had never left.

One of the mothers was hanging sheets on the line. The boys were running through the courtyard, playing tag. The teenager, with his curly black hair drooping into his eyes, was in the stables, shoveling manure into a wheelbarrow. The old woman was asleep in the corner of the kitchen, and there was a pot of pintos on the stove, smelling like onions and garlic and bacon.

Colton got his bottle, took a couple of glasses and found Manuel under the palo verde tree at the far edge of the courtyard, reading a paperback novel with a picture of a cowboy on the front, riding a horse, guns blazing. The river looked like the Rio Grande.

Manuel put the book down, took a glass of tequila, leaned back with his head against the trunk and listened while Colton told him all about it. It took some time to tell the story right, and Maria Goretti had to call them twice before they would come to supper.

Their teenager, whose name was Samuel, would make a good wrangler, Manuel said. He knew a rancher down outside Sonoyta, might take him on next year. Samuel was just fifteen.

"Maybe we'll go look for some scrubby old mare nobody else wants, so he can practice being a *vaquero*," he said, staring off across the garden. "The peppers look like they're coming up good."

The next morning Manuel climbed into Colton's pickup and they drove into town to find an old horse trailer.

"So what's happening now? Where's the sheriff?"

"They've got him in a federal prison somewhere back east. I must have had twenty smirking, smart-ass feds interview me. It's a wonder I didn't punch one of them in the teeth and get hauled away myself. They kept looking at me like, *How the fuck could you be so stupid, you didn't see this?* I wonder about that myself. The press is going nuts, they don't know if this is a gay hate crime or a Mexican hate crime or just a horrible crime against a beautiful young doctor. Diego's face is fucking everywhere except in our bed! And now he says he's not coming back."

Manuel grinned out the side window.

"He's still scared and doesn't want to tell me. I don't know where he is, he hasn't said one single time that he wants me to go get him. He won't even tell me! Does he really think I'm just gonna let him go? What the fuck is wrong with him?"

"Oh, yeah, the ladyboy's got you on a short leash. I don't reckon it'll take long

before you bust loose, do something stupid.”

Colton felt better somehow. Doing something stupid sounded just about right. He snuck a glance over at Manuel’s grizzled old head. Maybe he’d just missed having an old man around to talk to.

They found a beat-up horse trailer, hitched it to the truck, then bounced down a bumpy dirt road, drank some beer and haggled with a couple of ranch women for a mare with a new foal. The mama and her baby walked into the trailer sweet as pie, and when they pulled back up to the ranch, Samuel came out to lead the mare into the stables, and the three Juans led the baby, their hands stroking it everywhere. Colton watched them, his hat pulled low over his eyes. You would have thought that pony was walking on golden hooves.

“The place is starting to look like a ranch again, not a home for wayward girls,” Manuel said, and they went to the bench under the palo verde tree.

Where was Diego? One of his e-mails was some cryptic bullshit about they needed a vacation at the beach when this was all over. What beach? What the fuck was that all about? Manuel listened to him complain and consider and wonder what to do, until Colton looked over and saw the old man had fallen asleep, his head propped against the tree trunk.

Colton couldn’t concentrate, couldn’t sleep, and he lay in bed that night, his head like a dust storm, and it wasn’t the concussion or the broken neck. It was him. He thought about that commercial: This is your brain on drugs. Well, this was his brain without Diego. Colton took his pillow and an old yellow quilt from the top of the closet and walked outside. He went out past the palo verde tree, around the side of the stables and past the garden where the land started to get wild again. He kicked a few rocks out of the way, then put the quilt and pillow down and stretched out on his back, studying the stars.

The night was deep and clear, and the stars lit up the land around him, a tiny saguaro no taller than his hand, a cluster of teddy bear cactus looking so fuzzy and sweet, the scuttle and chirp of the tiny desert creatures who came out at night, their lives lived under the light of the stars, and the moon.

How could he have been so wrong about nearly everything? How could he not have seen? One by one his foundations had been kicked over, and his house was resting on sand. The things he had believed about himself, about the law and his place in it, about right and wrong, everything had been turned upside down. How could he trust his own judgment in anything? Seemed to him if he did, most likely he would be wrong.

His face had been plastered all over the TV, along with Diego’s. He thought the heading should say: a picture of a clueless wonder. If there was a single human being in all of Southern Arizona or Sonora who didn’t know every pathetic detail of this sorry affair, he would have been surprised. Naturally everyone wondered what was going to happen now: was this romance doomed? Colton wondered that himself.

Diego was slipping away from him. If he did something about it, and he did the wrong thing, like he seemed to be doing about everything lately... If he lost Diego. That was simply inconceivable, one loss too many, and in his mind, he wheeled up like a panicked horse. Yeah, yeah, he was an idiot and a loser who couldn’t see his own house infested with poisonous snakes. But no way was he gonna lose Diego, not from being too afraid to try, that was for damn sure. The day would never come when Colton Wheeler would stand shivering in his fucking boots, afraid to try because he might be wrong. So

that was settled. He picked up the quilt and shook it out, and left the desert to the night animals.

Early morning he woke up again, to the sounds of little boys sneaking out to the stables to check on a foal, and he knew where Diego was. Cabo. What had he said? Tortillas, tequila, sunshine, and sand.

## Chapter Six

Cabo. Three miserable dusty days across Mexico and down to the very tip of the Baja peninsula, to a town that was as far away from everything as you could get and still be in Mexico. Colton was in a foul mood, the headache threatening from the back of his head. When were the fucking headaches going to stop?

But he checked into a room a block from the beach, took a cool shower, and lay down with a fan blowing on him until the headache receded a step. It felt good, lying cool and clean on top of a sheet that was so worn it felt as soft as skin. If he didn't feel so lonely for Diego that he thought his heart was going to melt and weep tears in his chest, he might just lie here and relax and forget the whole fucking thing.

Diego. The only Mexican in the world who had escaped to the north, come across the border to the great USA, to avoid the power and influence and money his family had in Mexico. He came to America to be a regular guy. To have a career, a life, a lover to watch over him. He shouldn't be afraid to come home. Colton hauled himself out of bed. Time to go find him.

He attracted way too much attention cruising the bars, obviously looking for someone, but not looking for one of the pretty girls dressed in slinky hot pink who kept trying to get his attention. He found Diego at a smoky New Orleans-style jazz bar called Tino's, a saxophone in neon lights in the front window. They had a band and a woman in a long dress singing the blues, and Diego was slow dancing with his artist. It couldn't be anybody else. Diego was wearing faded Levi's and the snakeskin boots Colton had given him for Christmas, and a tight black T-shirt. The bastard with his arm slung around Diego's waist was even better looking than Colton had imagined. He walked across the dance floor, took hold of Diego's wrist, pulled him away from the other man. "Sorry. He's with me."

The man narrowed his gorgeous black eyes, put his hands on his hips. Was the shit-heel wearing a black silk shirt and smelling like Polo? Jesus, this was Cabo, not the Riviera!

"Diego," the man said, and of course his voice was like black velvet. He lifted his chin, and a couple of bruisers with jackets over their shoulder holsters slid over, stood on either side of him.

Colton just stared at them. "I said he's with me." He looked down at Diego. His face was beautiful, flushed and sweaty, and there was a piece of black hair falling across the eye patch. His mouth was ripe as a plum, wet and open and Colton bent toward him just as Diego reached for him, their mouths meeting in a kiss that seemed to last forever.

When Colton looked up, the artist had retired to the bar. He held his martini glass up in a little toast. Colton nodded at him, wishing it could be pistols at dawn, tucked Diego under his arm and pulled him outside.

"He drinks fucking martinis? Give me a break. Nobody drinks martinis. Let's go." He pulled Diego along by the wrist until they got to his little room.

Diego looked around. "Where's the bathroom?"

"The end of the hall," Colton said. "You can manage for tonight." He flopped down on the bed, still wearing his boots. "My head is fucking killing me."

“Really?” Diego morphed into Dr. Del Rio in a flash. “Any dizziness, blurred vision?”

“I don’t know,” Colton said, throwing one arm up over his eyes. “Maybe I am having blurred vision. I can’t see anything but your face. And it doesn’t have ‘victim’ written across it in big red letters.”

Diego was silent, then Colton felt his boots being tugged off. He didn’t want to move his arm because the headache was so bad it was bringing tears to his eyes. The headache or something else. Then Diego’s soft hands were touching his face, his soft mouth was kissing Colton so sweetly, slow and deep like he could kiss him forever, and after a few minutes the tears receded, and Colton could reach for him, and hold them close together.

“You’re coming home with me, right?”

“I guess so,” Diego said. His head was nestled into Colton’s shoulder, fingers tangled in the hair across his chest. “You’ll probably freak if I say no. Besides, I’ve never been so fucking bored in my life. If I don’t get back to work I’m gonna go nuts. You stole my great-uncle Manuel?”

“I was gonna trade him for you, one of those hostage deals. But actually, me and him, we get along.”

“You’re alike, you two. Fearless.”

“I’m not fearless,” Colton said, stroking the black hair back from Diego’s face.

“There is one thing I’m afraid of. But you won’t let that happen to me, will you?”

Diego shook his head. “No. I won’t let that happen.”

\* \* \* \*

## Christmas Eve

Diego lay back against the pillows like a pagan god, wearing a blood red silk robe and his snakeskin cowboy boots. Colton could see him in the mirror. Diego was watching him tie his bowtie. He was going to try again, because any fool could follow directions, and he had looked it up on the Internet when he realized that the tux didn’t come with instructions. Diego was grinning at him, not saying a word.

Colton had to admit the monkey suit looked good on him. It almost made him look elegant or something, taller and thinner, and he couldn’t help but notice the way Diego’s eyes lit up, the way he’d leaned back to watch Colton get dressed.

Colton walked over to the bed, carefully pulled aside the folds of the silk robe until Diego’s slender body lay like a dark arrow between the rich cloth. He was still wearing the eye patch, and Colton tried not to let him know how hot it made him look.

Diego’s face was flushed, his lips swollen and red from their make out session earlier in the shower. His hair was spread across the pillow, and Colton reached for his chest and his belly, spread his fingers through Diego’s curly black hair. His cock was filling, rising from a black nest.

“Nice robe. It looks good on you. Was this what came in that box from Mexico?”

“Yeah, Colton.”

“It wasn’t from Esmeralda?”

“Nope.”

Colton climbed up on the bed, and Diego turned and looked at the clock. “We’ve got to leave in about an hour, or we’ll miss the curtain. *The Nutcracker*. I can’t believe it.



You know, since I was a little boy, I've loved..." He paused and blinked. Colton ran his hand down Diego's long thigh. "Did Uncle Manuel tell you..."

"Yes, ladyboy. He did. Hot boots. Wear them with the tux, okay?"

"Okay. You're gonna give me a blow job wearing a tux? Wow. Cool."

Colton grinned and bent over, felt something like happiness spread out in his chest, took the head of Diego's cock between his teeth. He slid one big hand down, pressed his middle finger against Diego's ass.

"Let me in," he said, pressing gently against the tender skin, and he felt Diego sigh and open to him. "Let me in to play," he whispered, and he bent over and sucked Diego's cock deep into his mouth again, and he pressed his long finger in, skin like velvet surrounding him. Diego moaned, his hands reaching for Colton, fingers sliding through his hair.

Colton reached deeper, reached for that place where he loved to be touched. Diego was stroking his head, and he reached deeper, touched the spot, and Diego moaned and wrapped his cowboy boots around Colton's head. When Diego came in his mouth, he tasted like dark chocolate. He tasted happiness, and this felt like happiness, like this day was important, and worth remembering.

Diego reached around his shoulders and tied Colton's bow tie in the mirror. Diego looked like he'd been born in a tux, like he could do surgery in a tux and not get it dirty. "You've got to practice." He met Colton's eyes in the mirror. "Or not. I'll just do it for you if you want."

"I got you a Christmas present."

"Really?" Diego brushed some lint from Colton's lapel. "I thought *The Nutcracker* was my Christmas present."

"No, that was still an IOU from last year." Colton handed him an envelope, watched Diego's face when he pulled out the title to his granddad's ranch. No, to Colton's ranch. Now their ranch. He'd given Diego half of what he loved most in the world.

"Come on," he said, pulling Diego out the door. "We can't be late for *The Nutcracker*."

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Sarah likes to drive around on empty, red-dirt roads on the Navajo reservation in a beat-up blue Ford Ranger pickup. Unfortunately, she still doesn't know how to change a flat tire.

Every Christmas, Sarah tries to make her grandmother's fudge recipe, the one on the back of the Hershey's cocoa box. So far no luck. This year she's going to break down and buy a candy thermometer.

Sarah has a secret addiction to reading books from Mother Earth News about building your own house. Right now she is reading about Cordwood and Cob.

Sarah will use any excuse to buy cashmere sweaters from Land's End. She has even been known to do it without an excuse.

When she was young, Sarah wanted to marry Barnabas Collins, the vampire from

Dark Shadows.

Life goal: To visit all of America's National Parks.

Sarah has lived in: California, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Mississippi, Texas, Arizona, and Alaska. Also Italy, and one year in the Persian Gulf on the Hospital Ship USNS Comfort.

First pet: Janet, a red-eared turtle the size of a quarter. During a hurricane evacuation in 1968, Sarah's father carried Janet in his pocket wrapped in a damp washcloth, inside a plastic bag.

Sarah has a secret crush on Brett Favre, and believes that he redeems the sins of the rest of the NFL. He is one of the few remaining quarterbacks playing who is not young enough to be her son.

When she can't sleep, Sarah gets up and reads a random selection from the Oxford English Dictionary. Sometimes those words show up in her stories.

**Meet LSB Authors At The House Of Sin  
Lsbooks.NET**

**We invite you to visit Liquid Silver Books**

LSbooks.com  
for other exciting erotic romances.

**2007: Terran Realm**

Urban fantasy world: TerranRealm.com

**Featured Series:**

**The Zodiac Series: 12 books, 24 stories and authors**

Two hot stories for each sign, 12 signs

**The Coven of the Wolf by Rae Morgan**

Benevolent lusty witches keep evil forces at bay

**Fallen: by Tiffany Aaron**

Fallen angels in hot flight to redeem their wings

**The Max Series by JB Skully**

Meet Max, her not-absent dead husband, sexy detective Witt, his mother...

And many, many more!